

INSIGHT Digest May-June 2017

The date for the Kurdish independence referendum – 25 September – was announced in June. Practical steps are being taken towards that goal though, as of publication time, there was no clear resolution to the main sticking point – reactivating parliament. As the PUK appears to be the lynchpin in determining whether the referendum takes place on time, INSIGHT spoke to a number of senior party officials including Political Bureau chief Mala Bakhtiyar. This digest will present their views as well as tracking the referendum steps and local and international reaction so far.

May-June also saw the Iraqi PM visit his Iranian and Saudi neighbours for talks. This digest will also consider that trip in the light of US President Trump's Riyadh trip and the crisis with Qatar.

Referendum – full steam ahead?

Naming a date for the referendum prompted concerns in Baghdad, regionally and internationally. In the Kurdistan Region, efforts continued to resolve long-standing political issues that are inextricably interlinked with staging the referendum.

Mechanics

The referendum date was announced at a 7 June meeting of Kurdish parties chaired by de facto President Massoud Barzani. Gorran and the Kurdistan Islamic Group (KIG) did not attend. Attendees agreed that Barzani would head a High Referendum Council with representatives from each party and that they would work to reactivate parliament. It was also reported, and later confirmed, that the referendum would also take place in the disputed areas as well as the Kurdistan Region.

An initial payment of 6m dollars was sent to the Kurdistan Independent Higher Electoral and Referendum Commission (KIHERC) – part of a 17m dollars needed to stage the poll, according to a commission member.

The High Referendum Council held its first meeting on 8 July, chaired by Barzani. It confirmed that the referendum would go ahead in September as scheduled and asked the government to start making preparations for the vote in the disputed areas. Again neither Gorran nor the Kurdistan Islamic Group was represented.

Barzani later led a council delegation to Europe – and will also reportedly head to the US – to discuss the referendum. Representatives will also reportedly be sent to regional countries for the same purpose.

Parties and parliament

In October 2015, Speaker Yousef Muhammad (Gorran) was prevented from going about his duties and the parliament became inactive as a result of differences between the parties over the presidency. How it should be revived is contested by the parties. The referendum has put this issue firmly back on the table.

In mid-June, the Kurdistan Democratic Party (KDP) and Patriotic Union of Kurdistan (PUK) agreed

to reactivate the parliament with its existing leadership at a meeting attended by party deputies Kosrat Rasul and Nechirvan Barzani, according to a statement. But the problem of the Speaker remained. Speaker Yousuf Muhammad (Gorran) would only serve at the initial session, the statement said. KDP-affiliated *Rudaw* added that "Gorran should appoint someone else for the second session".

Gorran rejects this "conditional reactivation of parliament", according to Spokesman Shorish Hajji. He said the Speakership was not to blame for the paralysis of the parliament, rather "the end of the tenure of the president of the region and the attempt by parliament to amend the Presidency Law". The Kurdistan Islamic Group (KIG) also rejected the conditional reactivation of parliament as "inappropriate".

As June progressed, the PUK appeared to be asserting its backing to reactivate parliament prior to the referendum. PUK Political Bureau member Qadir Aziz said "the PUK now has one direction" and listed three conditions for the party's support for the referendum, including the reactivation of parliament and that all referendum orders should be passed by law in parliament.

After a Gorran-PUK joint leadership meeting several days later, the two parties called for full preparations to be made to hold a referendum after the reactivation of parliament. After the talks Gorran spokesman Hajji said the two parties had "similar views about reactivating the parliament and conducting the referendum" at the talks. The PUK-Gorran joint leadership met again on 8 July and reiterated the need to reactivate parliament prior to the referendum.

The KIG has maintained the same position and discussed reactivating parliament with the KDP at rare talks on 9 July. KIG leader Ali Bapir said after the talks: "The referendum matter is fateful and requires the parliament, as the highest lawful and legitimate institution of the Kurdistan's people, to decide on it and pass a law about it."

Gorran and the KIG then called for the independence referendum to be postponed until the elections or for them to be held simultaneously. In a statement they also called for reactivation of parliament "without any conditions or obstacles" and measures to improve livelihoods.

Gorran and the Kurdistan Islamic Union (KIU) also called for the parliament to oversee the referendum.

Baghdad

Once the date was named, Iraqi officials reiterated their earlier criticism of Erbil's decision to hold a referendum. A week later, in his weekly speech, Iraqi PM Haidar Al-Abadi Abadi said the referendum was "not legal and we will not support or finance it". He also said that the federal government would not adopt the result of the referendum.

