

Kurdistan and the Kurds in Iran

by Hugh Fitzgerald



Iran is, with Turkey, the nation that would be most harmed by the creation of an independent Kurdish state in Iraq. With an independent Kurdistan, and a well-armed Peshmerga, just over the border, the seven to eight million Kurds living in western Iran might well be inspired to rise up against their Persian masters in order to join that Kurdish state.

Indeed, in the month following the referendum by Iraqi Kurds, there has been a lot of excitement reported among Iranian Kurds. Preventing that enthusiasm from translating into armed

insurrection should keep the Islamic Republic permanently busy on its western frontier, at a time when Iran's conventional military forces are perilously stretched: Iranian troops and trainers are helping Assad in Syria against his many Sunni enemies, and he will need their help for a long time, with no conceivable end in sight to the hostilities.

Iran sends troops and military aid to Hezbollah in Lebanon, too, an intervention shoring up that group both in Lebanon and in Syria, and it too takes its toll on Iranian fighters, with several thousand having been killed to date; it also constitutes a drain on Iranian stocks of weaponry. Iranian missiles given to Hezbollah and sent Israel-wards are promptly shot down by the Israelis. How much Iranian weaponry has been used up by Iranians in Syria, or by Hezbollah in Lebanon, or in Syria, or has been sent to the Houthis in Yemen, to help them withstand Saudi bombardment, is not known, but there is certainly a heavy cost in both men and materiel. Early in 2017 the Iranian government announced that 2,100 Iranians had died in Syria; how many were wounded is not known. Nor has Tehran released figures about Iranian casualties in Lebanon.

Iran is also heavily involved militarily in Iraq. 100,000 members of Iran-backed Shia militias are now fighting in Iraq, with Iranian trainers and weaponry. Some of Iran's most important officers, including Qassem Soleimani, an Iranian general who commands the Islamic Revolutionary Guard's Quds Force, have been sent to Iraq. No figures there, either, about Iranian casualties, but as long as the Sunnis in Iraq refuse to accept rule by the Shi'a (who are 65% of the population, while Sunni Arabs are 19%), they will be high. The Meir Amit Center in Israel has recently claimed that thousands of Iranians, and ten Iranian generals, have been killed in Syria and Iraq. Finally, in Yemen the Saudis have been carrying on an extensive bombing campaign against the Shi'a Houthis that has hit civilians indiscriminately, while the Iranians have provided the Houthis with arms, trainers, and possibly some

troops, a commitment that appears to be not diminishing but escalating.

All of these conflicts use up Iranian men, materiel, money, and morale. And none of them, whether in Syria, Lebanon, Yemen, or Iraq, shows any signs of coming to an end. Iran, having committed so much and so publicly to these conflicts, cannot extricate itself unless it can claim at least the semblance of victory, and no such claim is, for the moment, believable. Assad's regime is not secure; in Lebanon Hezbollah, rightly seen as Iran's agent, though not entirely under Iranian control, has permanently enraged the Sunnis (and pushed them into an anti-Shi'a alliance with the Christians), first, by its presumed involvement in the killing of the Sunni leader Rafiq Hariri; second, in the repeated shows of force by its goose-stepping soldiers in central Beirut, designed to intimidate the Sunnis and the Christians; third, and most important, by its steadfast support for Assad. But the Sunnis and Christians are still in the Lebanese government, and so far still not intimidated. In Iraq, similarly, the Sunnis show no signs of acquiescing in the loss of power they experienced when Saddam Hussein's regime was toppled, despite the presence of Iranian officers and men helping the Shi'a militia. In Yemen, the stalemate continues, and the Saudi bombing campaign means that the Iranians have to keep sending aid to the Shi'a Houthis, in the form of advisors, trainers, and ever-greater amounts of weaponry, though they have not as yet sent Iranian troops to fight alongside the Houthis.

