Syrian Federalism: Saving the Country

It was quite predictable that temporary truce between the government troops and armed opposition would not stop the war with radical Islamist organizations like Daesh, Jabhat al-Nusra and others. A fierce fighting for the strategically important Aleppo and for the control over the Syrian-Turkish border continues, while military is planning operations on liberation of Raqqa and other cities controlled by jihadists.

The Kurdish People's Protection Units, which successfully countered jihadists in Kurdish enclaves in the north and liberated a score of adjacent Arab territories, are also participating in the struggle against Islamists. Despite Turkey's continued artillery bombardments and military provocations, the Kurds managed to regain control over a 700 km of 800 km stretch of the Syrian-Turkish border hindering the transport connection between Turkey and the Islamic Caliphate.

Now that the Kurds were not invited to participate in the Geneva peace talks on Syria, and neither Damascus nor the opposition guarantees the Kurds equal rights and freedoms with the Arabs, the Kurds are compelled to reinforce their self-defense troops and build their own system of regional and municipal government.

In terms of quantity, Syrian Kurds are the second largest ethnic group in Syria (with the Arabs being number one). Prior to the civil war, about 3 million Kurds lived in the country (over 10% of the country's population). Historically, the Syrian Kurds were mainly settling in three enclaves in the northern parts of the country along the Syrian-Turkish border, close to the Iraqi border, but there are also Kurdish communities in Aleppo, Damascus and other Syrian towns. During the 2011-2016 civil war, the Kurdish population shrank to 2.5 mln, as many Kurds were forced to flee from the country. Several thousands of Kurds died in the combat operations against militants of the Islamic State (Daesh), Jabhat al-Nusra and other Islamist groups. Majority of Syrian Kurds were fleeing to Turkey, Lebanon, Jordan and Iraqi Kurdistan, where they received shelter in refugee camps. Several thousands of Kurds managed to emigrate to the EU.

As for their religious believes, vast majority of the Syrian Kurds (about 70%) are Sunni Muslims, about 20% are Shiites, approximately one percent are Yazidis and a small fraction of Kurds are Christians. The Syrian Kurds predominantly speak the Kurmanji dialect. The Syrian Kurds, like the Kurds living in other countries, are known for their ethnic and religious tolerance. They support benevolent relations with all ethnic and religious groups living in Syria and in the neighboring countries.

Although at the inception of the "Arab Spring" in 2011, the Kurds were actively protesting the regime of Bashar al-Assad and were even persecuted by the central authorities, later they reconsidered their position avoiding participation in the civil war and maintaining neutrality. They chose not to fight on the side of the government or the armed opposition. The Kurds did not support or sympathize with the radical Islamist groups either. On the other hand, the Kurds were willing to participate in the forums and negotiations deciding the structure of the future Syrian state.

Leaders of the Syrian Kurds repeatedly stressed that they were not seeking independence and were willing to remain a part of the Syrian state as long as their rights and freedoms would be spelled out in the new Syrian
constitution. By that, they meant the establishment of an autonomous Kurdish region or inclusion of the Syrian Kurdistan in the composition of the future Syrian state as a constituent entity. They also implied the right to represent the Kurds in the central government on the pro rata basis as well as for the Kurdish language to acquire the status of the second state language or the language of regional communication, etc. Because the Kurds maintained neutrality during the civil war, they were allowed to create civil society institutions and bodies of local government back in the summer of 2012, after the government troops were pulled out of the Kurdish enclaves. The People’s Council of West Kurdistan was formed from representatives of cities and districts of the Syrian Kurdistan that had proclaimed self-governing. This body tasked itself with the drafting and approval of new regional laws. Among the first laws adopted by the new authorities was the law prohibiting discrimination based on nationality, language, gender, religion or social class. The People’s Council of West Kurdistan also passed laws regulating family relations, prohibiting forced marriages, underage marriages, polygamy, payments of bride price, etc. A new law of inheritance stipulating equal rights for male and female heirs was also passed.

