

Future of Iraqi Kurds hangs in the balance



HOPE: *The Kurdish govt is a promising economic player and a model of democracy in the Middle East*

IN this article, I will attempt to answer two questions: first, what is the status of the Iraqi Kurds in Northern Iraq and, second, will Kurdistan continue to develop itself as a quasi-state while avoiding a direct push toward sovereignty or is Kurdish independence a likely scenario?

Five million Iraqi Kurds currently live in the Kurdish Autonomous Region, which is made up of the four governorates of Duhok, Erbil, Sulaymaniya and Halabja. The capital is the ancient city of Erbil, with a population of 1.5 million.

Despite smaller numbers, Iraqi Kurds have played a much more important role in the country than those living in Turkey (20 million), Iran (eight million) and Syria (three million).

Unlike most parts of Iraq, Kurdistan is secure, stable and relatively prosperous. The region is multi-ethnic and multi-religious, with Arabs, Assyrians, Turkmens, Mandaeans and Yazidis. The region has held elections since 1992, has its own Parliament and is governed by the Kurdish Regional Government (KRG).

It has the capacity to produce over 500,000 barrels of oil per day and has plans to double this to one million barrels by next year. As of this year, over 30 countries now have consular, trade and representative offices, including Turkey and Iran.

Its army, the peshmerga, is considered to be one of the best fighting forces in the world, in sharp contrast to a weak and disintegrating Iraqi army. It is perhaps best known for its female fighters.

Iraqi Kurds have strived for a state of their own for more than a century. They have been promised autonomy on numerous occasions, only to be attacked instead.

Saddam Hussein launched the genocidal al-Anfal campaign against them in the final stages of the Iran Iraq War, from 1986 to 1988, with as many as 182,000 people killed.

In 1988, Saddam dropped chemical bombs on Halabja city, killing thousands and injuring many more. Victims that survived continue to be denied much-needed medical and psychological care, financial assistance and rehabilitation.

Western governments knew of these crimes against humanity but no official objections were raised. It was only in 1991, after the overthrow of the Saddam regime, that the region gained the autonomy which it retains to this day.

Not surprisingly, relations with the Iraqi central government in Baghdad have been contentious. The main issues of contention are political power sharing, share of the country's budget and disputed territories.

On the budget, the deals with Baghdad have been advantageous to the KRG. Apart from finally receiving its constitutionally-mandated 17 per cent of the budget, Kurdistan is able to export directly from its oilfields to Turkey.

Interestingly, this deal includes oil from Kirkuk, which is a disputed territory that the KRG managed to take back control of following the rise of Islamic State (IS).

For the time being at least and, particularly with the on-going IS conflict, demands for complete independence appear to be mitigated.

While there continues to be a huge leaning among the Kurdish population and its parties in favour of independence from Iraq, the Kurds are realistic.

FIRST, much depends on the willingness of Baghdad to continue to honour its legal commitments, specifically with regards to power sharing and the budget deal.

SECOND, the KRG's taking control of disputed areas harbours considerable potential for conflict vis-a-vis the Arab and Turkmen sections of the population.



recaptured two villages south of the oil-rich city of Kirkuk. AP pic

Kurdish security forces attacking Islamic State extremists outside the oil-rich city of Kirkuk, 290km north of Baghdad, Iraq, on Saturday. Kurdish peshmergaforces have

THIRD, the question of whether countries, especially neighbouring states, will ever recognise independence for the Kurds, if declared.

FOURTH, it is unclear who will supervise independence, given that some countries are bound to oppose it.

FIFTH, there is the possibility that the Iraqi government will oppose such a move, and it will take harsh measures by forming alliances with Arab states in the same way the Arab coalition was formed against Yemeni al-Houthis.

While the Middle East remains in turmoil, with a poor record for regional cooperation, and with the radical jihadists of the IS, the Kurdish Regional Government is emerging as a promising economic player. At the same time though, Kurdistan is a functioning, if still imperfect, model of democracy for the Middle East.

For the Kurds, there remains only one option - namely, to ally with the international community to gain its support for a future bid.

If an independent Kurdish state is what is required to preserve this, then this option needs to be seriously contemplated.

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