

Chapter 6

Questions Arising Before and After Independence

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More than a century ago the famous French sociologist Ernest Renan noted that a nation was “a daily plebiscite.”¹ By this, Renan meant that a nation’s very existence had to be repeatedly ratified in the minds of its people to continue to survive. In addition, his definition also referred to a nation’s changing/fluid nature as well as how nations rise and fall. (This, of course, was related to what Benedict Anderson more recently has termed “imagines,” when one seeks the origin of a nation.²) Renan’s weighty insight into the requirement for a nation to exist, applies particularly to the Iraqi Kurds. That is, do they truly think of themselves as a nation and will they continue to do so? Or do they still owe their ultimate allegiances to their party, tribal loyalties, or religion, especially when basic political and economic problems arise? This question will become particularly important for the future of the Kurdistan Regional Government (KRG) after the Islamic State of Iraq and Syria (ISIS) as well as both before and after any declaration of independence by the KRG.

Several decades after Renan’s celebrated observation, the possibly even more eminent German sociologist Max Weber concluded that a state was that entity which controlled a monopoly of the legitimate use of force

¹ Ernest Renan, “Qu’est-ce qu’une nation?” [What is a Nation?], trans. Ida Mae Snyder (Calmann-Levy: Paris, 1882), p. 26-29, in John Hutchinson and Anthony D. Smith, *Nationalism* (Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press, 1994), p.17. Renan’s essay on the nation is the classical statement of civic nationalism, the counterpart to the ethnic nationalism of such German writers as Johann Gottlieb Fichte and Johann Gottfried Herder. Civic nationalism refers to all the people living within a given state belonging to a particular nation whether or not they all belong to the same ethnic group, defined as supposedly descending from some common although probably fictional ancestor. On the other hand, ethnic nationalism refers to all its members belonging to the same ethnic, supposedly ancestrally-related group. Given that almost all existing states on earth today contain some ethnic minorities, most independent states in reality foster some type of civic nationalism, instead of ethnic nationalism, which is often operationalized in secessionist terms for the Kurds in Iraq, Turkey, Syria, and Iran.

² Benedict Anderson, *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism* (London: Verso, 1991).

within its domain.³ Thus, this chapter also will raise serious questions as to the KRG's ability to meet Weber's famous requirement of statehood *after* ISIS and both before and after any putative declaration of its independence given the KRG's current internal and external political problems and crushing economic difficulties.

With the creation of the KRG in 1992 following the U.S. victory against Saddam Hussein in the First Gulf War of 1991 and its eventual recognition as a federal entity in the new Iraqi constitution that followed Saddam Hussein's removal in 2003, both Renan's and Weber's insights applied in particular to the Iraqi Kurds, both as a nation and a putative state. Indeed, as early as 1992, this author recognized the situation when he analyzed what he then termed the arising of a *de facto* Kurdish state⁴ and shortly afterwards even elaborated on its emerging foreign policy,⁵ which is an attribute of independence most important to any state.

In the succeeding years, the Iraqi Kurdish nation has twice almost unanimously, but unofficially, voted for independence,⁶ while its leadership has repeatedly declared that it would soon call an official referendum to ratify such a demarche.⁷ Independence seemed imminent in June 2014 when ISIL suddenly seized Mosul, Iraq's second largest city, and knocked out the Baghdad authority in Iraq's north. This striking *coup de main* allowed the

³ Max Weber, From *Max Weber: Essays in Sociology*, ed. H.H. Gerth and C. Wright Mills (New York: Oxford University Press, 1948), p. 78. Max Weber first used this famous definition in a speech he made at Munich University in 1918 on *Politik als Beruf* [Politics as a Vocation.]

