



A Kurdish Call for Self-Determination: Crossing the Rubicon?

Ofra Bengio

On December 11, Mas`ud Barzani, the Iraqi Kurdish Regional Government (KRG) President and Kurdish Democratic Party (KDP) leader, took the world by surprise when he called for Kurdish self-determination during the opening session of the 13th KDP Congress. Underscoring the boldness of the move was the presence of a number of guests whose interests would be directly affected: Iraqi Prime Minister-designate Nuri al-Maliki and Speaker of Parliament Usama al-Nujayfi; Turkish and Iranian government representatives; and Kurdish delegates from Turkey and elsewhere. Surprisingly, Barzani's declaration went unchallenged by the non-Kurdish participants.

Barzani's action is best understood against the backdrop of developments in Iraq since the American-led invasion and the collapse of the Ba`thi government in April 2003. In the seven-plus ensuing years, the Kurds managed to catapult themselves onto the center stage of Iraqi politics, while energetically building their own largely autonomous entity in the north of the country. The demise of the Ba`thi state both fostered Kurdish state-building and allowed Kurds, for the first time in Iraqi history, to assume a central role in Iraqi state-building. Thus, since 2003 the Kurds have been engaged in both Kurdish and Iraqi state-building projects, which have alternately complemented and conflicted with one another.

At the outset, the Kurdish state-building project fared better than its counterpart in Baghdad. The intra-Kurdish peace process that began in the mid-1990s had already nurtured a degree of heretofore absent political cohesion, which helped the Kurdish region in Iraq maintain relative stability and peace after the 2003 war. Whereas the post-war Iraq state had to be reconstructed almost from scratch, the Kurds had already begun the process during the previous decade, so gained an advantage over other groups. And while the toppling of the Ba`th regime ignited a Sunni-Shi`i conflict that reached the magnitude of civil war in the center of the country, it had the effect of strengthening the bonds of Kurdish solidarity within the Kurdish region. Past Iraqi governments had practiced the principle of divide and rule to weaken the Kurds; in post-Ba`thi Iraq, this tactic was no longer part of the Baghdad authorities' toolkit, as the center entered a period of internal chaos while the Kurds presented a relatively unified front.

The Kurds' improved status in Iraq is also the result of their having made themselves indispensable to the American-led coalition during the invasion, thus earning the Americans' trust. Turkey's refusal to grant American forces passage through its territory for launching attacks against northern Iraq was ably exploited by the Kurds, who contributed to American efforts in the north to help defeat the Ba`th. Furthermore, as the group most organized militarily and strongest economically, the Kurds carried considerable weight in the shaping of post-Saddam Iraq.

Iraq's Arab population has been experiencing an acute identity crisis and struggling to normalize internal Sunni-Shi'i relations. In contrast, the Kurdish region has been relatively stable, playing a key role in Iraq's central government, able to act as an occasional mediator between Shi'is and Sunnis—and concurrently developing a Kurdish national identity and symbols of independence that distinguish it from Arab Iraq. To an extent, the Kurds have dislodged Iraq's Sunni Arab minority from its pivotal role in the state. The Kurds' avowed secularism enabled them to rise above the Shi'i-Sunni sectarian war; their political astuteness in certain critical moments in recent years helped them withstand potential attacks from their neighbors.

Kurdish participation in both the Iraqi central government and in the Kurdish national project would seem to present a conflict; nevertheless the Kurds have found a golden mean for acting simultaneously on both planes, without the one harming the other.

Mas`ud Barzani acknowledged as much, stating that “after the fall of the [Ba`thi] regime, we, the Kurds, have safeguarded the unity of Iraq and to this day we are the main reason for Iraq’s remaining unified.”

Kurdish figures occupy several key posts in the Iraqi central government, demonstrating the Kurds' leading role there: Jalal Talabani has been president since April 2005, and Foreign Minister Khoshiyar Zibari and Army Chief of Staff Babakr Zibari have held their posts since the establishment of the first Iraqi government in September 2003. The Kurds also acted as mediators in disputes over the constitution, the elections and the makeup of the government. Indeed, Irbil, headquarters of the KRG, has played a crucial role in the formation of the new Baghdad government this year.

Simultaneously, though, the Kurds did continue to develop their separate entity. In the aftermath of the 1991 Gulf War, which effectively detached the Kurds from Saddam Husayn's repressive central government, they established de facto autonomy, This laid the groundwork for the current quasi-independent Kurdish state-institutions, which have made impressive achievements on the social, political, economic and strategic levels. With their own government, parliament, military forces, airfields and a network of foreign relations, the Kurds now feel strong enough to press for self determination.

Barzani made his challenging declaration at an opportune moment. Nuri al-Maliki needed the Kurds' help to establish his government, and will continue to require their assistance in order to keep the government intact. Iran, though anxious to torpedo the move, must focus its energy on more pressing problems, internationally and internally. Turkey, embroiled in its own Kurdish problem, is not likely to fiercely oppose Barzani, as it needs Barzani's government to help it placate its own restive Kurds. In addition it has vested interests in the KRG: Reportedly half of the companies active in the KRG are Turkish; Turkey’s investments amount to 20 percent of total foreign investment in Iraqi Kurdistan, and its exports to the region in recent years amounted to billions of dollars. In addition Turkey sponsors numerous cultural activities there, including, for example, a branch of Bilkent University in Irbil. In the wider context, Kosovo’s declaration of independence two years ago and Sudan's upcoming referendum on southern independence have served to encourage Kurdish aspirations to follow suit.

Within days of Barzani's declaration, he felt compelled to backtrack, following a tirade of criticism, especially in the Arab press and the new media. Emphasizing that self-determination was an undeniable Kurdish right, he noted that the Kurds had nonetheless opted to remain part of federal and democratic Iraq. Indeed, the whole affair may illustrate the Kurds' long standing strategy of taking one step forward and two steps back. Hence, it remains to be seen whether self-determination—a term whose exact meaning remains unspecific—will be translated into an active push for independence, or will be merely another pious, and unfulfilled Kurdish wish.

The Moshe Dayan Center publishes TEL AVIV NOTES, an analytical update on current affairs in the Middle East, on the 10th and 26th of every month, as well as occasional Special Editions.

TEL AVIV NOTES is published with the support of the V. Sorell Foundation