Independent Kurdistan as a Factor of Stability in the Middle East

While the events in Syria, Iraq and Turkey related to the combatants of the local Kurdish armed opposition (Peshmerga) fighting Isis [also known as Isis] and other terrorist organisations in the region develop at a swift pace, the question has been raised yet again about the right of the Kurdish people to self-determination (the total population of the Kurds is estimated at about 41 million); the Kurds have been separated by the borders of four states - Turkey, Iraq, Iran, and Syria. The overall area of the regions with predominantly Kurdish population amounts to around 450 million square kilometers. The number of Kurds in Turkey exceeds 20 million, in Iran it is over 11 million, in Iraq - up to 7 million, and in Syria - up to 3 million people. In addition to Kurds, the region is a home to Azeri, Arabs, Armenians, Assyrians, Persians, Turks and Turkoman; till the mid-20th century quite a few Jews lived there that were later repatriated to Israel. The Assyrians and Jews (and to a lesser extent the Armenians) have noticeably assimilated with the Kurds. Before the early 20th century the Armenians made up a considerable part (a majority in some places) of the population in the Eastern regions of the modern Turkey that are now predominantly inhabited by the Kurds. The Armenian population was mostly obliterated at the end of the 19th - early 20th century.

Unlike the Iraqi army that consists mainly of Shia Muslims and was trained by the US instructors and equipped with American weapons but ended up fleeing from Isis troops, Peshmerga forces of Iraqi Kurdistan have not only managed to hold back the Isis onslaught and prevent them from taking hold of the largest oilfield near Kirkuk but also helped the Iraqi army to free some of the areas occupied by terrorists including a strategically important town Sinjar. Over the course of several months of 2015, Kurds had control over an important town, Kobani in Syria, located close to the Turkish border, however Isis militants managed to break through to its territory. Moreover, despite Turkey’s passive stance during that decisive moment when any outside help would have been welcome, and the lack of practical action of the American air forces, the Kurds rolled out the offensive and advanced towards Haseke and Rakka, the capital of the ‘Caliphate’.

Taking into account the Kurds’ special role in counteracting the Islamic State and based on the deep historical roots of the ‘Kurdish question’, the problem as to how the Kurds could exercise their legal rights is back on the agenda. Up until now, only S. Hussain’s government had offered them autonomy at some point having created the Kurdish Autonomous Region with a capital in Erbil. After that only B. Assad granted Syrian Kurds autonomous rule in areas where they are highly concentrated. Turkey and Iran ignore these rights, although Tehran, unlike Ankara, prefers not to resort to repression and military force against its Kurds. In any case, the ‘Kurdish question’ is the most pressing issue in the domestic politics of all four states with a Kurdish population. And it cannot be solved without external mediation.

The thing is that such a state existed in the past: Kurdistan was recognised as an independent state by the international community within the borders decided by the World Court of Arbitration on the August 10, 1920 following the Sevres Treaty. Besides, in the 1920s there was a self-declared Kurdish Republic of Ararat that was formed on the territory of Turkish Kurdistan and lasted for three years, while in 1945 the Mahabad Republic was declared in Iranian Kurdistan. Moreover, it was Moscow that managed to prevent mass genocide of the Kurds at that time by opening a passage to them to the USSR via Northern Iran, where Soviet troops were positioned in accordance with the Russia-Iran Treaty of 1919 after the fascist aggression against the Soviet Union. Their leader...
Mustafa Barzani, father of the present-day leader of KAR became a Red Army general, and many Kurds married Russian citizens, graduated from Soviet military and civil universities. Later in the 1950s, almost all of them successfully returned to their historical homeland.

Yet today a Kurdish state formation in effect exists only on the territory of Iraqi Kurdistan where as of 1992, it has been de facto functioning outside the Iraqi state lacking only its own foreign affairs authority and international recognition. Now, after the defeat of Isil, the Kurds are yet again taking heed of the idea of creating one ‘Greater Kurdistan’, that will be an independent state spanning the whole territory inhabited by ethnic Kurds. The first step will begrudging all other parts of Kurdistan the same status that widely autonomous Iraqi Kurdistan now enjoys. And what is more, the Kurds are currently weighing their chances with more precision and pragmatism possessing greater patience and are capable of consistently moving towards their goal and trying to reach it by overcoming several hurdles.

Laying hopes on the Americans during the time of their occupation of Iraq from 2003 to 2011 proved to be unsuccessful: the Kurds returned to the previous status quo, when all negotiations were done with Baghdad at the time headed by a Shia government under the leadership of the Daava party determined to secure its domination in the country. The situation escalated out of control during the time of Nouri al-Maliki and reached a deadlock. It seemed that it could easily have led to a new round of clashes between the Kurds and the central authority. But a new crisis broke out: Isil came onto the stage in June 2014.

At first, the Kurds drew the terrorists away from Baghdad, Iraq. The contribution of the Kurds in deterring the onslaught of Isis in Syria played a crucial part in what ultimately allowed Assad to stand his ground. With the rise of Kurds’ national consciousness, Turkey saw an uprising of groups associated with the previously oppressed and pushed underground Workers Party of Kurdistan that is in many ways the leading and most populous political organisation of the Kurds, regardless of their clan affiliation, unlike in Iraq where two main forces, the KDP of Bargani clan, and the DPAK established by Talabani, exist in rivalry with each other.

