Dialog of Syrian Kurds with Damascus is as Relevant as Never Before

As the civil war had unfolded in Syria, the country's government troops had to withdraw from the country's northern regions populated by the Kurds to strengthen the defense of Damascus and some other strategic regions. Over the short period of time, the Kurds managed to organize rather efficient self-government and self-defense forces in their territories. Initially, the leaders of Syria's Kurds tried to exercise the policy of non-involvement in the inter-Arab armed conflict and preserve their neutrality, and they were open to negotiations and communication with the central authorities and the opposition. Until recently, the parties to the Syrian conflict, however, have been ignoring the proposals of the Kurdish minority shutting the Kurds out of the Geneva talks despite the Kurds demonstrated the entire world their heroic struggle against the radical Islamist groups like the Islamic State and Jabhat al-Nusra. Ultimately, the Kurds stood at the forefront of the struggle against the international terrorism. The Kurds had been keeping up a fierce fight against jihadists for months managing not only to protect their regions from terrorists, but also take control of 800 km of the 900-kilometer Syrian-Turkish border.

Today, Rojava (Western Kurdistan)—an autonomous district established in the northern Syria—is claiming the status of a constituent entity in the future Syrian state. The authorities of the autonomous district invite all local ethnic groups (the Arabs, the Assyrians, the Armenians, etc.) to cooperation, and take steps to revive the regional economy (the agriculture, oil production, trade, etc.), shape a local legal base and enhance the unity of their ranks.

While intra-party misunderstandings and the development of an ideological and policy platform remain, so to say, an intra-Kurdish problem, the relations of Rojava with the adjacent regions and Damascus have recently emerged as a problem of a primary significance. It is quite obvious that today the Syria's Kurdish autonomy is forming in a hostile environment, and that its future depends on the ability of the regional leadership to overcome external isolation, which can easily transform into a blockade.

Turkey discriminates against the Kurds most aggressively. The Turkish authorities are making every effort to discredit the Kurdish national movement. For example, Turkey identifies the Democratic Union Party (PYD), the leading political force of the Syrian Kurds, allied with the Kurdistan Workers' Party (KWP), banned in Turkey and a number of other countries, and classifies both organizations as terroristic. Using it as an excuse, Ankara regularly delivers airstrikes against the neighboring Syrian territory inhabited by Kurds and shells it. On August 22-24, 2016, Turkish army and tanks pushed into the northern Syria in an attempt to create the so-called “buffer zone.” Though R.T. Erdogan declared that the operation's official objective was the struggle against Isis (organization outlawed in Russia), in reality strikes were delivered against the Kurdish militiamen and the frontier towns. Engaging the pro-Turkish Syrian opposition (the Sunni and the Syrian Turkmen) Turkish army managed to establish a foothold in northern Syria separating the Kurdish cantons Afrin and Kobani.

The Kurds also have rocky relations with the external and internal Syrian oppositions and their field commanders. The latter have been pursuing the policy of double standards allying with the Kurds to counter jihadist attacks, while seeking to expand areas they control by invading the Kurdish territories (though they receive an adequate rebuff). So far, leaders of the Syrian opposition have not given the Kurds an explicit answer to the question of what fate the Kurdish minority will have in the future Syrian state. The oppositionists of all sorts debating the future of Syria in
five-star hotels in Riyadh, Doha, Ankara, London, Paris and Washington remain faithful to the idea of Arab nationalism and follow their patron's guidelines. Neither the Arab, nor Turkish, nor other foreign puppeteers pulling the strings of the Syrian opposition think that the rights and freedoms of the Kurdish minority in Syria need to be expanded. They all seem to hold that the best solution to the Kurdish problem is no solution. None of them is willing to establish the Kurds' rights in the new country's constitution.

Washington could, of course, put pressure on Ankara to cut the number of innocent victims and persuade the sponsors of the armed opposition to include the Syrian Kurds in the negotiating process and in the future Syrian state, but does not do that. Apparently, the US administration is quite happy with the pending status of the Kurds, whom the transoceanic partners are using to pursue their selfish goals in Syria and the region. Quite predictably, the Syrian Kurds became "a bargaining chip" in the big drama staged by Washington in the Middle East. The US and their western allies will continue supporting the Kurds until the Syrian fate is decided. In fact, Americans are quite explicit in their desire to see Kurds in the ranks of al-Assad's opposition.

The objective of the Democratic Alliance with participation of Sunnis, Christians and Kurds (established with the support of the US at the end of 2015) is not so much to fight jihadists as to ensure that the Syrian government troops do not expand the area they control in the northern part of the country. At the end of 2015, the troops of the Democratic Alliance liberated the dam and the Tishrin hydropower plant on the Euphrates River from jihadist militants. By the beginning of 2017, they are planning to push Isis militants from Al-Raqqah. By taking these steps, Washington is basically implementing its "Plan B" on the division of Syria into separate Sunni, Kurdish, pro-Turkish, and Alawite enclaves.

Since the so-called "moderate" opposition and its out-of-the-country sponsors are not looking to resolve the Kurdish issue in Syria taking into account vital interests of the Kurds, some Kurdish leaders are seriously deliberating the possibility of re-establishing the ties with Damascus. Today, Damascus is ultimately the only legitimate authority in Syria unlike different "opposition groups" supported by various foreign patrons and unable to come to an agreement with each other.

Undoubtedly, the reaction of the central authorities to such a move of the Kurdish leaders would make a big difference.

It seems that Russia could use this opportunity of mediating a dialog between the Kurds and the government of Bashar al-Assad. Besides, today the Kurds cherish modest hopes: to have a guaranteed autonomy and equal rights with the Arab majority. The Iraqi Kurds have already been granted similar rights. The leaders of Rojava stress that they are neither separatists nor nationalists. They do not want to fight against Arabs and would be happy to be a part of the future Syrian state.

It appears that improvement in the relations between the Syrian Kurds and the central Syrian government could reduce the overall hostility and confrontation in this country. It would also seriously upset the plans of those making profit of the ethnic and religious tensions. Unlike the Syrian opposition, which is split into dozens of internal and external organizations and groups unable to reach a consensus, the Syrian Kurds have only two main political parties (PYD and Kurdish National Council), which makes it much easier to come to an agreement with them.

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