Abadi invited Kurdish representatives from both the Iraqi and Kurdish parliaments to come to Baghdad to draw up a road map to resolve disputes, saying that a referendum would complicate issues.

The ruling Shiite National Alliance has also rejected the Kurdish referendum, calling the unity of Iraq a "red line" at a 8 July attended by the PM, which described the move as "unconstitutional" and called for "dialogue and understanding based on the constitution and the law."

Influential Shiite cleric Moqtada Al-Sadr has called on Barzani to postpone the referendum as "a first step to cancelling it in the future", citing the urgency of the Mosul operation.

Sunni parties also rejected the move. The Sunni Coalition of Iraqi Forces also rejected holding a referendum on independence in the Kurdistan Region, Kirkuk and other disputed areas as it is "unconstitutional". The recently formed United for Iraq party, led by Iraqi Vice-President Usama Al-Nujaifi, also rejected the inclusion of disputed areas such as Kirkuk in the referendum and called

for international mediation and dialogue within the framework of the constitution.

Kurdish, Arab, Turkoman opposition

Gorran and the Kurdistan Islamic Group are the most vocal opponents of the referendum as planned, partly for the reasons outlined above on the reactivation of parliament. Just a day after the referendum date was announced, Gorran described the referendum as "illegal" and warned against attempts to deflect attention from political and economic problems. While Gorran believes in the establishment of a Kurdish state, a referendum "should be part of a comprehensive plan before the declaration of independence" and not "to gloss over the non-transparency in oil revenues and suspicious contracts, the latest of which being the contracts with Rosneft", it said.

Since 7 June, an increasing number of people spoke out against the referendum, though it is still marginal. Critics support the referendum in principle but argue that this is neither the time nor way to hold an independence referendum. Their views, expressed through a petition, discussion on social media and also articles in *NRT*, argue for better living conditions, governance and true democracy, including the reactivation of parliament before taking such a historic step.

Iraqi MP Hoshiyar Abdullah (Gorran) has alleged that the KDP set up an "operations room" to defame activists, writers, journalists and politicians who speak out against the referendum. His claim tallies with one reported by *Zhedar* website, widely perceived to be KDP-affiliated given its editorial slant, which said the KDP had set up an organization to keep track of the names of those Kurds who oppose the referendum with a view to putting them on trial or making their names known to the public after the referendum.

Kirkuk's Arabs and Turkomans have also said that they do not want to take part in the Kurdish referendum. The head of the biggest Turkoman party in Kirkuk, Turkomeneli, said the inclusion of the disputed areas was "unconstitutional". However, Governor Najmaddin Kareem backs the referendum and was a member of the Brussels delegation.

Regional and international viewpoints

Regional and international players had already spoken against the referendum and reiterated their concerns after the date was announced.

The Turkish Foreign Ministry described the decision as a "grave mistake" and called for a united Iraq. Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdogan later added his voice, saying that: "Taking a step towards the independence of northern Iraq is a threat to Iraq's territorial integrity and is a false step." By contrast, Turkey's pro-Kurd Peoples' Democratic Party (HDP) welcomed the referendum and condemned Turkey's objection to it.

Kurdistan's other heavyweight neighbour, Iran, was also critical of the move, saying Iraq needs stability more now than ever. Iranian Foreign Ministry spokesman Bahram Ghasemi warned that "unilateral decisions made outside national and legal frameworks, especially outside Iraq's constitution, will bring about further complications for Iraq".

Likewise, Russian Foreign Ministry Spokesperson Maria Zakharova said Moscow supports Iraq's territorial integrity and called for issues to be resolved "through constructive talks".

The US has consistently underlined Iraqi unity, the importance of cooperation and dialogue with Baghdad and said the fight against IS should be the priority at talks with Kurdish officials. PM Abadi said that he had been told in a call with US Secretary of State Rex Tillerson that the US does not support the referendum as Erbil should instead "intensify the efforts for cooperation with the central government to face the challenges of stability and reconstruction after the completion of the liberation battles [against IS]".

EU foreign ministers issued a statement on 19 June warning that "unilateral steps must be avoided, and all open questions must be resolved through consensual positions" based on the Iraqi constitution.

By contrast, Belgian Deputy PM Jan Jambon said it was normal to hold referendums and that that the result would be legitimate and result in an inviolable position. Also, the Hungarian government "supports any decision made by the Kurdish people about their future", reflecting a similar stance expressed by the Hungarian PM two years earlier.