The Kurds, due to their enclave position, have no other choice but to look for allies from a number of countries that could help them enter the international markets (oil supply which Kurdistan fully depends on economically; and in this respect they are fully reliant on Ankara) and military and economic aid from abroad, since the main strategy of their rivals is to isolate them. In reality, this isolation can only be broken by the US and Russia, but Moscow is still inclined to have dealings with the central government while Washington is not ready to compromise its relationship with Turkey and the Sunni monarchies of Arabia that strongly oppose the provision of rights to the ethnic and confessional minorities in the Arab world.

That’s why, despite the fact that Kurds entered the conflict with Isis of their own accord, they have not been recognised as a party to the conflict but instead viewed as partisans resisting the aggressor at times when the government army is incapable of defending the country. That is the Kurds are once again adopting a far from central role in the present conflict, but unlike before they refuse to tie themselves to either side of the conflict but try to defend their land without making alliances with anyone. In any case this time they are requesting official recognition and real guarantees.

But here the problem is that the Kurds cannot defend their land on their own, since at this moment in either part of Kurdistan they would not be able to last without external help in a real war with their enemy equipped with the latest weapons, above all aviation and tanks. And Ankara is actively utilising its army, planes, tanks and artillery to destroy members of the KWP not only within its borders but also in Syria and Iraq with occasional fatalities among the local Kurds.

In these circumstances and also taking into account the fact that after the attack on the Russia’s SU-24, Turkey practically admitted its links with Isis in economic (smuggling of oil), and military (helping militants with weapons, instructors and special forces) planes, it is important to take all the necessary steps to protect the Kurds from Ankara and the Islamic State. The only way to do it is by creating an independent Kurdistan, first comprising of KAR and Kurdish areas in the South-East Anatolia. To start with, the issue should be put forth for consideration at the UN taking into account that the Statute of the world community affirms the principle of the right of all nations to self-determination. And if it was achieved by nations inhabiting small islands in Polynesia, and while the 4-billion strong Palestinian nation is now trying to achieve the same with help from almost all UN states, then surely 40 million Kurds should be entitled to the same right.

Its practical implementation is a totally different matter.
Firstly, it will be essential to organise a referendum among the Turkish Kurds in relation to the broad powers of autonomy within the Turkish state. After it has been finalised and the power structures have been created, a vote should be taken on the unification of KAR and Kurdish autonomy in Turkey in one state. Clearly, both these stages of the independence movement should be supervised and monitored by and in presence of UN observers and other international organisations. The question of borders should be resolved using maps of the Ottoman Empire and, if necessary, International Arbitration.

The territory with an area of up to 300 thousand sq. km and population of up to 28 million people should be feasible for such a state. Moreover, it will be surrounded by Kurdish regions from the West and the East in Syria and Iran, whose fate can be decided later considering that neither Damascus, nor Tehran have used terror or coercive extermination against their Kurds. Moreover, independent Kurdistan is a factor of stability in the region. Its formation will allow Erdogan’s aggressive Turkey to be cut off from the Arabic states from where Ankara has been smuggling oil with the help of Isis even before its existence; the revenues from such illegal trade are used for financing terrorism and other dubious undertakings. This would benefit many countries - it would create a real lever for influencing Turkey as well as Iran that has a history of ignoring the interests of other countries in the region and fuelling conflicts between the Shia minority and the Sunni majority.

One of the major stumbling blocks in the creation of the Kurdish state is its international recognition. For instance, 50 years ago a state was formed on Cyprus under the name of Turkish Republic of Northern Cyprus (TRNC). However, it has still not been recognised by anyone except for Turkey. Although the Turkish occupation of this part of Cyprus is a different case. It is likely that the western states, and US above all, will initially abstain from voting on the question, but in the medium term the West will recognise Kurdistan. Firstly, the agreement that was reached by the western states in the 19th century regarding the independence of Greece, in reality existed in relation to the Kurds as well (the Sevres Treaty of 1920 foresaw the creation of a Kurdish autonomy in Turkey and considered the possibility of forming an independent Kurdish state at the request of Kurds to the League of Nations). However, back then the West failed to keep its promise to give independence to the Kurds in the beginning of the 20th century. Secondly, the stage that Iraqi Kurdistan is now in is partially due to the US actions, including their operation «Provide Comfort» and imposition of a no-flight zone above Northern Iraq. Berlin, Paris, London and other EU capitals may as well follow in Washington’s footsteps. Besides, we should not forget that the West recognised the independence of Kosovo not on the basis of UN resolutions but as a result of its bombing in Serbia. Israel has already announced that it would recognise Kurdistan. And more Asian, African and Latin American countries will follow suit.

At this time it is important that the last word resides with Russia as the only country among the world powers that has waged real war on terrorism in the Middle East. Russia saved Abkhazia and Southern Ossetia from Georgian aggression by means of recognising their independence and military assisting. Moscow refused to give Crimea up to be butchered by Ukrainian radical nationalists. It seems, that it is time to secure stability in the Middle East, too; and that will be impossible without destroying Isis, but also without resolving the ‘Kurdish question’.

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