

Arcanum in the news



THE UNITED STATES MUST PREVENT DISASTER IN KURDISTAN

October 2, 2017

John Hannah

You have to hand it to them. U.S. officials nailed it. Prior to the Sept. 25 independence referendum in Iraqi Kurdistan, they couldn't have been clearer in setting out the parade of horrors that might come to pass if the vote went ahead. Tensions between the Kurdistan Regional Government (KRG) and its most powerful neighbors – Turkey, Iran, and Iraq – would dangerously escalate, officials warned in private conversations. Kurdish airspace could be shut down. Borders might be closed. Essential trade, including the oil pipeline to Turkey that accounts for the vast majority of the KRG's revenues, could be threatened.

Worst of all, the risks of military clashes between the Kurds and their neighbors would increase as nationalist sentiment and posturing on all sides reached a fever pitch. Of special concern was the possibility that Iran-backed Shiite militias in Iraq could seek to gain political advantage by challenging Kurdish control in the oil-rich, ethnically mixed city of Kirkuk and other disputed territories also claimed by the central government in Baghdad.

In the referendum's aftermath, which saw Kurds vote overwhelmingly in favor of independence, virtually all of these threats have, unfortunately, begun to materialize. It has to be said that Kurdish officials and U.S. analysts who downplayed the referendum's likely consequences largely missed the mark. Private assurances that the day after the referendum would look much like the day before – that Iraqi, Turkish, and Iranian leaders might feel compelled to whine a bit for domestic consumption, but would end up doing pretty much nothing while adjusting to Kurdistan's new reality – look, at the very least, overly optimistic.

Instead, a genuine crisis has erupted. Even a brief sampling of the regional reaction is deeply troubling. Iraq ordered Kurdish airspace closed to international civilian traffic. Foreign air carriers have unanimously complied. In apparent coordination with its neighbors, Iraq is reportedly preparing to set up positions just inside Turkish and Iranian territory to seize control of KRG border crossings. The Iraqi parliament is pressing Prime Minister Haider al-Abadi to send the army to confront the Kurdish Peshmerga in Kirkuk and other disputed areas. It has also called on foreign governments to close their missions in Kurdistan and demanded the prosecution of Kurdish leaders responsible for the referendum, including KRG President Masoud Barzani. For his part, Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdogan has accused Barzani of treachery, threatened to shut down Turkey's border with the KRG, including the oil pipeline, and explicitly warned the

Kurds that Turkish troops “could arrive suddenly one night.” For good measure, forces from Turkey and Iraq held joint exercises on the KRG’s border. As for Iran, it has closed its airspace to Iraqi Kurdistan, launched war games near the KRG border, and is planning its own joint exercises with the Iraqi military.

Again, in the run up to the referendum, U.S. officials accurately foresaw most of these developments. I heard it firsthand several times: “We know this will trigger a major crisis that will distract from the fight against the Islamic State. It will create frictions between the Kurds and Baghdad that will only benefit Sunni terrorists and Iran. It will empower the extremes in Iraqi politics, especially the Shiite militias loyal to Iran, undermining Abadi and other moderates before next April’s national elections.”

That was the logic behind Washington’s strong opposition to the vote, including a very aggressive public campaign to kill it in the final fortnight (see, for example, [here](#), [here](#), and [here](#)). That was the basis for the bile that U.S. diplomats spewed at Barzani in private conversations with me in the weeks leading up to the referendum. I was taken aback by the intense frustration and anger directed at a critical wartime ally and longtime, loyal U.S. partner whose history of oppression and even genocide at the hands of other nations leaves it with – if nothing else – an almost unimpeachable moral case for self-determination.

Now that many of their concerns are coming to pass, with KRG officials expressing growing alarm that their neighbors might actually proceed to impose a crippling blockade that could bring the region to its knees, American diplomats are clearly thinking “I told you so” – indeed, they’ve said as much to me. More than a few are surely tempted by the opportunity to teach the Kurds a lesson, to show them that there’s a price to be paid for so directly defying the repeated requests of their most important and powerful patron on an issue that was clearly of great significance to U.S. interests. They’re no doubt feeling a sense of schadenfreude as the outside pressure mounts day by day on Erbil.

