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Rise of Kurdistan

TO ACKNOWLEDGE OR IGNORE THE
UNRAVELING OF IRAQ

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INTRODUCTION:

Kurds, many have heard of them but don't know who actually the Kurds are? A numbering in between 25 to 35 million Kurds inhabit in a Mesopotamian plains and the mountainous region what are now south-eastern Turkey, northern Iraq, north-eastern Syria and north-western Iran. Kurds make up the fourth largest Ethnic minority group in the Middle East, With diverse origin, Kurds are one of the largest ethnic group in the world that do not have a state of their own. According to CIA Fact book, Kurds formed 18% of Turkey population, approx. 14 million, 7-10% population of Iran, approx. 7 million, 09% population of Syria, approx. 1.6 million and 17% population of Iraq, approx. 8.35 million mainly in Iraqi Kurdistan. (Langley, 2015) Today Kurds form an eccentric community amalgamated through language, race and culture. They also discern to a number of different religions and creed, with a Sunni-Muslim majority.

According to Micheal M. Gunter, the Kurds are thought by some scholars to be the descendants of various Indo-European tribes that attained the region about 4,000 years ago. In the medieval period and dynasties of Safavid and Zand, Kurds were treated as slaves and found in great numbers to be sold to Turkmens. Kurdish ethnic identity was gradually materialized and evidence of their solidarity was seen in 12th century under the leadership of Salah-ad-Din Yousuf ibn Ayyub or Saladin, founder of Ayyubid dynasty in todays called Middle-East region. In the Ottoman period, Kurds assisted in the army of Sultan Salim 1, and uprisings were initiated by the Kurds against the Ottomans to protect the current structure of Kurdish principalities. The first Kurdish Nationalist movement arose in 1880 with the demand of political autonomy which was suppressed by Qajar Persia and Ottoman Empire.

KURDISTAN; A NATION WITHOUT A STATE:

A troubled history of Betrayal, Oppression and Genocide was experienced by Kurdish people. Kurdish Nationalist movements emerged in World War 1 with the fall of Ottoman Empire. In the Sykes-Picot agreement of WW1, Great Britain created the state of Iraq and left out the sub-group of Kurdish people. A short-lived (1922-24) unrecognized state 'Kingdom of Kurdistan' was proclaimed in the territory under the jurisdiction of British mandate of Mesopotamia. (Eskander, 2000) A series of rebellion was launched by Kurdish leader against the British and succeeding Iraqi rule. The Kurdish people were promised for independence in the Treaty of Sevres in 1920 but that was overturned in 1923 with the establishment of Republic of Turkey over the Kurdistan borders in the Treaty of Lausanne. Later in 1927, a self-proclaimed Kurdish state 'Kurdish Republic of Ararat' located in the east of Turkey, during a wave of rebellion among Kurds, was subsequently defeated by Turkish army in 1930. (White, 2000) During the opening stage of Cold-war, a 'Republic of Mahabad' was founded (1945) and demised (1946) during the Iranian

crisis by Mustafa Barzani. Soviets promoted the Kurdish Nationalism and Kurds of Iran sought autonomy and self-government of Kurdish people as a revival of Kurdistan. (Ervand, 1982)

WARS AND LONG-STANDING ASPIRATIONS:

