The Kurdish Problem and Possible Solutions

The Kurdish problem will probably be solved not at the global or regional level, but separately and by stages, in countries where Kurds live compactly and are in the minority. There is little likelihood that these states will split along ethnic lines or that the Kurdish areas secede. Hence a new country — Greater Kurdistan — probably will not come about for a long time to come. Of course, the Kurds themselves will never surrender this age-old dream or idea, but the preconditions for it do not yet exist.

The Kurds are a people with a history that stretches back more than 1000 years. They are made up of many tribal groups located primarily in the middle and northern Zagros Mountains and the upper reaches of the Tigris and Euphrates — in an area referred to as Kurdistan, which stretches across Turkey, Iran, Iraq and Syria. There is no single Kurdish language; its dialects belong to the northwestern branch of the Iranian languages. Most Kurds belong to the Sunni faith. There are also Shiite, Alawi, Yezidi and Christian Kurds. No official censuses of the Kurds have been taken. According to approximate estimates, there are a total of about 40 million Kurds, of which 18-20 million live in Turkey, 8-9 million in Iran, 5-6 million in Iraq, about 3 million in Syria, and over 2 million in the countries of Europe and Asia. There are also several hundred thousand Kurds in the post-Soviet space, including Russia.

Ethnic Kurdistan was the scene of instability, wars and armed conflicts for a long time, and it was completely dependent on the imperial ambitions of conquerors (the Arabs, the Persians, the Tatar-Mongols and the Ottomans, among others). The Kurds have struggled for national liberation throughout their long history, but they have nevertheless failed to establish an independent country.

A large number of internal and external factors prevent a Kurdish state from forming today. The primary factors are the following: the geographic and tribal fragmentation and disunity of the Kurds; the varying levels of political and socioeconomic development in each country; the lack of a single Kurdish language, a common political platform (party, movement, front) and a common national leader; the absence of external supporters who favor breaking up the existing countries and forming a Kurdish state (the sole exception may be the United States’ willingness to use any opposition force against the Iranian government, including nationalist movements, which is how Washington perceives the Kurds).

What are some possible ways that the Kurdish problem might be solved within the existing states?

The Iraqi Kurds are the most successful in terms of self-determination and socioeconomic status. They succeeded in becoming a federated state with extensive rights and powers. The Iraqi Kurdistan government rules the region independently; possesses all of the attributes of a state; conducts foreign policy and engages in foreign economic activities; has its own law enforcement agencies and armed forces; and receives 17% of Iraq’s revenues from hydrocarbon exports, which is proportional to its population size — and the Kurdish language (dialects of it) is recognized as the country’s second official language. In addition, the region is well represented in the federal government (by Iraqi President Jalal Talabani, six ministerial posts including the Interior Ministry, and an influential faction in parliament, among others). Iraqi Kurdistan compares stands above the rest of the country in terms of security and a favorable investment climate and its success in restoring its war-torn economy, infrastructure, vital functions, health care and education. As a rule, Iraqi Kurdistan’s authorities resolve their remaining differences and conflicts with the central government through negotiation and discussion. Moreover, the Iraqi Kurdish leaders have repeatedly functioned as intermediaries between Iraq’s Shiite Arabs and Sunni Arabs, thereby helping to resolve
serious government crises. The region has become an oasis of stability and prosperity in Iraq, which is balancing on the brink of civil war. Iraq’s Kurds stress that they favor retaining a unified Iraqi state and have no intention of ripping it apart along ethnic and religious lines. Besides, the issue of the so-called “disputed territories” on Iraqi Kurdistan’s administrative border that have been historically inhabited by Kurds remains unresolved. If Iraq were to break apart today, about 1 million Kurds would remain in the Arab part of the country. Therefore, President Massoud Barzani is working to get the Nouri al-Maliki government to implement the article of the constitution that governs referendums in the disputed regions, where Kurds are in the majority. As things stand now, only extraordinary circumstances (a military coup in Baghdad, a civil war between Arabs, or a military attack on the region from outside) could provoke Iraqi Kurdistan to secede from Iraq.

Iraqi Kurd leaders Barzani and Talabani have expended a great deal of effort to help find a peaceful solution to the Kurdish problem in neighboring Turkey. With the active involvement of the Turkish authorities, they entered into negotiations with Kurdish Workers’ Party (PKK) leader Abdullah Öcalan, who is serving a life term in prison. Öcalan has urged his supporters to stop fighting and initiate a phased peaceful solution to the Kurdish problem in Turkey. The plan concluded with the Turkish government for settling the Kurdish problem peacefully envisages the following: withdrawal of PKK fighters to the neighboring areas of Iraq over the course of several months, legislative reform that includes amending the country’s constitution to recognize the national rights and freedoms of the Kurdish minority, removal of the PKK from the country’s list of terrorist organizations, and the release of all Kurdish political prisoners, including Öcalan. In its final phase, the plan calls for the voluntary disarmament of the Kurdish militants and their safe return to their homeland (i.e., amnesty). The first groups of Kurdish guerrillas crossed the Turkish-Iraqi border on May 8, 2013.