Outside Iran, the country's military are stuck, then, not to one but to four separate Tar Babies: in Syria, propping up Assad; in Lebanon, supporting Hezbollah even though that group has picked unnecessary fights with the local Sunnis; in Iraq, supporting the Shi'a in Baghdad against a Sunni minority that nonetheless will not capitulate; in Yemen, supporting the Houthis. It's a tremendous drain on men, money, materiel, and morale, with no end in sight.

An independent Kurdistan carved out of northern Iraq will have two effects on Iran's stability. The first, and most obvious, is the effect such a Kurdish state would have on the eight million Kurds in Iran. They have been exhilarated by the referendum in Iraq; public demonstrations of solidarity have unnerved the rulers in Tehran, who have dispatched troops to Kurdish cities. This has always been one of Tehran's worst fears: the possible violent uprising by masses of Kurds. They tried it in 1979, and were ferociously crushed, with at least 30,000 Kurds killed.

Why should the Kurds in Iran not now take up arms received from a newly-independent Kurdistan, and welcome, too, outside volunteers from the Peshmerga in Iraq and Syria? For that matter, why wouldn't Israel, which has had a long secret history of working with the Kurds, help out with training and weaponry for the Kurds in Iran? There is no better way for now, to strike a destabilizing blow at Israel's most dangerous enemy.

A rebellion among Iran's Kurds at this point, with all of the Iranian military's commitments abroad, is a nightmarish possibility for Tehran. If the Iranians are too ruthless in suppressing it, they will only inflame the Kurdish population inside and outside Iran against the Islamic Republic. In the Middle East, those eight million Iranian Kurds would no longer be fighting alone; now they would have behind them the support of many millions more, out of a total Kurdish population of between 35 and 45 million, Kurds who everywhere would have been inspired by the newly independent Kurdish state would be eager to enlarge it with the Kurdish territories in Iran. The new Kurdish state could offer military help to Iran's Kurds in the form of its own battle-tested and American-armed Peshmerga. The Peshmerga, it needs to be repeated, have fielded the most effective fighters against ISIS in Syria and Iraq. They are well-armed, with both the American arms given to them to fight ISIS, and the arms they seized from ISIS,

arms which ISIS had previously taken from Iraqi forces beating a hasty and chaotic retreat from Mosul in 2014. And Iran's Kurds could also be getting more weapons, and training, from Israel. The Iranian Kurds will be a much more formidable foe than ever before, in numbers and in the experience of their fighters, in amount and sophistication of their weaponry, in the fact that next door in Kurdistan they would now have available a place where their soldiers could regroup, plan, and attack anew.

For Iran, an open revolt by its Kurds presents an even worse possibility than the loss of Kurdish-populated territories. Such a revolt could threaten the very existence of the country. The various non-Persian minorities in Iran make up between 35% and 50% of the population (the government claims the lower figure; outsiders claim the latter). Many of them resent their treatment at the hands of the Persians. The Azeris are the largest ethnic minority in Iran, 18 million of them, or approximately 20% of the population. In fact, there are more Azeris in Iran than in Azerbaijan itself, which has 9 million. They have not been well treated. The Iranian government has banned the teaching of the Azeri language and literature in Iranian schools. When in 2015 the Iranians broadcast programs that mocked the Azeri accent and language, this alone led Azeris, already on the edge, to demonstrate in many cities, shouting such slogans as "stop racism against Azeri Turks," "long live Azerbaijan," and "end the Persian racism," in Tabriz, Urmia, Ardabil, and Zanjan, and even Tehran itself. Civil unrest among the Azeris is a given. And independent Azerbaijan is just over the border.

The Baluch people in the east of Iran, bordering the Province of Baluchistan in Pakistan, are Sunni, and have suffered terrible discrimination in Shi'a-ruled Iran. Only 2,000 of the 3.3 million college students currently in Iran, for example, are Baluchis. On the other hand, Baluchis make up 55% of those who have been executed in recent years by the Islamic

Republic. The Iranian regime has forbidden the exclusive use of the Baluchi language in writing – that means any Baluchi text must always include a Farsi translation. In 2002 Baluchis founded the Jundullah, a religious and political organisation that has claimed rights for the Baluchis in eastern Iran. It has carried out both attacks on the Iranian military, and suicide bombings of Shi'a mosques. It is also suspected of kidnapping an Iranian nuclear scientist. Like the Kurds and the Azeris, the 1.6 million Baluchis can count on aid, including men, money, and materiel, coming from the other side of a porous Iranian border, offered by the 8.3 million Baluchis in Pakistan, who are keenly aware of the mistreatment of their fellow Baluchis by the Shi'a government in Iran.

