Russia’s Stance on the Kurdish Problem

Many Russian scholars and experts believe the Kurdish problem has started acquiring greater importance in the system of regional and international security. The events of the Arab Spring brought destructive forces into play and energized radical Islamist groups. They have exacerbated many ethno-religious problems and made the overall security environment in the Middle East significantly worse. These events led to Syria’s protracted bloody civil war and the continuing large-scale terrorist attacks in Iraq, and they have intensified the Kurdish factor in regional geopolitics.

It is becoming increasingly obvious that the Kurdish problem is no less important and complex than the Palestinian problem. Therefore, the violence and bloodshed in a new war in the region over the Kurdish factor could occur on a scale similar to that of the Arab-Israeli wars. Much depends on the ability of the authorities in the states with Kurdish minorities (Iraq, Turkey, Iran and Syria) to resolve the Kurdish problem within their countries justly and peacefully with due consideration for the national identity of this multi-million person ethnic group.

Nor should we ignore the efforts of Washington and its Western and regional allies to play the Kurdish card in furtherance of their own interests. The State Department and the Pentagon continue developing plans to redraw countries’ borders, create a Greater Middle East, a Greater Kurdistan, etc. A desire to topple at any cost the regimes in Syria and Iran that are so hated by the West may lead American strategists to employ the Kurds as a “fifth column” for putting pressure on Damascus and Tehran. Washington also finds the role of “peacekeeper” and “arbitrator” between the Kurds in Turkey and Iraq and their central governments appealing. It is no coincidence that the Turkish PKK becomes more active when problems arise in Turkish-American or Turkish-Israeli relations. The US government’s interest in Iraq’s Kurds also increases against the backdrop of attempts by the Nouri al-Maliki government’s to grow closer to Iran or support the Bashar al-Assad regime in any fashion.

Russia is trying to pursue a balanced and weighted policy with regard to the Kurdish problem in close cooperation with the authorities of the states concerned and the international community while, at the same time, preserving the right to have humanitarian, cultural and other ties and contacts with the Kurds. Russian leaders must give consideration to the existing high level of political, trade, economic and other relations with our traditional regional partners — Iran, Turkey and Syria — while looking to resume full relations with Iraq. An objective analysis of the existing balance among internal and external forces and interests in the Middle East and in West Asia enables Russia to react properly to events and build long-term, mutually beneficial relations with every country in the region without exception. Russia backs the peaceful resolution of all disputes and conflicts, preferably under UN auspices. It is in the interest of the entire international community and the Kurdish minorities to end the violence and bloody civil war in Syria, normalize the security situation in Iraq and direct the Kurds’ struggle for national rights and freedoms in Turkey and Iran into peaceful channels.
Russia bases its policy of taking a differentiated approach to the Kurdish minorities in Iraq, Syria, Turkey and Iran on international law and the actual situation regarding resolution of the Kurdish problem in each of the countries that have large Kurdish populations.

Russia’s closest and mutually most beneficial relations are with Iraqi Kurdistan, which has achieved the status of a federation with broad rights and privileges in newly democratic Iraq. By agreement with Iraq’s central government, Russia has opened a new Consulate General in the Kurdish region’s administrative center — the city of Erbil — and it has established inter-parliamentary, inter-party, trade, economic and other relations with Iraqi Kurdistan. Each year, it provides scholarships to Russian universities and establishes contacts in the fields of education, science and culture. In 2008, the state-owned Russian company Voice of Russia initiated regular broadcasts in the Kurdish language to northern Iraq’s largest cities (Erbil, Kirkuk, Doha and Sulaymaniyah). Russia has a permanent working relationship with the Kurdistan Democratic Party and the regional government.

The May 2008 visit to Erbil by a delegation from Russia’s Chamber of Commerce headed by the well-known Russian politician, Orientalist and social activist, Yevgeny Primakov, who is well regarded in Iraqi Kurdistan, contributed greatly to strengthening Russia’s relations with Iraq and Iraqi Kurdistan.

The May 2010 visit to Russia by Fadhil Mirani, Secretary of the Kurdistan Democratic Party, was also extremely significant. During a roundtable discussion at RIA Novosti, he gave his views on the recent parliamentary elections in Iraq and his sincere interest in furthering the entire range of Kurdish-Russian relations.

The February 2013 visit by Iraqi Kurdistan President Massoud Barzani gave new impetus to bilateral relations. He met with Russian President Vladimir Putin and held talks with Russian Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov and Gazprom CEO Alexei Miller. A number of Russian state-owned and private companies expressed an interest in working with their Kurdish counterparts.

Russia’s contacts with the other Kurdish minorities (those in Syria, Turkey and Iran) are limited, for well-known reasons. A fierce civil war is underway in Syria, and although the Syrian Kurds are trying to remain neutral, all external communications have been disrupted and it is unsafe to travel in the country. Russia may provide humanitarian aid to the Kurdish refugees located in two camps in Iraqi Kurdistan.

The authorities in Turkey and Iran are firmly opposed to any foreign ties and contacts by their Kurdish minorities. Therefore, Russian representatives are forced to refrain from all relations with the Kurds in those countries. Moreover, in order to maintain partnership (strategic) relations with Ankara and Tehran, Russian officials try to avoid the issue of ethnic discrimination against Kurds in Turkey and Iran during bilateral talks. I should also point out that Russia has not responded to persistent requests from Ankara to add the Turkish Kurdistan Workers’ Party (PKK) to its list of terrorist organizations and does not take part in any actions against the Kurds. The Russian public and the Kurdish diaspora in Russia welcomed the agreement reached between Abdullah Öcalan and members of the Erdoğan government in April 2013 to end the fighting between the PKK and government forces and resolve the Kurdish problem in Turkey in phases by peaceful means.

Russia also takes into account the continuing existence of a large Kurdish diaspora in the post-Soviet space (several hundred thousand people), members of which maintain close ties and contacts with their fellow Kurds in Iraq, Turkey, Iran, Syria, European countries and America. Large numbers of Russian Kurds live in Moscow, St. Petersburg, the Stavropol and Krasnoyarsk Krays, and a number of other areas. They have their own nongovernmental civil and commercial organizations and voice-broadcast channels. They publish Kurdish-and Russian-language newspapers like Free Kurdistan, which is put out by the Federal National-Cultural Autonomy of Kurds of the Russian Federation, and the Internet magazine Kurdistan.ru.

It is important at this point to continue focusing on humanitarian and cultural factors in each country that has a large Kurdish population without prejudicing Russia’s bilateral relations with their governments. The government’s program of supporting the Kurdish-language media and holding regular seminars and conferences, showing films, putting on art and photo exhibitions and exchanging delegations of scientists and cultural figures, among other things, is a reasonable approach.

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