

## **Kurds Moot Future Status**

**Author:** [Twana Osman](#)

The extreme option is secession – but many Kurds say this is a bargaining ploy to get the best possible status as part of Iraq.

For Hawre Karim, 32, putting his signature on a piece of paper was like a dream come true. "I never imagined that one day we'd be rid of the Baath regime and that the Kurds would be able to speak so easily and freely about their destiny."

A petition has been circulating across northern Iraq since late January demanding a referendum in which Kurds can say what kind of future relationship they want with the Iraqi state. On February 21, demonstrations are scheduled in all major Kurdish cities to pursue the demand for a ballot.

The petition's organisers, the Committee for a Referendum in Kurdistan, say any decision on the future structure of government for the Kurdish region should be based on the will of the people. The campaign petition drive will end soon, and the organisers believe they have collected nearly two million signatures in cities, towns and remote villages.

"The Kurds have been struggling for years for the right of self-determination," said Karim, a volunteer collecting signatures in Sulimaniyah. "Today, with Saddam gone, it is time for us to determine our future."

Most Kurds understand that the referendum will offer them three basic choices: full independence as a sovereign state; a US-style federalism based on the existing Iraqi governorates – the preferred format of the Coalition Provisional Authority – and third, what the Kurds are calling "geographical federalism" that makes the whole of Kurdistan a single federal unit.

Kurds say they have a right to vote on their own status, saying that as a nation – a people joined by common culture and language – they should be able to determine their own future.

Historians cite the Treaty of Sèvres, signed after the First World War by the defeated Ottoman government and the victorious western powers. Article 64 of that 1920 agreement allowed for the possibility of a Kurdish state. But the treaty was replaced three years later by the Treaty of Lausanne, which deleted the earlier provisions allowing for a move toward an independent Kurdistan.

In Kurdish minds, though, the principle still stands.

While the idea of petitioning for a referendum came from private individuals, mostly intellectuals, the two main Kurdish political parties – the Kurdistan Democratic Party and the Patriotic Union of Kurdistan – soon came on board. The two parties provided personnel and support for the referendum teams working in smaller towns and villages, including the use of their offices.

Both parties have stated clearly that they do not favour an independent state, since they see this as politically unattainable. Instead, they endorse the "geographic federalism" plan which would make the Kurdish region (rather than the individual provinces) the federal unit within Iraq. They are opposed to a federal system based on Iraq's 18 existing governorates, because they feel it would allow them less distinct autonomy – certainly less than they enjoyed during their years of de facto separation from Saddam Hussein's rule.

Some local observers suggest that the parties are backing a referendum in order to improve their bargaining power in negotiating a more robust version of federalism than the US currently favours. "They preferred that this demand come from the mouth of the people to strengthen their negotiation talks in Baghdad," said Sirwan Anwar, 35, a Kurdish journalist.

The fly in the ointment when it comes to "geographical federalism" is that the concept – as approved by the Kurdish parliament in 1992 – would include the city of Kirkuk, an oil-rich city that lies just outside the administrative boundary of the Kurdish region comprising the provinces of Arbil, Suleymaniya and Dahuk.

Kurds consider the city their own, for historical and geographical reasons, but it has always been home to a sizable number of Turkoman and smaller numbers of Arabs and Christians. However, the Baath party's concerted campaign of "Arabisation" radically altered the population mix in the area, bringing in large numbers of Arab settlers from other parts of Iraq and pushing out some of the local people.

As a result, even if "geographical federalism" wins out as the most workable solution, it is doubtful that the federal entity would be granted Kirkuk.

At the same time, there is a growing movement for full independence, mostly among professionals and intellectuals. On February 14, Kurds in Suleymaniya staged a demonstration calling for secession. The main street through the city was jammed for miles by thousands of supporters.

Yet few people think secession is a serious possibility, and some suggest the demand is a tactical move which has the objective of putting a more realistic compromise on the table.

"When I was a child and I needed 20 dinars from my father, I used to ask for 50," said Zanist Osman, another of the people busy distributing petitions. "That's why the Kurds should be adamant about their right to separate – in order to guarantee a good form of federalism."

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