The final minority that has been mistreated by the Persians are the Arabs in Khuzestan, the oil-producing southern province that was devastated in the Iran-Iraq war, with much of the area left in ruins. The Iranians claim there are two million of them; the Arabs claim there are five million in Khuzestan. Whatever their number, the Khuzestanian Arabs have long complained of discrimination by the Persians. In 2005, there were mass riots and mass arrests of 25,000 people, and many Arabs were summarily executed. Arrests, torture, and executions have continued to imperfectly keep the peace. There were more riots in 2007, followed by more repression; in 2015, there were a wave of arrests made so as to head off any tenth-anniversary revolt; the rage remains. But if those Arabs were supplied directly with arms, or with the money to buy arms, they could cause a great deal of destruction to the oilfields and thus to the Iranian economy.

Were Iran to lose control of Khuzestan, it would also be losing the region from which 85% of its oil, and 60% of its gas, comes from. In other words, the loss of Khuzestan would destroy the Iranian economy. And even if the territory were not lost, if the Arabs of Khuzestan rose in revolt, armed with weapons bought or supplied by Saudi Arabia and the other oil-

rich Gulf Arab states, the destruction unavoidably wrought on the oilfields and pipelines, either by the Arabs in revolt, or by the Iranians fighting those Arabs, could put much of Iran's oil production out of commission for years. The prospect of this is no doubt causing nightmares in Tehran, and complacent glee in Riyadh. From the viewpoint of the Arab members of OPEC, there's an added bonus to a heavily-armed insurrection in Khuzestan, which is that with Iranian oil production way down as a result, both from actual damage to oilfields and pipelines, and from interruptions in the flow that would be the result of hostilities, the price of oil will rise considerably, and among the greatest beneficiaries of that price rise due to diminished deliveries of oil from Iran would be the Arabs in Saudi Arabia, Kuwait, and the Emirates.

Everyone in the world – with the lone exception of Israel – opposed the Kurdish referendum of September 25, but nowhere more so than in Iraq itself and among its immediate neighbors. Iraq's Arabs may be at daggers drawn, but both Sunnis and Shi'a agree that Iraq must remain an Arab-dominated polity, as by right, with the Kurds there by sufferance, and forced to remain under Arab masters. Islam is a vehicle for Arab supremacism, and it is right and proper that non-Arab Muslims, like the Kurds in the Middle East or the Berbers in North Africa, should be kept in their place. The Syrian regime would, if it could, suppress "its" Kurds but is no longer in any position to recover Kurdish-dominated Rojava. Turkey continues to deny the Kurds their peoplehood, still describing them as "Mountain Turks" who, over time, "forgot" their Turkish language; the Turkish military has repeatedly attacked the Kurdish militias in Syria instead of focussing all of its energies on ISIS. Finally, the Islamic Republic of Iran continues to murder Kurdish leaders and suppress any outward and visible signs of dissidence.

Also opposed to that Kurdish referendum, and certainly to a Kurdish state, has been the Organization of Islamic

Cooperation, or O.I.C. All 22 members of the Arab League were opposed, circling the wagons on behalf of Arab supremacism. China and Russia are opposed to a Kurdish state, because neither country sees any advantage in opposing the world's Muslims on this (why antagonize the O.I.C.?), and each country also has minorities – such as the Tibetans and Tatars – whose ambitions the Russians and Chinese do not wish to see encouraged by examples of new states being achieved abroad. The E.U. was opposed, and one assumes that its opposition was based on the fear of antagonizing either Erdogan or the O.I.C.