⁴ Michael M. Gunter, "A De Facto Kurdish State in Northern Iraq," *Orient* 34 (December 1993), pp. 379-401; and *Third World Quarterly* 14 (no. 2; 1993), pp. 295-319. See also Michael M. Gunter, "Unrecognized De Facto States in World Politics: The Kurds," *Brown Journal of World Affairs* 20 (Spring/Summer 2014), pp. 147-164. For further excellent background, see Ofra Bengio, *The Kurds of Iraq: Building a State within a State* (Boulder, CO: Lynne Rienner, 2012); and Mohammed Ihsan, *Nation Building in Kurdistan: Memory, Genocide and Human Rights* (London and New York: Routledge, 2017).

⁵ Michael M. Gunter, "The Foreign Policy of the Iraqi Kurds," *Journal of South Asian and Middle Eastern Studies* 20 (Spring 1997), pp. 1-19.

⁶ Kurdistan Referendum Movement—International Committee, "98 Percent of the People of South Kurdistan Vote for Independence," KurdMedia, February 8, 2005, www.indybay.org/newsitems/2005/02/09/17205061.php, accessed September 20, 2016; and Seth J. Frantzman, "2016: The Year Kurdistan Finally Breaks from Iraq?" *The National Interest*, February 26, 2016, nationalinterest.org/feature/2016-the-year-kurdistan-finally-breaks-iraq-15321?page=show, accessed September 20, 2016.

⁷ David Romano, "A Step Closer towards a Referendum in South Kurdistan," Rudaw, June 24, 2016, <http://rudaw.net/english/opinion/24062016>, accessed September 20, 2016; and Hannah Lynch, "Is 2016 the Kurdish Goodbye to Iraq?" Rudaw, January 8, 2016, <http://rudaw.net/english/kurdistan/080120161>, accessed September 20, 2016.

KRG quickly to occupy Kirkuk and its surrounding disputed territory. This, in effect, not only implemented Article 140 of the Iraqi Constitution on the future of these territories, but appropriated the very oil reserves that might make the KRG's independence financially viable. Indeed, KRG president Massoud Barzani quickly stated that the time to declare independence had arrived and would soon be ratified by a popular referendum.⁸

However, the Monday morning of reality swiftly dawned to haunt the seemingly inevitable march to independence when ISIS suddenly attacked the KRG and drove within a mere 20 miles of Erbil, its capital. Turkey, the KRG's supposed ally, offered no military succor. It was only the United States, which hastily deployed enough air support to buttress the KRG's response to save itself. However, by its attack and genocidal assault on the Yezidi-Kurds, ISIS had demonstrated how fragile the reputed basis of KRG independence actually was.⁹

In the succeeding months, two additional issues preventing independent KRG statehood even in a post-ISIS world would arise: the economic crisis that rapidly bankrupted the financial basis of successful KRG independence, and the equally challenging political crisis of KRG disunity. Thus, on two separate occasions—first in 2013 and then again in 2015—President Massoud Barzani's terms were challenged by the Gorran Party.

A political crisis of the first order had arisen that made any talk of KRG independence challenging, politically as much as it already was economically. Soon, the other historic Iraqi Kurdish party, the Patriotic Union of Kurdistan (PUK)—already rent by Gorran splitting away from it in 2009—itsself divided between two factions led by Hero Talabani, the wife of its incapacitated longtime leader Jalal Talabani, and Mala Baktiyar, the leader of the party's politburo on the one hand, and Barham Salih and Kosrat Rasul, on the other. On top of all this, the virtually required U.S. support for independence remained lacking. As did that of all the remaining regional actors, including Iran in particular, but in an effect Turkey as well.

⁸ "Iraq Kurdistan Independence Referendum Planned," BBC News, July 1, 2014, www.bbc.com/news/world-middle-east-28103124, accessed September 20, 2016.

⁹ For background, see Michael M. Gunter, *The Kurds: A Modern History*, 2nd ed. (Princeton: Markus Wiener Publishers, 2017), pp. 175-206.

