Russia, Iraq and the Kurds face challenges

After the overthrow of Saddam Hussein's regime it seemed as if Iraq was forced out of the zone of Russia's interests. Even Iraqi Kurdistan, despite the long-standing close Kurdish relations with Moscow, saw the United States as their only strategic partner to whom they were significantly indebted after receiving an unprecedented degree of autonomy within Iraq. However, in recent years there has been increasing Russian interest, on the one hand, and from Iraq and the Kurdistan Regional Government (KRJ), on the other, in enhancing cooperation. Russian energy companies are actively working both in the south and in the north of the country. Russia has expressed its sincere satisfaction with Iraq's successes in consolidating their government and in repelling jihadist attacks of the Islamic State. At the same time Moscow is taking note of the growing importance of the Kurdish problem for the future of the region and is closely monitoring the developments in countries where Kurds reside.

Particularly, on February 28 in Turkey the People’s Democratic Party (HDP), during a joint press conference with the government, made an appeal to the leader of the Kurdistan Worker’s Party (PKK) Abdullah Ocalan to convene this spring for deliberation of a complete end to armed conflicts. The well-known British diplomat, and former advisor to Tony Blair, Jonathan Powell, expressed optimism regarding the Turkish-Kurdish peace process, saying that the granting of permission to forces of Iraqi Kurds for passage through Turkish territory on their way to Rojava (Kurdish territory in North-eastern Syria) by Turkish authorities, strengthens trust between the two sides. Moscow generally shares this view, since for Russia which maintains friendly relations with both Turkey and the Kurds (including in the not-so-distant past with even the PKK) there is much to gain from reconciliation between the Kurds and Ankara. According to Russian experts on the region, the successful participation of the Iraqi Peshmerga in the Siege of Kobani is evidence of the growing consolidation of the Kurds, with whom they are united today by the common threat from ISIS. In no small measure as a result of this fact the Peshmerga forces in general showed themselves to be more a combat-ready force than the Iraqi army. Of course, the structure of the Peshmerga takes into consideration the difficult relations which historically developed between various Kurdish parties that ended in open confrontations at times. This is why, for example, the Peshmerga in Iraqi Kurdistan is made up of two groups: Democratic Party of Kurdistan (DPK) supporters and Patriotic Union of Kurdistan (PUK) supporters.

Concurrently, with the emergence of ISIS in Iraq many Kurdish politicians have accused each other of a lack of solidarity with the Kurdish minority victims of the jihadists, primarily Yazidis, but also Shabak, Yarsanis and Syrian Kurds. Certain Western writers have also expressed criticism at the Peshmerga. Prominent British journalist Patrick Cockburn notes that these armed forces of the Kurdistan Regional Government (KRG) "fled from the ISIS attack in August even faster than the Iraqi army in June. Yazidi villagers from Sinjar and Christians from the Nineveh Plain complained bitterly that they were abandoned by Peshmerga units who only hours earlier had sworn to defend them to the last drop of their blood."

Russian analysts do not share the harsh criticism of the British journalist. According to unconfirmed reports from their sources, the government of Iraqi Kurdistan, based on the progress made through the brokering of certain agreements with the jihadists, allegedly expected that their region would not be subject to attacks, but ISIS launched military operations in Kurdistan, prompting KRG to switch to active resistance. Perhaps the Kurds needed more time to better prepare for heavy fights with the jihadists. And those were bloody indeed. Speaking to me on March 12 of this year, in Suleymaniye, PUK executive secretary Hikmat Kareem said that the Peshmerga have already lost about
1,100 men with 5,000 injured. The heroic actions of Kurdish troops in Iraq, as well as in Syria, are highly valued by the population, including the minority groups that are under Peshmerga protection today. Incidentally, according to the BBC, there are 200 foreign volunteers fighting in Syria with the Kurdish forces against ISIS, including US and British citizens. In Iraqi Kurdistan, Peshmerga units are formed within an ethno-religious framework designed to further the formation of the just-created separate Christian units (the Arab BBC reported about this in particular on March 13). It is good that the Christian population of the region will be directly involved in the war with ISIS but what if this step will have a boomerang effect: strengthening of ethno-religious and sectarian Iraqi militias? We have seen the consequences this might have, for example, with the battle of Tikrit: representatives of the local Sunni population have already started accusing the Shiite volunteer militia al-Hashd al-Shaabi of reprisals on the peaceful Sunni population after ousting jihadists of the Islamic State. Will this not cause an influx of new jihadists into ISIS? Note that on February 13, Ayatollah Sistani advised the Shiite volunteer forces not to avenge the population of liberated settlements.

Iraqi Kurdistan has welcomed a huge number of refugees and internally displaced persons, including Syrian Kurds. According to international organizations, the total number has reached about 1.5 million and according to local authorities, more than 1.8 million (the exact number is unknown). Some of them live in specifically-organized camps and others live with relatives, friends and acquaintances. Clearly, receiving and accommodating refugees and internally-displaced persons places a heavy burden on local budgets. Most difficult is providing these people with electricity, food, medical care, drinking water, and so on.

The problem of joint armed confrontations with the jihadists also draws leaders of the Kurdish autonomy in Iraq and the federal government closer. Nevertheless, even in these difficult circumstances, existing antagonisms between them do not simply vanish and sometimes spill over. I recently witnessed an open debate flare up between the Republic of Iraq’s Oil Minister Adil Abdelmahdi and the Minister of Natural Resources of the Kurdistan Regional Government (KRG) Ashti Hawrami, during a highly representative forum held recently at the American University in Suleymaniye, which was brilliantly organized and assembled prominent representatives of local and international political and scientific elites, civil society representatives and journalists. The representative of the regional government accused the federal government of delaying the transfer of expected oil quota funds to Erbil, of which the autonomy is badly in need. In turn, the representative of the federal government, referencing information obtained from the Turkish side, which receives oil from North Iraq, cited figures saying that part of the oil was not delivered, or delivered in such a way that the central government has not received payment for it. Given the complex financial and economic situation in Iraq due to low prices for energy products, this creates additional budget difficulties. While such quarrels are usually held behind closed doors, the openness and constructive spirit of the participants in this situation left a good impression on the audience but aggravated the ongoing debate on government transparency on the sidelines.

Of course the main issue facing all the Fertile Crescent states, including Iraq, is the question of whether they can do away with the Islamic State, which strategy is best to achieve this and which future awaits the country in a post-ISIS era. But another important issue which concerns the citizens of Iraqi and friends of its people is which one of the two trends will prevail in the development of the North Iraq: the further deepening of the Kurdish autonomy and its subsequent alienation from the rest of the country or its further integration into a democratic, multinational, and multi-religious state which will constructively resolve all disputes between its groups. In this context, the worrying evidence that the younger generation of Kurds are speaking less and less Arabic causes a certain alarm with integration supporters. However, the situation is not as simple as language.

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