Creation of Kurdistan and Israeli Geo-Politics

Creation of Kurdistan may be an issue of great significance for the Kurds; however, it is an open secret that this creation necessarily involves large scale territorial adjustments, i.e., redrawing boundaries of at least three major Middle Eastern countries. In a region like the Middle East, which is historically notorious for extremely complex geo-political maneuvering and conflict, the mere talk of redrawing state boundaries is likely to trigger clash of interests at both regional and global level, which would otherwise never be a cause of concern for the Kurds themselves.

The history of the Middle East has been determined by events which initially seemed localized and relatively minor. It appears that the region is heading for yet another change which may, in turn, invite comparisons with the events after World War I that shaped the Middle East of today. In the present context, the core issue of the creation of an independent Kurdistan is not new; however, the momentum it has recently gained seems to have stirred the minds of many Kurd leaders to seriously strive for materializing their long lasting dream.

It is worth considering what has brought the idea of Kurdish independence so close to realization. In recent months, communities in the autonomous Kurdistan Region have witnessed a growing Sunni Arab uprising in western and central Iraq, including areas around the capital Baghdad and near the autonomous Kurdish Region itself. Kurdish Peshmerga have been deployed outside Iraqi Kurdistan to block Sunni rebel advances, and defend Kurdistan’s borders.

Notwithstanding the crave for independence and the imperative to defend Kurdish ‘borders’, however, the current crisis has not whetted the appetite of Kurds only; it has also galvanized a number of regional states into action. One of the leading amongst them is Israel. One should not be led to believe that Israel is ‘helping’ the Kurds out of “human sympathy.” This support for an independent Kurdistan is more likely to be explained by Israeli geopolitical calculations than sympathy for the Kurds' history of persecution.

It is a fact that the possibility of the creation of Kurdistan involves some of the most important regional states, which also happen to be rich in oil. It is a territorial fact than a mere coincidence that the Kurdish area is also rich and has already started to export oil on its own; and, it is precisely this very aspect, among some other also, that has led to an increased involvement of Israel. Watching these developments in Iraq, and calculating their possible ramifications, the Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu has already thrown the cat among the pigeons. Only a few days after the first tanker carrying crude oil produced in the autonomous Kurdish Region arrived at the Israeli Mediterranean port of Ashkelon, bypassing areas under Iraqi government control, Netanyahu made his public announcement of support for Kurdish independence. Netanyahu’s words must have come as nothing short of sweet music to Kurdish leaders’ ears. Not only that; It is no secret in the Middle East that Tel Aviv and the Kurds have had historically a fruitful working relationship – in military, intelligence sharing and business terms - since the 1960s. It’s a no brainer then that Israel would instantly recognize a possible new Kurdish nation-state. No wonder Israeli President Shimon Peres, in July, 2014, told US President Barack Obama that “the Kurds have, de facto, created their own state, which is democratic. One of the signs of a democracy is the granting of equality to women.”

As such, the argument that the Israeli’s expression of support originates from a common history of oppression and
persecution of both Jews and Kurds is a sign of naive thinking; for, there are Israeli geo-political calculations at play to shape a new regional reality that will be more favourable to Israel’s own interests and ambitions in the Middle East.

Regardless of the fact that the creation of an independent state is an issue of great importance for Kurd people; however, for Israel, it is important only as a means to achieve greater regional hegemony. As a matter of fact, if a Kurdish state is created, it will surely disintegrate the present day Iraq, and may also arouse ambitions of Kurds living in Iran and Turkey—hence, more disruption.

As a matter of fact, since the 2003 US invasion, Iraq is already a much weaker power in the region. Its further partition would result in at least three mini-states – Kurdish, and possibly a Sunni and a Shiite also, triggered by a sharpening divide among them. The process can also set in motion further ‘balkanization’ of Iraq, creating an Afghanistan, Syria or Libya type situation. In the Israeli calculations, that scenario would probably enhance Israel’s own status as the regional superpower. It would also give Israel a carte blanche to militarily intervene. However, would such a situation make Israel more secure is a question that remains to be answered.

The narrative, with regard to this issue, prevailing in the Jewish media has been projecting Kurds as “non-hostile” towards Israel; and the reason for this projection is that Kurds are not Arabs, Turks or Persians. Kurdistan---at least Iraqi Kurdistan--- is seen by Tel Aviv as a “non-hostile entity” that, crucially, is not exactly touched by the plight of the Palestinians. As such, from a strictly Israeli point of view, Kurds are regarded as moderate, secular Muslims who have been victims – and that’s the key operative notion – of Arab chauvinism, be it on nationalist or hardcore Islamist terms. At least in theory, Kurds won’t antagonize the notion of “Jewish self-determination.”

Notwithstanding the crucial significance of this issue, Israel’s calculations involve a larger territorial disintegration and integration. The implications of Israeli scheme would not be limited to Iraq’s partition into smaller, mutually hostile, states. It is an open secret that Kurdish people aspire for independence from Iran, Turkey, and even Syria also. Once Iraqi Kurds secede, it would embolden their ‘brethren’ in those states. The idea of greater Kurdistan is, as such, going to be a powerful agent, and confrontations with the central authorities in Ankara and Tehran will follow. Kurdish communities in Syria have already been left to lurch amid the on-going war, with many of them living in areas bordering Turkey. Turmoil in Syria along with Kurdish uprising further affecting Turkey also would, as such, affect all three major states of the Middle East, all of which also happen to Israel’s ‘enemies.’

However, among these states, Iran remains the primary target of Israel’s geo-political calculations. Netanyahu’s advocacy for action against Iran has been particularly aggressive in recent years, and the US President Barack Obama’s attempts for some kind of rapprochement with Tehran are a source of disagreement between Israel and the US. The creation of an independent Kurdish state in Iraq may encourage similar demands from the Kurdish population in western Iranian provinces of Kordestan, Karmanshah and West Azerbaijan. If Netanyahu’s scheme succeeds, those demands will fuel the discontent in the Kurdish and other minorities of Iran. They may even lead to conflict, and create an air of justification for both Israel and the US to intervene militarily in the name of ‘protecting’ the rights of the minorities.

By the same token, Israel has developed some serious differences with Turkey over the last few years; and as such, the former would like to see the latter in turmoil, which can conventionally happen if Kurds living in Turkey are given a stir to intensify their movement for an independent state of their own.

Although Israeli Prime Minister’s statement does not mention any particular state or states; however, a content analysis of his statement does shows deliberate vagueness left with regard to the boundaries of Kurdistan. It is quite evident that this was done with the intention of creating anxiety in Ankara, Tehran, Baghdad and Damascus. It is certainly a recipe for drastic upheavals in future. The idea of Kurdish independence within borders not yet specified, and the decision to hold a referendum in Iraqi Kurdistan, raise the prospect of momentous changes in years to come. Exactly what forces are behind the scheme remains shrouded in mystery. We know only that the idea has come from the Prime Minister of Israel, and has been seized by Iraq’s Kurdish leader Massoud Barzani. How events unfold from now on is going to be of interest to many in concerned capitals and beyond.

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