Problems Associated with KRG Independence

Too often, Kurds and others discuss independence as if it were the end of a process, rather than the beginning of one. Thus, it also becomes necessary to suggest the likely problems associated with KRG independence.¹⁰ In the first place, it should be clear that we are talking about sequenced or cascading independence for the KRG only, not some type of pan-Kurdish state that would also include the Kurdish portions of Turkey, Syria, and Iran. Although practically every Kurd dreams of a pan-Kurdish state, this is highly unlikely given the vastly different stages of Kurdish nationalist development in each state the Kurds inhabit.

Thus, at present, the Kurds in Iraq are the most likely to soon become independent, followed by those in Syria. Given the continuing strength of Turkey and Iran as viable states, the Kurds in those two countries are much less likely to follow suit, although those in Turkey are more likely to achieve some type of ethnic rights. Thus, the question arises, what would be the relationships between an independent KRG and the other constituent parts of Kurdistan still part of Syria, Turkey, and Iran? Would the KRG make irredentist claims on these other Kurdish areas? Would the KRG offer automatic citizenship for all Kurds like Israel does for all Jews? Would an independent KRG allow dual citizenship for Kurds living in other states?

What about other likely legal problems involving separate visa regimes and financial laws? How would an independent KRG organize its economy? Abdullah Ocalan's PKK still seems a staunch advocate of socialism (Marxism), while the KRG pursues a capitalist route. Would the gas-rich KRG share its oil resources with the gas-poor Kurds living in Turkey? In other words, would the KRG's oil be a pan-Kurdish resource, or would it be a localized one? Similar problems exist among the Arab states, and indeed were argued by Saddam Hussein as a justification for his invading Kuwait in 1990.

In addition, what kind of economic infrastructure would an independent KRG have? At the present time, real banks are non-existent, forcing many people to carry their life savings around in their pockets or to keep them stashed at home. ATMs remain few. The KRG is largely a cash economy lacking a long-term sophisticated monetary policy, fiscal discipline, and

¹⁰ The following discussion owes much to Michael Rubin, *Kurdistan Arising? Considerations for Kurds, their Neighbors, and the Region* (Washington, D.C.: American Enterprise Institute, 2016).

sufficient reserves. Any attempt at creating a KRG currency would probably collapse. A possible compromise might be to create a symbolic currency pegged to the U.S. dollar or the euro. A precedent for this already exists in Liberia, Panama, and East Timor, which use the U.S. dollar. Furthermore, what about the large-scale crony capitalism and corruption prevalent today in the KRG? And in Turkey, what would be done with the Village Guards who still provide an income for some 50,000 Kurds and their families?

What about water resources? An independent Kurdistan in Turkey would inherit a large proportion of that state's fresh water supply and its ability to generate hydroelectric power, which, of course, is an important reason why Turkey would continue to oppose Kurdish independence. The KRG and Rojava, on the other hand, obtain their fresh water supplies from upstream Turkey and are thus in a potentially much less advantageous position than their Kurdish brethren in Turkey. A lesser, but still important symbolic problem involves choosing a flag and national anthem. Currently, many Kurds do share "Ey Raqip" (Hey Enemy) as a common anthem.

Early in 2016, the World Bank Group released a 219-page economic report on the KRG proposing reform options for fiscal adjustment and the diversification of the economy. The report addressed the high dependency on the oil sector, excessive role of the public sector in the economy, dependency on imports, weaknesses in the financial system and dependency on a cash economy. Economic diversification could plausibly be affected by taking much better advantage of land and water resources, greatly expanding the private sector through available human resources and entrepreneurial spirit, exploiting the advantageous geographic location on east-west trade routes between highly productive industrialized economies, and taking advantage of foreign expertise. A World Bank study carried out in conjunction with the KRG ministry of planning estimated stabilization needs in 2015 at 1.4 billion dollars.¹¹

In another important report, John Roberts, a senior non-resident fellow at the Atlantic Council's Dinu Patriciu Eurasia Center and Global Energy Center, agreed with this chapter when he identified a series of almost unprecedented challenges facing the KRG: "Its economy, its relations with Baghdad, and its own internal politics are all in turmoil."¹² His report

¹¹ World Bank Group, *Kurdistan Region of Iraq: Reforming the Economy for Shared Prosperity and Protecting the Vulnerable* (Washington, D.C.: World Bank Group, 2016).