It is difficult at this time to judge how effective and realistic the plan reached between the PKK and Ankara will be because there are people on both sides who support it and people who oppose it. By tradition, military commanders, members of Turkey’s security agencies, and the radical Islamist and nationalist groups favor a military solution to the Kurdish problem. Prime Minister Recep Tayyip Erdoğan and the Justice and Development Party (AKP) he heads take a more pragmatic approach towards the Kurds and other ethnic minorities. Erdoğan understands that solving the Kurdish problem can resolve a number of issues preventing Turkey’s accession to the EU. In addition, the Kurdish vote is extremely important for continuing the constitutional reform effort and securing Erdoğan’s election as president.

Turkey’s Kurds also lack unity. Most favor a peaceful resolution of the Kurdish problem and support the recent agreements between Öcalan and Ankara. However, among the numerous Kurdish anti-government groups there are those that want to continue the guerrilla war. These are primarily the extremist nationalist groups, including the ones that broke away from the PKK. Some have ties to foreign intelligence services and emigrant centers in Europe, others to organized crime together (smuggling, the arms trade, and drug and human trafficking) where the borders of Turkey, Syria, Iraq and Iran come. We can say today that the first step toward overcoming the Kurdish-Turkish conflict has been taken. However, the cease-fire that was reached with such difficulty can easily be broken by provocations on both sides.

Nor is the ongoing civil war in Syria helpful in reducing tensions in Turkey’s Kurdish regions. There are Syrian refugee camps along the Turkish-Syrian border where Syrian armed opposition groups are assembled, and in addition to defectors from the Syrian army there are Muslim volunteers (“soldiers of Allah,” “jihadists”), mercenaries from all over the Middle East, al-Qaeda and Jabha al-Nusra fighters, and dozens of others.

It is difficult to predict how this peaceful settlement option in Turkey will play out. It will probably last for a while, and open fighting may resume at any time.

The situation of the Syrian Kurds is much more difficult. On the one hand, they were oppressed and subjected to ethnic discrimination during the years they were ruled by the Baathist Syrian government and naturally cannot support it in the ongoing violent civil war. On the other hand, the disparate armed opposition groups fighting the Assad regime cannot guarantee the Kurds their national rights and freedoms, either. Moreover, the Kurds are legitimately concerned that if the rebels win, radical Salafist or Wahhabi Islamist groups oriented towards the Persian Gulf monarchies may take power in Damascus. Should that occur, the Syrian Kurds could hardly count on their status changing for the better.

Therefore, the Syrian Kurds continue to maintain strict neutrality in the intra-Arab conflict. Bashar al-Assad was forced to withdraw government forces from the regions densely populated by Kurds in order to concentrate them in the main areas under attack by opposition groups. The Kurds took advantage of the situation to establish local
government agencies and self-defense units throughout in order to prevent the rebels from consolidating in those regions. Despite clashes with them (in Ras al-Ayn on the border with Turkey and in Aleppo), the Kurds have generally succeeded in controlling the areas where they have compact populations. These regions have suffered little from the civil war, although some refugees have fled from Syria to neighboring Iraq. The fate of the Syrian Kurds may only become clear after the civil war ends. Their leaders do not favor Syrian Kurdistan seceding from Syria and are not even demanding autonomy because, unlike Iraq, the Syrian Kurds live in enclaves in the major cities (Damascus and Aleppo, among others), as well as in three different Syrian provinces separated by areas inhabited by Arabs. Syria’s Kurds would like to have rights and freedoms on a par with the country’s Arab population, proportional representation in new government agencies and cultural autonomy (the Kurdish language, their own media, traditional clothing, observance of ethnic customs and ceremonies, the ability to socialize with fellow Kurds in Turkey and Iraq, etc.).

Considering the bitterness of Syria’s civil war, it is premature to discuss realistic options for resolving the Kurdish problem in that country.

The status of the Iranian Kurds is totally dependent on the policies of Iran’s ruling regime. The regions inhabited by Iran’s Kurds are the most socioeconomically backward, their political parties and movements are persecuted, and activists are imprisoned or executed. The authorities periodically promise concessions to the Kurds and allocate funds from the budget to accelerate development of the region, but they usually forget their promises after elections. The situation is aggravated by the fact that the Kurdish parties in Iran lack unity and a common platform. The Kurdish issue in Iran is currently dormant, but the tumultuous events surrounding the restoration of Kurdish national rights in Iraq, Turkey and Syria are definitely raising the ethnic self-awareness of the Iranian Kurds. Tehran has also had to take into account the changes taking place in Kurdish enclaves in neighboring countries and adopt preventive measures to reduce tensions between Kurds and the authorities.

The situation in Iran’s Kurdish regions may change radically if Iran’s military confrontation with the United States and Israel worsens — if Iran’s nuclear and other strategic facilities are attacked with missiles and bombs, for example. If that happens, a no-fly zone may be established over the Kurdish regions, as was done in Iraq, and the Iranian Kurds may be given the status of an autonomy under an American “umbrella.”

The struggle of the Iraqi, Syrian, Turkish and Iranian Kurds for their national rights and freedoms is the internal problem of those states and does not directly affect Russia’s interests. As the Kurdish parties and movements in those countries are legalized, Russia may establish contacts with them along parliamentary, party, federal subject and municipal government, nongovernmental, and public organizational lines. Of course, the increasing role and importance of the 40 million Kurds and the dynamically developing Kurdish minorities in each country where they have compact populations must be given due consideration in Russia’s foreign policy and by its foreign policy departments.

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