The UN said it would monitor the referendum if asked to do so by Baghdad. This was followed by a statement by the United Nations Assistance Mission for Iraq (UNAMI) saying that it would not oversee, support or observe the referendum, following "inaccurate" reports to the contrary. The UN secretary-general's envoy, Jan Kubis, also called for "serious and open" dialogue and cooperation with Baghdad at talks with the Kurdish PM.

Kurdish leaders shrug off concerns

Kurdish officials have repeatedly underlined that any further efforts to pursue independence after the referendum would be in partnership with Baghdad and would not lead to border changes.

KRG PM Nechirvan Barzani has downplayed the generally unsupportive outside reaction to the referendum, saying that countries' reactions were "normal, not strong".

KRG Department of Foreign Relations head Falah Mustafa added: "We cannot expect other countries to welcome the move and say that they are with Iraq's division; they [the countries] have tried to send a balanced message."

Massoud Barzani has spoken and written for a number of international media outlets since the announcement to explain the move. In a commentary in the *Washington Post* he put the move into a historical context and noted recent problems with Baghdad. He said that he understood neighbours' anxieties about the move and that Erbil would "do what we can to assure them that a democratic and stable Kurdistan is the best possible partner".

Speaking to *France 24*, Barzani said that he had "pushed back" a request from the Trump administration to postpone the referendum, adding that any effort to thwart the referendum would bring "catastrophe" and risk a "bloody war".

Likewise, he told EU officials in Brussels on 11 July that no country had opposed the referendum outright and that independence was never expected to be granted as a gift. He said that while some countries fear it may bring stability "the opposite is true", warning: "If this is not done, the security of the region would be destroyed."

He called for support for the referendum, telling attendees: "We are asking our friends to support us and send your representatives to participate as monitors in the referendum on 25 September."

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The most important question INSIGHT has identified for the current phase is whether the referendum will indeed take place at the specified time. The answer appears to hinge on how the different actors will behave vis-à-vis the application of the vote – whether they are prepared to conduct it without parliamentary oversight.

The PUK is the one force that can tip the situation either way. To hear their views on the process INSIGHT spoke to several PUK leaders from different camps within the divided party, which has seen decline given its lingering leadership crisis and differences over whether to side with the KDP or Gorran on major issues like the referendum.

PUK Political Bureau chief Mala Bakhtiyar spoke exclusively to *INSIGHT*, thereby breaking his silence on the issue. Bakhtiyar has been closely tied to deputy leader Kosrat Rasul given their perceived common aim to seek a workable relationship with the KDP. Other interviewees did not want to be named.

Parliamentary red line

Bakhtiyar said that the PUK insists that the referendum process should be carried out through parliament. "The reality is that none of the political parties is against the concept of independence or, in fact, this referendum. The main issue is not the referendum, but the [continued closure of] parliament and the economic predicament that the public is facing," he said.

Asked which of these two issues constitutes a red line that would stop the PUK from backing the referendum process, he said: "The parliament part is a red line... and this is the decision of the party leadership, as stated in the concluding statement at its last meeting, and this is also part of the PUK road map."

He said the party is "very serious" on this stand, adding: "By no means do we want enter into this historic event without having the necessary laws to back it."

The situation would be different if – like in the Eritrean and Kosovan examples – there was no parliament in the first place, he said, adding: "But we do have a parliament, and the whole of Europe is asking us to reactivate the parliament. "

"We will not take part in the process without the reactivation of parliament," he insisted. However, he did admit that there were pitfalls associated with this stand.

PUK clout

Bakhtiyar said that one of the main issues facing the PUK is that it cannot afford to cold shoulder this landmark event and it was therefore positive that the parliament would be activated.

"I believe the KDP would want to go ahead with the process even without the PUK," he said, adding: "It is like this: If it succeeds then it [KDP] can claim the success for itself; if it fails, it can blame all of those who didn't back the referendum for its failure."

However, he pointed to the willingness demonstrated by the KDP to accept this proviso by the PUK. In this context he underlined the PUK clout in Sulaimaniyah and Kirkuk, as a hint that the KDP is aware of the fact that without the PUK's backing the process can fail in those areas.

Other senior PUK members to whom INSIGHT spoke were in agreement that they were waiting for the parliament to oversee the process. When asked, however, none of them, including Bakhtiyar, gave a straightforward answer as to whether the PUK would 'boycott' the process if the KDP went ahead with the process without them and without parliament.

They all expressed hope that the KDP would commit to the condition of reactivating parliament.