¹² John Roberts, *Iraqi Kurdistan Oil and Gas Outlook* (Washington, D.C.: Atlantic Council, September 2016), p. 1. The following discussion is taken from this source.

went on to discuss the many major problems regarding the physical capacity to deliver KRG oil and gas to the market as well as issues concerning the corruption involved in the process. Security risks along the major export route in Turkey threatened the export of crude oil through the Turkish port of Ceyhan. In addition, the long-running dispute with Baghdad over the crude oil produced at Kirkuk, and the manner in which oil revenues accrued to Baghdad and Erbil further complicated the matter. Roberts' report also pointed out the severe polarization of government in Erbil and Baghdad that led to constant feuding and inability to reach necessary solutions. Hence the question of how an independent KRG might survive.

In yet another recent study, Nyaz Najmaldin Noori found that economic reform in the KRG largely relies on the ruling authority's willingness to share power with the people and each other. Indeed, since the birth of the Iraqi state and subsequently the KRG, the interaction of traditions such as corruption, rent seeking, and centralization, have caused a vicious circle hindering economic reforms necessary to sustain development. "Thus, the economic problem has remained as it is: relying on one source of national income, whether externally or internally, to provide civil servant salaries and public services as well as to support domestic investment, in addition to the expenditure of a huge public sector."¹³

In analyzing the KRG's economic "transition from boom to bust in detail," Mark DeWeaver states that "last year's 50 percent drop in oil prices, the occupation of neighboring provinces by Islamic State (IS) militants, and the suspension of fiscal transfers from Baghdad to the KRG have resulted in a government-budget crisis of epic proportions."¹⁴ He notes how "state-sector salaries have gone unpaid for months at a time,

¹³ Nyaz Najmaldin Noori, "The Failure of Economic Reform in the Kurdistan Region of Iraq (1921-2015): The Vicious Circle of Uncivic Traditions, Resource Curse, and Centralization," *British Journal of Middle Eastern Studies*, published online September 3, 2016, <http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/13530194.2016.1225258>, accessed September 25, 2016. This argument is also found in Michael M. Gunter, "Economic Opportunities in Iraqi Kurdistan," *Middle East Policy* 18 (Summer 2011), pp. 102-109; and Michael M. Gunter, "Iraqi Kurdistan's Two Contrasting Economic Images," *International Journal of Contemporary Iraqi Studies*, 6:1 (2012), pp. 80-95.

¹⁴ Mark DeWeaver, "Iraqi Kurdistan Economic Report 2016: Kurdistan's Great Recession," January 8, 2016, <http://www.macropolic.net/iraqi-kurdistan-economic-report-2016-kurdistan-s-great-recession.htm>, accessed September 24, 2016. For further background, see Yaniv Voller, "Kurdish Oil Politics in Iraq: Contested Sovereignty and Unilateralism," *Middle East Policy*, 20 (Spring 2013), pp. 68-82; and Denise Natali, *The Kurdish Quasi-State: Development and Dependency in Post-Gulf Iraq* (Syracuse, NY: Syracuse University Press, 2010).

KRG-controlled banks have no cash to fund depositors' withdrawals, arrears to construction contractors are piling up, and billions of dollars in payments due to foreign oil companies have not been made." He further adds that "the impact on the private sector has been little short of catastrophic," noting that "property prices have crashed, occupancy rates at four and five star hotels have plummeted, and work on many projects has come to a virtual standstill."¹⁵ DeWeaver also agrees that "in many ways the KRI [Kurdistan Region of Iraq] fits the definition of a rentier economy quite closely." However, "the current situation in Kurdistan is difficult to quantify because almost none of the statistics commonly published for most other economies are available." For example, "no monthly or quarterly time series data covering GDP, industrial production, capacity utilization, fixed asset investment, or employment" are available. Nevertheless, "if there were a business sentiment index for the KRI, our sources suggest that it would be at an all-time low." Thus, "this is truly a great recession by any definition of the term." DeWeaver adds that unfortunately the KRG also lacks three important corrective economic policy tools that most sovereign states possess: It "does not issue its own currency, it cannot increase the local money supply, [and] given the limited scope of its tax base, it cannot hope to solve its budget problems by raising taxes."¹⁶

