

Why the Kurdistan Regions Deserve Self-Rule



Introduction

The Middle East is in turmoil with proxy wars, ISIS and a struggle between ideologies, values, Sunni versus Shia, and civilians versus dysfunctional states. Meanwhile, the stateless Kurds have gained an international profile from fighting ISIS and having created islands of relative safety and stability in Iraq and Syria.

Since the formation of nation states in 1923 Kurds have demanded their independence. Today, some observers call for Kurds to modify their demands for self-rule, autonomy or independence in the regions in which they are the majority, despite Kurdish leaders having already modified their position regarding an independent nation state that covers all parts of Kurdistan. Instead, those in Turkey, Syria and Iran aspire to democratic, federal, self-governing ethnically inclusive regions within current borders. Having experienced the shortcomings of this political framework, the Kurds of Iraq want a negotiated independence, possibly within a confederation of Iraq. To further modify their demands would leave Kurds and their fellow citizens victim to four authoritarian states.



An inherent right to self-determination

The Kurds have their own history, culture and language. They are among the original inhabitants of the region they occupy and number up to 50 million people. Until the nineteenth century they were largely independent of the Ottoman and Persian empires, but in 1923 their territory was divided between four newly formed nation states. Since June 2014, poorly equipped and unpaid Kurdish forces from Iraq, Iran, Syria and Turkey have been fighting ISIS. Like their ancestors, they fight for survival and freedom from oppression. The Kurdistan regions of Iraq and Syria have become destinations for IDPs and refugees, despite these regions being subject to boycotts and military threats. Given the Kurds' numbers, history, distinct cultural heritage, tolerance of other ethnicities and religions, their sacrifices in fighting oppression, and the nature of the states in which they live, at the very least the Kurdish majority regions deserve support for some form of self-rule. In addition to being an inherent right, supporting self-rule in Kurdish-majority regions has numerous local, regional and international benefits, including those listed below.

Military benefits

1. Kurdish military forces have a good track record in fighting ISIS and dictators like Saddam Hussein, and in co-operating with other forces including foreign advisors and troops in these endeavours. For instance, the Kurdish-majority regions of Iraq and Syria have welcomed western military advisors and military bases. Rewarding such an ally not only reassures other allies that their sacrifices will be appreciated but building military relations in Kurdistan regions reduces potential for future conflict. If conflict arises and necessitates intervention, having military relations with the Kurdistan regions would reduce costs for foreign agencies.
2. Ending destabilising insurgencies will save lives and have political, economic, social and personal benefits. For instance, the Kurdish insurgency in Turkey has cost in excess of 40,000 lives since 1984 and in Iraq in excess of 200,000 lives between 1986 and 1992. These countries diverted considerable resources into fighting and oppressing Kurds, leaving Kurds without basic rights and their regions without essential infrastructure and services. Resolving the status of Kurds and the other religious and ethnic groups in Kurdistan regions will allow each country to develop politically and spend resources on economic and social development.
3. The potential for war between countries will be reduced. For example, Saddam Hussein's betrayal of his autonomy agreement with Iraqi Kurds in 1974 led him to hand control of the Shatt Al-Arab to Iran. In return, Iran had to stop supporting the Kurdish insurgency in Iraq. Six years later, Saddam Hussein attempted to militarily reclaim the waterway, resulting in an eight-year war between the two countries. In 2017, Turkey and Iran are vying for influence in northern Iraq and Syria. Resolving the political status of the Kurdistan regions would help curb an escalation of tensions between nation states.

Political benefits

4. The Kurds have workable relations with other minorities in the contiguous region they occupy, and have made every effort to develop workable relations with other people in the Middle East, including Arabs, Persians, Turks and Jews. Although a majority of Kurds are Sunni Muslim, their mix of religions and varied experiences have enabled them to become mediators, for instance, between Shia and Sunni Arabs in Iraq, 2003 – 2010. In a Middle East that is increasingly divided by Sunni and Shia power struggles, this mediating role may be useful in the future.
5. Whether or not current borders are maintained, support for local and regional administrations that demonstrate a relatively high level of security, pluralism, institution building and public services creates ‘islands of stability and influence’, even though these islands need support to improve accountability, political pluralism, the rule of law and an alternation of power. Expensive, short-term nation building efforts in Iraq and Afghanistan have largely failed. Supporting ‘islands of stability and influence’ is less costly and potentially more effective. For example, Iraqi Kurdish leaders established diverse political parties under the protection of the no-fly zone from 1991 and, despite many mistakes, gained experience in self-government between 1992 and 2003. As a consequence, Kurdish political leaders were vital in drafting the 2005 federal constitution of Iraq. Between 2005 and 2014, while the Government of Iraq squandered the opportunity to build a strong, pluralist and prosperous federation, the Kurds were relatively successful in providing for their citizens, including those from different ethno-religious minorities. Similarly, Syrian Kurds and their allies have been relatively successful in establishing security and multi-ethnic local administrations in northern Syria. If these efforts were refined and consolidated, the results would inspire people in neighbouring regions to do likewise, as has been seen in Iraq, where Shia and Sunni provinces aspire to become autonomous provinces or regions like the Kurdistan Region of Iraq (KRI).
6. Supporting self-rule for the Kurdistan regions would require supporting self rule or inclusive, truly representative and impartial governance for all people in Iraq, Syria, Turkey and Iran, thus benefitting Arabs, Turks, Persians, Assyrians, Yezidis and others.
7. Creating stable regions that can accommodate IDPs and refugees in an emergency reduces the costs of providing for displaced people, and reduces the flow of refugees to countries outside the region.

Socio-cultural and economic benefits

8. In Turkey and Syria, pro-Kurdish political parties that have gained power insist that all public positions are co-managed by a man and a woman, and aim for a workforce with a 50:50 representation. Women’s councils have the right to veto any law a mixed council proposes if it infringes upon women’s rights. However,

the AKP government is currently undoing these gains in eastern Turkey. In Iraq, the Coalition Provisional Authority provided small grants to women. This helped women establish businesses and NGOs that continue to thrive, at least in the KRI and disputed province of Kirkuk, where women are also well represented in the Kurdish parliament and provincial councils. Enhancement of women's rights has political, economic and social benefits.

9. The Kurdish-majority regions of Iraq and Syria have been relatively successful in enhancing minority rights at the regional and local level, although gains need to be consolidated by developing a strong, highly qualified, independent judiciary.
10. Establishing 'islands of stability and influence' allows international and national agencies and businesses to operate from a stable, secure environment to conduct work in and outside the Kurdish-majority regions.
11. Establishing 'islands of stability and influence' enhances energy security, with the Kurdish-majority regions being rich in oil and gas.
12. These 'islands' would enhance food security for the Middle East, with the Kurdish-majority regions being rich in agricultural land.
13. The Kurdish-majority regions have rivers that cross borders and feed more arid regions. Creating 'islands of influence and stability' in Kurdish-majority regions would enable projects that enhance water security and could potentially resolve international water disputes.
14. With relatively stable regions more reliant on their own resources, there would be less need for foreign aid and loans.
15. Relatively stable regions would create greater economic and employment opportunities in these regions, and between these regions and other regions and countries, as proved by mutually beneficial economic relations between the KRI and Turkey since 2005. Kurds in the diaspora have also returned to the KRI and disputed territories to establish businesses, teach at universities and participate in government, e.g. the Governor of Kirkuk.
16. Self-rule and stability would also help preserve some of the most ancient archaeological sites of civilisation including significant ethno-religious heritages, which are currently being threatened by ISIS and mega projects in Turkey, or are being neglected because of poor governance and war in the Middle East.



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