But why did the American government add its voice to the shameful chorus? There are several reasons. The American government appears eager to appease the Iraqi government, in the hope that somehow the trillions spent in that country, and the thousands of American lives lost, and tens of thousands seriously wounded in that country, all in order to remove Saddam and then to create a modern, democratic, well-functioning state, one that is a friend of the West, will have been worth it. But that state does not exist, and cannot exist. The Sunni Arabs will never fully accept their loss of power; the Shi'a do not intend to relinquish any of the power that finally devolved to them when the Americans toppled Saddam. And the Sunnis cannot forgive the Americans for having toppled their protector, and the Shi'a, who have welcomed Iranian military advisors and troops into Iraq, cannot forgive the Americans for refusing to hand all of Iraq over to the Shi'a. The gratitude we might have expected, for getting rid of Saddam's monstrous regime, was remarkably short-lived. Now we can please neither the Shi'a nor the Sunni Arabs in Iraq. But by not supporting the Kurdish referendum, we turn our backs on the one group that is sincerely grateful to us, and that has been fighting alongside us, ever since American troops entered Iraq in 2003. Neither Sunni nor Shi'a Arabs in Iraq will allow the Kurds independence, or anything like the degree of autonomy (including control of their own oil

resources) that just possibly might win Kurdish favor.

Instead of trying to keep Iraq in one piece, the American government should recognize all the benefits such a Kurdish state could bring to the West, especially as it could threaten Iran's territorial integrity, not only by inspiring Iran's Kurds to strive for secession, but by the effect that, in turn, would have on Azeris, Baluchis, and Arabs in Iran.

Another consideration that may explain the American reluctance to support a Kurdish state in northern Iraq is Turkey. As was noted in a previous article, many in Washington still regard Turkey as an ally, despite the repeated malevolent anti-Western re-islamizing conspiracy-peddling misrule of Erdogan. Those who are willing to update their view of Erdogan's Turkey, understanding it is not the Kemalist state it once was, a half-century ago, may be more willing to consider the benefits of having the Kurds in Anatolia attempt secession in order to join an enlarged Kurdish state. At the very least, it would keep Turkey more occupied at home, and less able to cause mischief abroad.

Finally, one more reason for the lukewarm attitude toward Kurdish independence: there is a certain exhaustion in Washington with the Muslim world, a desire to detach (so many disappointments, so many betrayals, so many lives and so much money squandered), and not just from former "ally" Pakistan, a disinclination to support any potential new upheaval, with possible new streams of refugees, for fear of the unknown consequences. Kurdistan is different.

There is an overwhelming argument to be made that an independent Kurdistan fully deserves, both on geopolitical and moral grounds, Western and especially American support. The Kurds in northern Iraq were there for a thousand years before the Arabs arrived; the 182,000 Kurds murdered by Saddam's Arabs between 1986 and 1988, certainly form part of the moral case for their independence, as does their mistreatment, by Assad's Arabs, by the Turks, and by the Persians. The oil in

Iraqi Kurdistan, the revenues from which used to be appropriated by the Arabs in Baghdad, but which deservedly belong to the Kurds, is sufficient to guarantee the new state's economic viability. It's Iraq's Kurds, not Iraq's Arabs, who are democratic, pro-Western, pro-American – exactly what we would have wished Iraq to have become. The Kurds are even pro-Israel, and Israel, in turn, is the only country to publicly declare its support for Kurdish independence. So let the part of Iraq that meets those criteria, and that can both defend itself, with its battle-hardened Peshmerga, and pay for itself, with its own oil, be given a chance to become the state of the stateless Kurds, to which other Kurds, in Syria first, then Iran, and finally, even in Turkey, may later adhere in one form or another. We do not have a stake in making things easy for Assad, Erdogan, or Rouhani. We have, rather, a stake in making their lives more difficult. That's what the Kurds, merely by furthering their own, justified interests, can do.

The exhilaration that would be felt by Kurds all over the Middle East, at the spectacle of a Kurdish state carved out of northern Iraq, could have significant consequences, all of them good.

First published in