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Iran and the Kurdish Challenge

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY: The national aspirations of the Kurdish minority in Iraq pose considerable challenges to all four countries that contain large Kurdish populations. It is not surprising that the decision to hold a referendum on Kurdish independence sparked angry reactions among the leaders of Iraq, Iran, Turkey, and Syria. However, Tehran's staunch opposition does not stem solely from fear that the referendum's passage will kindle separatist tendencies among the Kurds of Iran. The Iranians have other geopolitical and geostrategic concerns that can be affected should Kurdistan become independent.

The Kurdish referendum on independence poses multiple dilemmas for the Iranian regime's domestic and foreign policy. The most obvious issue is that the success of the Iraqi Kurds in realizing their national identity could catalyze separatist trends among their Iranian counterparts. Although this concern has a degree of validity, Iranian Kurds have their own unique characteristics – one of which is a set of far less pronounced national aspirations than those of their counterparts elsewhere.

That point raises the question whether Tehran's opposition does in fact stem from fear of separatism among the Iranian Kurds. The regime's considerations may well include other aspects that have largely been pushed to the margins.

The relationship between the Kurdish minority in Iran and the central government had ups and downs throughout the monarchic and post-revolutionary periods. The uprising of the Kurdish minority led by Qazi Muhammad, which brought about the establishment of the "Republic of Mahabad" (January 1946) under Soviet patronage, is still engraved on the historical consciousness of the Islamic Republic. The Kurdish uprising was a

chain reaction following the uprising of the national movement of Azerbaijan led by Jaffar Pishevari, which had begun two months earlier. Clashes continued into the 1960s, undermining Iranian national identity and morale.

The Iranian Kurdish minority's aspiration for autonomy did not end with the establishment of the Islamic Republic in February 1979. Hope soon receded, however, because of internal rifts and the regime's uncompromising policy. From 1989 to 1996, a string of assassinations of leaders of the Iranian Kurdish movement left a leadership vacuum that remains to this day.

Moreover, the Iranian Kurdish minority – estimated, without official data, at about 7.5 million people – is marked by a lack of structural unity stemming from religious factors. There are also party, ideological, and tribal differences. Unlike in other countries where the Kurdish minority is mostly Sunni, in Iran, a considerable proportion of Kurds – particularly those who live in the Kermanshah province – are Shiite and receive preferential treatment from government institutions. This population voted against holding the referendum, unlike the Kurds belonging to the Sunni branch, who voted in favor. Furthermore, the policy of “divide and conquer,” in combination with the Iranian regime's tight control and harsh repression of the Kurdish population, has affected this minority's cohesion.

Tehran's opposition to the nationalist tendencies of the Iraqi Kurds stems from other motives as well, both geopolitical and geostrategic. Iran fears that Kurdish autonomy in northeastern Iraq will weaken its influence in that divided country.

It is well known that Iran has penetrated Iraq's political, diplomatic, and security spheres and influences its decision-makers. Tehran uses powerful levers of influence in Iraq, such as the Shiite militias active in the framework of the al-Hashd al-Shabi (the Popular Mobilization Forces). Though these militias operate according to a November 2014 resolution of the Iraqi parliament that subordinated them to the country's security-political establishment, the first loyalty of some of them is to the Revolutionary Guard and the policymakers of the Islamic Republic of Iran.

These militias are subject to Iranian guidance, funding, training, and sometimes even command, and are meant to promote Tehran's interests. The ongoing fighting in Iraq and Syria and the collapse of governmental rule there has given Iran a window of opportunity to achieve its regional aspirations, which include promoting the “resistance axis” – a tactical and ideological basis for expanding Tehran's influence across the Middle East.

Thus, for Iran, the establishment of an independent tract of land that is not under its authority and likely to disrupt its operative and strategic plans is out of the question. Not surprisingly, commanders of the militias in Iraq voiced threats against the Kurdish leadership to dissuade them from going through with their plan. Hadi Ameri, leader of the Badr organization (set up by the Revolutionary Guard during the Iran-Iraq War), was quoted by the Fars News Agency (a news service that is close to the Revolutionary Guard) as saying the Kurdish leadership's refusal to cancel the referendum would lead to bloodshed and even civil war in Iraq. Qais Khazali, commander of the Asa'ib Ahl al-Haq (Association of the People of Truth) militia, which operates under an Iranian umbrella, averred that the Kurdish move is an Israeli plot – an example of the demonization Iran is employing to deny the referendum's legitimacy.

Another important factor is the land corridor Iran wants to create from its territory through Iraq and northern Syria to the Mediterranean Basin. The uncertainty regarding the Kurdish dilemma, and the possible effect of that dilemma on the Kurdish minority in Syria, were among the reasons this route was nudged southward towards al-Mayadin and Deir ez-Zor. Tehran is concentrating its efforts, using the militias it directs, to achieve control of border passages between Iraq and Syria, and has threatened US and coalition forces operating in the Syrian Desert.

The aspiration to national self-determination of the Kurdish minority in Iraq has fostered Iranian-Turkish cooperation despite their deep disputes over the Syrian civil war, especially President Assad's legitimacy. The Kurdish issue has gradually led to bilateral coordination based on a convergence of interests that accords with the conceptual basis of political realism. The two countries are adopting similar tactics, including efforts at persuasion to set aside national aspirations together with threats of an economic clampdown and a media cutoff.

In an example of the first tactic, Qasem Soleimani, commander of the Quds Force of the Revolutionary Guard, held a meeting with Jalal Talabani, leader of the Patriotic Union of Kurdistan Party, at which he tried to convince him to shelve the referendum. It should be noted that, with its lack of egress to the sea, the Kurdish territory in Iraq is entirely enclosed between the four countries that surround it, and its economy relies to a great extent on trade with both Iran and Turkey.

Tehran is now taking an opposite tack to that of the monarchical regime in the 1960s and 1970s, during which Iran assisted the Kurds out of a desire to weaken the Iraqi regime. But then as now, the basic attitude was the same: Kurdish autonomy contravenes Iran's interests. Still, helping the different sides enables Iran to "adjust the flame" in Iraq in accordance with its own needs and outlook.

Tehran is striving to obtain precedence in the rehabilitation of battle-damaged Iraq and Syria. It is prepared to invest considerable sums in repairing the electricity and telecommunication infrastructures and in wide-ranging engineering projects. Iran is seeking to bolster dependence on the regime, but also stands to gain a considerable intelligence advantage by restoring the infrastructure. Iran's push for regional hegemony is leading it to forge a "Shiite crescent," which would radiate outward from Tehran towards Lebanon, Syria, Iraq, and Yemen.

The current decentralization in Iraq means Tehran can become the effective policymaker in return for plentiful economic assistance. The hope of the regime is that this will perpetuate the "indirect control" (proxy) model it wants to implement throughout the Middle East. The Kurdish minority's aspirations for self-determination do not jibe with Iran's regional policy, and not only because of the fear of a chain reaction. Tehran's opposition stems from both internal and external considerations, and its policy is likely to have a substantial effect on the delicate Middle Eastern puzzle.

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