However, despite the KRG's dire economic situation, DeWeaver points out that "outside of Iraq, Kurdistan's great recession has attracted surprisingly little attention [because] . . . the war against the Islamic State continues to monopolize the headlines." He concludes that "this one-sided emphasis on the security situation is unfortunate because it obscures some of the most serious problems the region is facing [and leads to] . . . the impression that everything in Kurdistan will be fine once enough precision guided munitions have found their targets in the IS-controlled areas south and west of the border."¹⁷ In other words, the KRG will remain in an appalling economic and therefore political and security crisis after ISIL, to the detriment of being in any position successfully to become an independent state. Kurdish independence would not automatically be the solution to Kurdish problems, but more likely the beginning of a host of new ones. Thus, it behooves all who hold a stake in the Kurdish future and its increasing importance for developments in the Middle East to be aware of these problems and consider them sooner rather than later.

¹⁵ Mark DeWeaver, "Iraqi Kurdistan Economic Report 2016: Kurdistan's Great Recession."

¹⁶ *Ibid.*

¹⁷ *Ibid.*

Conclusion

This chapter has considered the future after ISIS of the Kurdish *nation* and the KRG *state* in light of what Ernest Renan and Max Weber, two of the most illustrious sociologists who ever lived, most heuristically and famously posed as significant definitional questions regarding their nature. Although often used synonymously and therefore confusingly, as employed by Renan and Weber, the two concepts: nation and state, are not the same thing. Therefore, a nation is a cultural/sociological term referring to a fairly large group of people who share certain common traditions and a common culture on the basis of which they feel they constitute an entity. However, since each nation was created by different historical factors, no one factor or group of them defines all nations. Indeed, one wit has concluded that a nation is a group of people united by common error as to its origins and an irrational aversion to its neighbors, which, of course, leads into Benedict Anderson's famous observation referred to also at this chapter's beginning, that a nation's origins are largely imagined.

A state is a sovereign, legal entity. If a nation has its own independent state, it is a nation-state. In reality, very few states meet the national homogeneity required to constitute a true nation-state because almost all of the more than 190 states on earth today contain minorities. The KRG is no exception, as its population is comprised of Turkmen, Assyrians, Arabs, and Armenians, among others. Thus, some refer to the population of the KRG as "Kurdistanis," a term which covers everyone, whether or not they are an ethnic Kurd.

Given these prodigious political and economic problems, applying Weber's famous definition of a state as a territorial entity that possesses a monopoly on the legitimate use of force is problematic. Divisions among KRI political parties is so great that it is difficult to argue that the KRG has the monopoly on the legitimate use of force. Under such circumstances, it is impossible to conclude that the KRG would constitute a state in the Weberian sense. Indeed, Weber's famous definition would suggest that the current situation in the KRI is not a propitious time to declare KRG independence. In other words, at present, an independent KRG state would lack the required monopoly on the legitimate use of force to prevail.

Despite a division into four separate states since the end of World War I, the Kurds have managed to maintain their sense of belonging to one nation by expressing what Renan referred to as "a daily plebiscite," that

is, the continuing will to be a nation. Although ethnic Iraqi Kurds constitute no more than 20 percent of the overall Kurdish nation, they have manifested the will to constitute a separate Iraqi Kurdish nation, minorities, refugees, and internally displaced persons (IDPs) notwithstanding. Indeed, Renan's definition of a nation continues to help us understand how the Iraqi Kurds have managed to persevere despite so many challenges and problems. However, the current problems of political unity and economic viability may challenge the future of Renan's insight into what an Iraqi Kurdish nation is by lessening or even destroying the will to remain a nation.