There were some changes introduced in the security domain as well: the People’s Protection Units handed their public safety and protection of law authorities to a new body, the Asayish (a cross of police and special service forces). The Kurds started forming village, district and city councils charged with bringing the local public life to order. A program of elementary general education in Kurdish language was approved, and teachers are now in training. The Kurdish culture and art are now being actively developed.

By the end of 2012, when the military and political situation was still tough, the Kurds managed to create rather effective regulatory bodies and People’s Protection Units with participation of all ethnic and religious groups present in the region (the Arabs, the Armenians, the Turkomans, the Assyrians, the Circassians, the Yazidis, etc.). Volunteers of Turkish, Iraqi and Iran descent as well as Kurdish women and youth under 18 have fought in the ranks of the Kurdish militia. When jihadists besieged the city of Kobani, several peshmerga brigades came to the rescue of their fellow tribesmen from the Iraqi Kurdistan.

On March 17, 2016, the creation of Rojava (which means "West" in Kurdish) —the Federation of Northern Syria—was proclaimed at the convention held in Rumeila (Syria’s Al-Hasakah province) by over 30 political parties representing districts of the Syrian north. More than 200 delegates were present at the forum held under the motto "Democratic Federal Syria is a guarantee of coexistence and brotherhood of peoples." Leaders of the Kurds emphasize that the system of federal administration will be introduced only in the regions controlled by the Kurdish Democratic Union Party (PYD). They also stress that the regional authorities will assert the interests of all the ethnic and religious groups present in the self-governing districts. Rojava authorities will manage economic, defense and security issues. According to the determinations of the convention, the region will soon hold elections for the Constituent Assembly. The federation will be governed by the Supreme Council.

Official Damascus did not recognize the Federation of Northern Syria as valid. The Syrian Foreign Ministry said that the government “warns against any attempts to undermine Syria’s unity and territorial integrity, no matter what names such attempts might be disguised under." The Syrian opposition did not support the creation of the Kurdistan region either. In fact, Turkey in general opposes introduction of new territorial and administrative arrangements in Syria.

However, despite open rejection of federalism in Syria, ongoing attacks and the threats of the Turkish authorities and attempts of radical Islamists to invade the Kurdish enclaves, an autonomous administrative district – Rojava—was set up in the Syrian northern and northeastern regions. Rojava, also known as Western Kurdistan, is divided into three administrative districts (cantons): Jazira, Kobani and Afrin separated from each other by predominantly Arab lands.

The regime of democratic self-governing introduced in the Kurdish regions of Syria was both a protective measure and an ideological response to radical Islamists striving to invade the Kurdish enclaves in the circumstances when Damascus and the Syrian opposition kept ignoring the interests of millions of Kurds. It seems that the Kurds set a good example that can be used for peaceful resolution of the Syrian conflict and reconciliation of major confessional groups (Sunnis and Alawites).

From the very beginning, Russia supported equitable participation of the Kurds in the Syrian peace talks in Geneva. Opening of a representation of the Syrian Kurdistan (the Democratic Union Party) in Moscow in February of 2016 facilitated a direct communication of the Syrian Kurds with the Russian state as well as its public organizations, parties, mass media, scientific community, Kurd communities in the Russian Federation and the countries of the CIS. It also serves as a channel providing the first-hand information about the situation in the northern Syria.
Rojava representation abroad was opened in Iraqi Kurdistan, in 2015. It is on the short-term agenda to open representative offices in Prague, Washington, London, Berlin and the capitals of some Arab countries.

It seems that it would be in the interest of the current Syrian authorities and opposition to support the Kurds and the Rojava population, as a whole, in their striving for peace and order in the region, and include the concept of federalism in the future Syrian constitution. In doing so, the government would prevent new conflicts and bloodshedding in the multiethnic and multiconfessional Syria, promoting unification of the Syrian peoples in their struggle against the common evil—radical Islamist forces. This could also be a solution facilitating preservation of the Syrian state in its current borders.

Stanislav Ivanov, leading research fellow of the Institute of World Economy and International Relations (IWEIR) and the Institute of Oriental Studies of the Russian Academy of Sciences, PhD, exclusively for the online magazine “New Eastern Outlook.”