

Iraqi Kurds have earned their statehood

Consider the plight of an ethnic group seeking self-determination in the Middle East. Its leaders have renounced terrorism. Their militias fight alongside US soldiers. While their neighbours built weapons of mass destruction, they built a parliament, universities and the infrastructure for an independent state. And they pursue independence through a recognized legal process, enshrined in their country's constitution.

I am, of course, talking about Iraq's Kurds. On 25 September, they will vote in a referendum to endorse a state of their own.

One might think the US government would see the Kurds as ideal candidates for statehood in a region where self-determination is often sought through violence. But the Trump administration has worked assiduously to dissuade the Kurdistan Regional Government in Iraq from giving its people the opportunity to vote for independence.

The US arguments against the statehood referendum revolve mainly around timing, according to both US and Kurdish officials. Next year, Iraqis themselves are supposed to have elections. A vote to break away from Iraq would weaken Prime Minister Haider al-Abadi at a moment when he has been helpful in keeping Iraq together and leading the fight against the Islamic State.

What's more, the Kurdish referendum will offer Iraqis in disputed areas like Sinjar, and most importantly the oil-rich city of Kirkuk, the opportunity to choose between Iraq and an independent Kurdish state. Asking citizens to vote for independence in areas that are already disputed within Iraq is a recipe for trouble, US diplomats say. They want the Kurds to reconsider.

These objections, however well intentioned, have not deterred the initiative. The Iraqi constitution promised such a vote, and Kurdish leaders have delayed it for years. It is time for Iraq's Kurds to at least formally convey what anyone who has followed this issue already knows: Kurds deserve their own country.

Aziz Ahmad, an adviser to Masrour Barzani, the national security adviser to the Kurdistan Regional Government, told me that senior delegations who travelled to Washington and Baghdad asked the US for some assurance in exchange for flexibility. "We told them, 'If you have disagreements on the timing, give us formal guarantees of when we should hold the referendum.' And they never did," he said.

Instead of treating this like a problem, President Donald Trump should see the Kurdish referendum as an opportunity. Here we have an ethnic minority that has done—for the most part—everything we ask of groups seeking statehood. Compare this to the Palestinians, who have squandered billions in aid and years of exquisite international attention, yet still lack the kind of functioning institutions the world takes for granted in Erbil, the capital of the Kurdistan region.

There are of course important differences between the Palestinian and Kurdish cases for independence. Because the Kurds are not Arabs, their cause never got strong support from Arab states in the region, like the Palestinian cause has. And Israel never committed the kinds of large-scale war crimes against Palestinians that Saddam Hussein and Turkish governments have against Kurds. Also Kurds make no claim to Baghdad, the way both Palestinians and Israelis makes claims to Jerusalem. There is also still considerable support within Israel for a two-state solution, whereas there is no such support for Kurdish independence among Iraqi Arabs.

But the most consequential difference between the Palestinians' case for statehood and the Kurds'

may end up being US national interests.

Ten years ago, the US needed to at least support a peace process for Israel and the Palestinians as a way to persuade Arab allies like Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates to join American efforts against Iran. The presidency of Barack Obama and the emboldened predations of Iran changed all of that. Today, America's Arab allies in the region are frustrated at the lack of a more robust policy to counter Iran, peace process or not.

The Kurdistan regional government today is by no means perfect. Its politics are still dominated mainly by two families. They are three years past due for elections on a new government, though the region's president, Masoud Barzani, today says there will be new elections in November, and he has pledged he will not stand for office. Corruption, like in all Middle Eastern governments, remains a problem.

But compared with its neighbours, the Kurdistan regional government is Switzerland. Kurdish leaders do not name parks and streets after suicide bombers. Kurdish leaders have implored their citizens to fight alongside the US against Iraq's common enemies. The Kurdish people do not burn American flags. Most of them are not gulled by Muslim fanatics. They pursued statehood the way we hope the Palestinians would.

The Kurdish referendum this month closes a chapter that began 25 years ago, when president George H.W. Bush in the aftermath of the first Gulf War established a no-fly zone to protect Kurdish families driven into the mountains by Saddam Hussein's storm troopers.

In the last quarter century the Kurdish people have built a state worthy of independence, under the protection of the US military. Our president shouldn't quibble over timing. The administration should welcome Kurdish independence. **Bloomberg View**

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