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MERI Debate on the Referendum for Independence

Rebecca Irvine*

MERI hosted a roundtable event for diplomats, policymakers, and experts to discuss Kurdistan's independence referendum and its consequences for the region.

Introduction

On 25th September, 2017, 92.7% of voters voted 'yes' in the Kurdistan region's independence referendum. In the aftermath of the result, events have moved fast as Iraq and its neighbours issued almost immediate warnings, and Baghdad sought to reassert its sovereignty over the Kurdish region. Since that time, various interventions from the governments in Baghdad and Erbil have sustained the tension, with no sign of the conflict winding down in the near future. To discuss these issues, and potential future scenarios for Kurdistan, Iraq, and the wider region, MERI hosted a roundtable discussion for diplomats, analysts, representatives of various political parties and Kurdish Regional Government (KRG) officials on 2nd October. Although much still remains unclear, the discussion focused on the need for dialogue and de-escalation, how to curb potential conflicts, the role of the international community in facilitating dialogue, and how to move forward from this point.

The Possibility of Negotiations

While there was dialogue with Baghdad leading up to the referendum, since then all official communication channels have broken off. The need for a re-establishment of this communication and the initiation of negotiations were widely acknowledged. Yet important questions are still outstanding. These include questions on what the nature of the negotiations will be, what the content of the discussion will include, and, perhaps most importantly, how the Iraqi government can be persuaded to come to the table. A 'de-escalation of narratives' is required prior to any negotiations. However, with all groups reminded of the need to refrain from over-hyping the issues. Though the airport has been closed to international flights, it was always under federal control, and therefore Baghdad's (re)assertion of sovereignty over the international borders is not such a break from the past.

* Research Intern, The Middle East Research Institute, Erbil, Kurdistan Region, Iraq

With this in mind, some tentative proposals for negotiations moving forward were raised. These sought to prevent violence, and were focused on ensuring that there was no split in Iraqi unity. Iraqi Vice President, Ayad Allawi, proposed a seven-item initiative, calling on the KRG to freeze the referendum result and return to negotiations as a constructive step forward. While this initiative was rejected by the government in Baghdad, perhaps more promisingly was Ayatollah Sistani's call for a peaceful route forward. Though in its very early stages, this initiative offers some hope of bringing all parties to the table. Similarly, while there was hope that Jalal Talabani's funeral may be the site of dialogue, the row that broke out over the use of a Kurdish flag draped over the coffin may have damaged that potential. Despite this, however, it must be remembered that negotiations need to be just that: if there is an end goal already in the mind of one of the participants — for example, complete independence — then no dialogue can begin to take place. Equally, it is difficult for the Kurdish government to reverse its position on the referendum, given the strong mandate the vote produced.

Worsening Tension

In the context of increased tension and worsening relations with Baghdad, the possibility of an escalation towards violence was raised. It was widely agreed that it is imperative for the conflict to stay peaceful, and that a descent into violence would bring increased suffering to the Kurdish people. If a military incident were to occur, for example, involving Hashd al-Shaabi, the Peshmerga, or a confrontation between Kurdistan, Iraq and the country's neighbours, it would be very difficult to then de-escalate the situation. The possibility of the situation spiralling into a prolonged civil war, should tensions reach that point, would be high. For that reason, the continued pursuit of diplomatic means as the desirable path forward was highlighted by all.

The International Community

With this in mind, there is the important issue of what role the international community and powers deeply involved in the region should take on at this time. Some participants expressed the idea that the international community, and the United States in particular, should be offering support for the Kurds. This may be financial assistance, which could allow the Kurdish region to withstand potential blockades in the future. However, it was more widely suggested that while the international community hopes to see dialogue resume between Baghdad and Erbil, only those parties can make that happen. Therefore, while all players in the international community hope to see a return to dialogue between governments and officials, they are best placed to support efforts, rather than make them happen.

Breaking the Stalemate

What then, can be done on a practical level at this present time? While the need for dialogue over violence was the most common refrain over the course of the discussion, there was little consensus about how to actually move forward. The stalemate between Baghdad and Erbil must be broken; and it may be in the hands of the KRG to take the first step. A suggestion that Erbil could put to Baghdad was for collaborative control of the airport, with officials in Erbil inviting Baghdad to send personnel to jointly manage the airport, thereby maintaining Iraqi sovereignty over the borders, but permitting travel in and

out of Kurdistan. By allowing international air travel from the Kurdish region to resume, a positive step forward would have been taken. This may then allow for further dialogue, if the KRG is willing to suspend the demands for independence at this time. More self-reflection from the KRG about questions of resources, corruption, and governance within the Kurd-ish region is also important. The onus is on all parties to ensure a flexible approach is taken, and that a zero-sum attitude of 'independence or nothing' is avoided.

Conclusion

The ongoing failure to initiate talks between Baghdad and Erbil risks the region descending into worsening tensions and potential violence in the weeks and months ahead. The way forward is uncertain and steps need to be taken to break the stalemate. However, all discussants remained hopeful that conflict can be averted if progress can be made. The KRG must find the appropriate offer to make to the government in Baghdad to bring discussion into the picture once more, while the Iraqi government must also be open to negotiating its position. For that reason, all options must remain on the table while negotiations continue.

Moving forward, the key recommendations from the meeting were:

- A 'de-escalation of narratives' is required prior to any negotiations.
- Negotiations must be conducted with an open mind; all parties willing to be flexible in their position.
- All efforts must be made to find a diplomatic solution, avoiding heightened rhetoric and the potential for violence.
- The international community must facilitate a return to dialogue where possible.
- The onus is on all parties to ensure a flexible approach is taken, and that a zero-sum attitude of 'independence or nothing' is avoided.

The roundtable was chaired by Dlawer Ala'Aldeen, President of MERI, and attended by MERI staff and the following external participants:

- Falah Mustafa, Head of Department of Foreign Relations of KRG
- Sadi Pira, Member of the Politburo of the PUK
- Ken Gross, US Consul General
- Clarisse Pásztor, Head of EU delegation in Erbil
- Dominique Mas, French Consul General
- Dr. Csaba Vezekényi, Hungarian Consul General
- Labeed Abbawi, Former Deputy Minister Foreign
- Cho Yeongmoo, South Korean Consul General
- Janet Alberda, Dutch Consul General
- Tanya Gilly Khailany, Former Member Parliament Baghdad
- Sardar Aziz, Academic – Goran Movement
- Guney Yildis, Research Fellow, European Council for Foreign Relations
- Zmkan Ali Salim, Academic, Sulaimaniyah University
- Mahmood Nashat, Advisor to Kurdistan Parliament on Turkmen Affairs

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