

## Is the “deal on Kurdistan” the only safest way for the Middle East?

The Middle East has been torn apart by wars and conflicts to such a great extent that the very mention of the region today would inevitably raise some bitter feelings and safety fears. Starting from the uprising in Egypt’s Tahrir Square to the Civil war in Libya, from the Syria unrest to the rise of ISIS, from the isolation of Yemen that has caused thousands of hunger deaths and the never-ending Palestine-Israel conflict, the peace and stability do not seem to come to the region any time soon.

And yet, in the Middle East, there is a tiny land, that has been able to withstand the great outside pressure and to keep its borders safe. And even move to a greater autonomy. This region is the Northern Kurdistan.

Located in the north of Iraq, bordering with Iran, Turkey and Syria, the government of the Kurdistan Region has to balance between the political giants, like Iran and Turkey, on the one side, and to fight against terrorism threats from ISIS-allied groups in Syria and Iraq, on the other. The national struggle for separatism and the absolute win of Iraq’s Kurdish leader, Masoud Barzani at the referendum held on September, 25 adds more oil to the fire.

Indeed, for most of the countries neighboring the region, the Northern Kurdistan is seen as a spot of the potential threat. As Ankara and Tehran fear of Kurdish uprisings in Turkey and Iran, they are siding against legitimizing of the Kurdish referendum results, while Baghdad, already teetering on the edge of a collapse, is concerned about its political and economic future.

However, the Kurdish independence referendum cannot be simply boycotted by the neighboring countries as the economic and political strength of the Iraqi Kurdistan continues to grow. And it obviously did not happen overnight.

Back in 1991, when the Iraqi Kurds were literally on the brink of the new genocide wave, the UN Security Council issued a decision to create a safe zone in the north of Iraq which Iraqi government forces were not allowed to pass. In this period, up until 2003, Iraqi Kurdistan was practically independent. Kurds created their own autonomous public authorities, militia troops and everything else that was needed to be recognized as an autonomous state based on the three main provinces: Irbil (the capital), Suleymaniyah and Dohuk. The rest of Iraq remained a unitarian state, at least until the Iraqi Civil War in 2014 that has split the country into three different parts.

The economic and financial prosperity of Iraqi Kurdistan is primarily based on the oil trade. According to the Iraqi Constitution, the Kurds should be reimbursed with 17% of all Iraqi oil export. But as Baghdad has been demonstrating constant payment delays for the last decades, the Kurds developed their own oil and gas industry collaborating with oil giants from all over the world (including Russia’s “Gazprom”). Along with this the Kurds successfully established strong economic and trade relations with Turkey, Iran, Russia, the United States and other countries.

In 2014, when the Islamic State of Iraq and Syria (ISIS) occupied major Sunni provinces in Iraq, the Kurds were practically cut off Baghdad and Iraqi southern provinces. The real threat for the Kurds was a Sunni-Shia war in Iraq, provoked by ISIS groups, and the ISIS occupation of the city of Mosul bordering with the Northern Kurdistan. Shortly after that, Masoud Barzani sent Kurdish military forces to the border where they joined the Iraqi forces and helped clean up the strategically important road from Mosul to Raqqa. Needless to say, that the Kurds traditionally have owned a large number of weapons and arms, a part of which was granted to them after the collapse of the Saddam Hussein army while further arms supplies were coming from Iran, Turkey, Russia and different European organizations and foundations. **All of this has allowed Iraqi Kurdistan to become a peaceful oasis in the war-torn country.** Even more, as the Baghdad’s military and political influence is falling down, the Kurds, on the contrary, represent the real power that is able to confront terrorism in the region.

However, when it comes to the issue of the Kurdish autonomy, the Kurdish total independence from Baghdad is unlikely to happen. Indeed, the Kurds do not deny collaboration with Baghdad. They would still continue to adhere to the Iraqi Constitution and would still have the fraction in the Iraqi parliament. The Kurdish “yes” vote for independence On September 25 should not be seen as the call for the military action against the Northern Kurdistan. It should be seen as a protest to the Iraqi way of governance towards the Kurds, as a protest to unprecedented violence of the human rights of the Kurds residing in Iran, Turkey and Syria. Whatever the Baghdad’s response is, it should not lead to further tensions on the ground. For Baghdad is better to collaborate with its only strong and safe island.

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Olga Malik is an independent journalist, political analyst and a writer. She has visited more than 20 countries and the count continues to grow. Her articles and publications often highlight international issues such as global politics, social & gender inequality as well as the world's trends. A frequent contributor to The EU Reporter, Gulf News and other international publications, Olga touches most sensitive issues providing independent analyses.