But they need to get over it – and fast. Difficult as it may be, the U.S. needs to quickly pivot from warning that disaster could strike to making sure that it doesn’t. Yes, the KRG leadership, in direct disregard of U.S. concerns, has set off a crisis that now threatens important U.S. interests. But further escalation would only guarantee that the damage will be amplified manyfold, with potentially catastrophic results. A crucial intelligence and security partner, fresh from its costly battles in defense of civilization against the barbarian hordes of the Islamic State and fiercely pro-American in disposition, Iraqi Kurdistan could be dramatically weakened and destabilized, largely at the hands of forces far less sympathetic to U.S. purposes in the world. Iran and its Shiite militias, leading the charge to defend Iraqi unity against what they allege are U.S. and Israeli-backed Kurdish secessionists, would be super-charged at the expense of more moderate political forces still seeking to carve out space for a more inclusive, cross-sectarian, and independent Iraq.

There is now a real risk that U.S. warnings about the referendum’s most dangerous consequences could become a self-fulfilling prophecy. It is almost certainly the case that the ferocity of Washington’s public opposition in the days leading up to the vote unintentionally gave the KRG’s neighbors license to bully, threaten, and punish the Kurds. Largely missing from U.S. policy was any corresponding campaign of equal seriousness to deter those neighbors from responding with retaliatory actions that would only escalate the potential harm to U.S. interests and regional stability.

Disconcertingly, in the crucial hours and days immediately following the referendum, there has been a noticeable passivity to the U.S. response. As tensions rapidly ratcheted up against the KRG, the only American official to comment was State Department spokesperson Heather Nauert. In her statement immediately after the referendum and a

several press briefings in the days following, Nauert underscored America's "disappointment" that the vote had gone ahead. While affirming that the nonbinding referendum would not affect U.S. relations with the KRG, she unhelpfully repeated predictions that it would result in greater instability and hardships for the Kurdish people. She made it clear that the United States opposed violence from any party and suggested, "We want both sides [the KRG and Iraq] to come together and have some conversations and be able to move things forward." When pressed on Sept. 28 about why the United States wasn't doing more to broker a dialogue between two of its most important partners in the anti-Islamic State fight, Nauert offered that Washington "would be willing to facilitate a conversation" – but, she went out of her way to stress, only "if asked" to do so.

Last Friday, four days after the referendum and with the crisis dangerously intensifying, Secretary of State Rex Tillerson finally became the first senior U.S. official to comment. Importantly, Tillerson's written statement took a far more forceful and authoritative stance against those threatening the KRG. "We urge calm and an end to vocal recriminations and threats of reciprocal actions.... [W]e call upon the central government to reject threats or even allusions to possible use of force. The United States asks all parties, including Iraq's neighbors, to reject unilateral actions and the use of force." Tillerson concluded by encouraging "all sides to engage constructively in a dialogue to improve the future of all Iraqis."

Good – as far as it goes. But the United States simply has too much at stake to just sit on the sidelines waiting for that dialogue to begin. The odds are too high that, left to fester, the crisis will continue to deepen, escalate, and perhaps even turn violent. True, most of the parties may not have an interest in things getting out of control. But then again, this is Iraq. Can the United States really bank on cooler heads prevailing?

The administration needs to go on the offensive diplomatically in an effort to de-escalate the situation. President Donald Trump, Tillerson, Secretary of Defense James Mattis, and National Security Advisor H.R. McMaster need to be working the phones with the region's leaders, urging an immediate pause to escalatory rhetoric and actions, and immediate dialogue via some form of third-party mediation. With the diplomatic bandwidth to see it through, the United States could serve as the sole broker of such a process. But another possibility would be for the United States to mobilize the office of the U.N. secretary-general to take the lead with support from the Security Council's permanent members – all of whom, including Russia and China, happen to have significant political and economic interests in both the KRG and Iraq. (Indeed, Russian energy giant Rosneft just signed a billion dollar oil and gas deal in Kurdistan.)

The urgent task confronting Washington is to short-circuit the dangerous escalatory dynamic now at work before it gets further out of hand. A high-level diplomatic initiative backed by the world's major powers could give the parties the excuse they need to pause, back away from the brink, and begin exploring options on how to move past the immediate crisis triggered by the referendum. Substantive solutions may not be immediately available, but the process itself, imbued with sufficient outside support from Washington and other great-power capitals, could buy valuable time and space to calm the waters, begin the search for workable compromises, and at very least keep the very worst from happening.

John Hannah is senior counselor at the Foundation for Defense of Democracies.