Disputed areas

Asked whether staging the referendum would succeed in the disputed areas, Bakhtiyar said he

believed that it would. However, he said that there may be problems carrying it out in some areas, such as Hawija, Mandali, Rasahd, Riyaz, all of are in Kirkuk province. He added: "We also have a problem in Tuz Khurmatu [of Salahaddin province]."

Nonetheless, he said: "Though it's not easy, it is better to get cracking now to conduct a referendum in those territories, as now an historic opportunity has arisen."

Timing and funding

Despite his enthusiasm, Bakhtiyar could not say for certain that the referendum would be held on time given how little time is left to agree on the reactivation of parliament. But he said the Massoud Barzani has told them he would secure needed funds as "some businessmen have pledged him to fund the referendum".

Asked whether the deadline was realistic given that previously the inexperienced Kurdish election body said it would need at least six months to prepare for any vote, Bakhtiyar cited Barzani as saying that the election body will be given double funds to double the number of staff it needs in order to cut the time needed to prepare for the vote.

As to whether the PUK should be proceeding with the process under the circumstances, Bakhtiyar said that some of his colleagues are of the view that referendum committees should not be set up prior to the activation of parliament. He went on to say: "We, that is some 20 of us [in the PUK leadership] including Kak [honorific] Kosrat [Rasul], see it differently: we should not waste time; let the process continue as it should and then later, if the parliament is not activated, we will take a stand then."

Abadi asserts Iraq role amid regional uncertainties

The past two months have presented a foreign policy challenge for PM Haidar Al-Abadi. First the new US president visited Riyadh, where he highlighted his focus on terrorism and isolating Iran. Two weeks later Qatar was cut off by some Arab states, putting Iraq in a tight. The PM used the situation to claim a foreign policy triumph for a new Iraq.

Trump in Riyadh

Aside from called the cradle of civilization and "a land of natural beauty" Iraq was barely mentioned in Trump's Riyadh speech in May except for in the context of the fight against the Islamic State (IS). Iraq, like Qatar, was mentioned as one of a number of regional states "already making significant contributions to regional security".

Iraq was also mentioned as a place where Iran "funds, arms, and trains terrorists, militias, and other extremist groups that spread destruction and chaos across the region" in the speech, which portrayed Iran as the dark force in a region of great potential that needs to "drive out the terrorists and extremists".

The US is committed to changing its strategies to help in line with "a Principled Realism, rooted in common values and shared interests", Trump explained. Many saw in this and his visit in general a realignment of US and Sunni Arab states against Iran.

Given Iraq's strong relations with Tehran, this puts Baghdad in a weakened position in the new order.

Iraqi foreign minister underlines Iran ties

INSIGHT saw no immediate or direct official Iraqi responses to Trump's speech, but comments a week later, by Iraqi Foreign Minister Ibrahim Al-Jaafari to reporters during a visit to Spain, clearly

illustrate Baghdad's own version of "principled realism". Jafari said that Iran has no military units on Iraqi territory and that Tehran "has not interfered in our affairs" since 2003. The minister said that Iran is part of the Middle East and all the speeches targeting Iran "represent "a losing deal".

The foreign minister also said that Baghdad "desperately needs to find good relations with all countries away from foreign interventions". He said that Iraq would not enter "suspicious fronts", in an apparent reference to US efforts to seek regional partners against Iran, noting that Iraq is a "mature country" and would not get involved in US policies against Iran.

Qatar upset

Qatar's relations with its Gulf neighbours have been under strain for some time, as Doha stands accused of interfering in regional affairs, supporting terrorism and offending the region with *Al-Jazeera's* coverage. Doha also enjoys better relations with Iran than its Gulf allies.

In early June, Iraqi Speaker Salim Al-Juburi was in Qatar for talks with its leaders on strengthening ties. He met the emir and the foreign minister to "coordinate efforts to meet challenges and crises and to end problems and differences" in the region. The emir said his country was "keen to establish special relations with Iraq".

Then, on 5 June, Saudi, Egypt, Bahrain and the UAE announced that they were cutting ties with Doha for supporting terrorism and interfering in the domestic affairs of other countries. Other states joined in and stood firm. Qatar cried foul.

The Iraqi foreign minister engaged in telephone diplomacy while Vice-President Iyad Allawi warned of serious repercussions of the rift and called for dialogue among Arab leaders.

Iraq's Qatar stance

In his weekly speech on 7 June, PM Haidar Al-Abadi confirmed that Baghdad was involved in mediation efforts concerning Qatar. For the first time, countries that used to unite against Iraq are now uniting with it to seek solutions for disputes, he said, coining it as the result of "a strategic shift in Iraq's politics". Despite "some differences" Iraq now has "good relations with all neighbouring countries", he said.

Though he gave little detail about efforts being made to resolve the Qatar dispute, he said there was some Iraqi involvement and that Iraq regretted the breakdown in relations, blaming it in part on support for terrorism and the media.

Abadi charted a careful course. He said that while Iraq does not oppose the embargo politically, it rejects it as a matter of principle, recalling that Iraq experienced a long period of international sanctions that did not harm systems as much as its people. Iraq backs regional stability and all countries of the region facing terrorism, he said, noting that the IS emerged with "support, money and weapons", though he did not name a source.

Abadi also referred to payments allegedly made by Qatar to Shiite militias and Al-Qaeda-related groups in Iraq and Syria to free 26 Qatari hunters abducted in Iraq last year. He said the funds were seized at Baghdad airport and held at the Iraqi Central Bank.

Iraq visits Saudi, Iran, Kuwait

On 19 June, Abadi embarked on a regional tour that included Saudi and Iran. His office said that the visits follow "formal invitations" extended by these countries some time ago, probably in an effort to clarify that the visits were not linked to current Gulf disputes. However, Abadi did say he would seek an explanation from Riyadh concerning its stance against Doha.

It is not clear whether a statement by Iranian Deputy Foreign Minister Hussein Jabiri Ansari that said Abadi's visit to Tehran was "an unscheduled visit" in accordance with "the requirements of the current phase" was closer to the truth.

The PM travelled with his interior, foreign, planning, labour and agriculture ministers. He said the aim of his tour was to strengthen bilateral relations with neighbouring countries, adding that Iraq has been victorious "and wants to coordinate with these countries to eliminate terrorism".

He also used the visits to assert Iraqi sovereignty, saying: "Iraq will not be a party to any conflict or let its territory be used as a platform for aggression against any neighbouring country." He said Iraq only wants to defend its borders.

The PM's office heralded the visits three-day tour to Saudi Arabia, Iran and Kuwait as "successful" and said the trip was founded on the independence of Iraqi decision-making and avoided any polarising policies. It was "the culmination of a political approach taken by the Iraqi government to establish balanced foreign relations", it added. Citing victories against terrorism, the statement said Iraq's regional position had been restored and that Baghdad had regained "an influential role among the countries of the region".

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Iraq is not just religiously, geographically and historically interlinked with Iran, it is also dependent on Tehran. Whether Trump likes it or not, Iran has been one of many factors in winning the fight against the IS. Baghdad also has substantial energy interdependency with Tehran and earlier this year the two sides discussed further integration.

Iraq is also, however, improving relations with Saudi Arabia. The recent visit by the kingdom's oil minister for talks on a joint position on production cuts was the first such visit for decades. The Saudi foreign minister also visited Baghdad for talks back in February: the first visit by a high-level Saudi official since 2003 and the first by a Saudi foreign minister since 1990. At talks, Abadi and the Saudi foreign minister sought to "put bilateral ties back on track", according to an Iraqi Foreign Ministry statement. These visits followed the – albeit bumpy – re-opening of the Saudi Embassy in Baghdad in late 2015.

The responses of the Iraqi PM and foreign minister to the US and Sunni-Arab alignment and Qatar crisis were succinct and realistic expressions of Iraq's position. What was seen of Iraq's position in the media – and likely at talks in person – navigated a careful path that supported and did not offend Riyadh or Tehran, yet was sufficient to make clear that this was not a dispute that Iraq can afford to take sides on.

There are of course many in Iraq who will see things differently. There is tension between the Kurdistan Region and Iran, for example, over Tehran's loud opposition to the Kurdish independence referendum. Border shelling and recent PMF advances in the Sinjar area, in which Erbil has seen Iran's hand, have also raised temperatures. Despite all this, Barzani knows that Iran is fundamental to post-IS peacemaking. Moreover, it is only a year ago that Barzani appeared to be close to signing a pipeline deal with Tehran.

For most power-brokers in Baghdad, Iran is a firmly integrated key ally. Trump's principled realism will require that he will have to overlook this, just as he overlooks the inconvenience of a key Syria ally in the fight against the IS – the YPG – having firm connections with a group on his US terror list – the PKK.

In Riyadh, Trump listed Qatar as one of the countries who are "already making significant contributions to regional security", only to join the chorus against Doha a fortnight later, then later join mediation efforts. He is learning fast that the Middle East neighbourhood is as complex as his

own administration is precarious. By contrast, Iraq has smartly weathered this latest storm.

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