Mullah Mustafa Barzani, coming back from exile in Soviet Union after the collapse of 'Republic of Mahabad', with the support of Abd-Al Karim Qasim (Iraqi Leader) became the Head of Kurdish Democratic Party (KDP) in 1959-60 in return to the assistance of Qasim's policy in the coup d'etat of 1958 wherein the Iraqi monarchy was eliminated. In 1962, Mustafa Barzani forged a rebellion with Peshmerga; a para-military force of Kurdish rebellion, now pledged itself to KRG, against the Iraqi government, First Iraq-Kurdish War, also known as Barzani Rebellion vented in between 1962-70 because of the false promise of Qasim for the grant of autonomous Kurdish Region. In March, 1970 Iraqi-Kurdish Autonomy Agreement was signed between the Iraqi government and Kurdish opposition with the stalemate resulting 75,000 – 105,000 casualties. Failure in the implementation of the agreement leads to another round of bloody war, Second Iraqi-Kurdish War in 1974-75. Ba'athist Arabization campaigns in North Iraq enforced ethnic minority groups especially Kurds displacements and cultural Arabization, in line with settler policies of colonization, led by Ba'athist government of Iraq in 1960's to 1990's, in order to change the demographic of North Iraq towards Arab domination. Uprisings and revolts were badly oppressed by Saddam regime of Iraq as seen in the genocide of Kurds in 1982 Iran-Iraq War, and Al-Anfal campaign of 1988 in which Chemical Weapons were used against the Kurdish people leads to the deaths of in-total 8-10 Thousand of Kurds(Thousands suffered) and sweeping destruction of around 2000 villages. It was clear that any move set by Kurds for independent state was viciously quashed.

After the end of Persian Gulf-war, Things were not like the same; United Nation Security Council Resolution 688 provided a safe haven to Kurdish refugees and The U.S and U.K initiated a military operation named as 'Operation provide comfort' in April, 1991 for a safe passage of Kurdish refugees in Northern Iraq and provided Humanitarian aid after the deadly and extensive destruction of Kurds people. A no-fly zone was established in the 36th parallel, which end-up the repression of Ba'athist Iraq of its minority groups. Baghdad agrees 'Oil-For-Food Programme' with UN which reserved 13% of Iraqi oil proceeding for the Kurdish controlled three northern governorates.

IRAQI KURDISTAN:

Land of the Kurds; a geo-cultural region known as (Iraqi) Kurdistan, is only an autonomous region in northern Iraq comprise of four governorates of Duhok, Hawler, Silemani and Halabja with a regional capital of Erbil. It encompass of 41,710 square kilometers (16,100 sq. mi) with an estimated population of 8.35 million. Article 115 of the constitution secured federal power,

stating, "All powers not stipulated in the exclusive powers of the federal government belong to the authorities of the regions and governorates that are not organized in a region. With regard to other powers shared between the federal government and the regional government, *priority shall be given to the law of the regions and governorates not organized in a region in case of dispute.*" (Iraqi Constitution, Article 115;) Thus, The Article 140 of new Iraqi constitution 2005 outlines the Kurdish Region as a federal entity of Iraq. The region is officially governed by Kurdish Regional Government (KRG) which is parliamentary democracy with a 111 seats in regional assembly. Masoud Barzani, an elected president in 2005 election, later in 2009 and extended its tenure in 2013 election for 2 years.

The Kurds are in full control of all the territories that they demanded before the invasion of Mosul by ISIS, and they are clearly content to see this de facto reality recognized legally by implementing the final stage of the Constitution's Article 140 process – a referendum in these territories that will ask the inhabitants whether they wish to remain governed from Baghdad, or be part of the Kurdistan Region. (Razzouk, 2014) With the annexation of Kirkuk, economically empowered KRG signposts to hold a referendum on independence in the Kurdistan region but subsequent ISIS threat to Kurdistan-controlled territory holds further discussion after June 2014.

PESHMERGA:

KRG is permitted to field its own military forces in the Iraqi constitution of 2005, which include active duty fighters numbered around 200,000 of Peshmerga (means; one who faces death) and Zeravani ground forces, including Kurds women at large number for the sake of Kurdish principalities security from ISIS threat. The KRG has about more than 350 tanks and 40 helicopter gunships, Anti-tanks Weaponry, Mortars, Man-portable air-defense systems, Armored vehicles, Anti-air craft gun and heavy artillery, although limited because of not an independent state. KRG's Peshmerga is also trained by US Army and military equipment is mostly provided to them by USA, Soviet Union, Germany and China. Peshmerga played very significant role in the interests served for KRG by helping US forces to trace and capture Saddam Hussein back in Iraq-2003 war and its intelligence led to Operation Neptune Spear, which eventually helped killed Osama Bin Laden (OBL). It is currently fighting against the ISIS in the Iraq and Syria while ensuring the security of Kurdistan-controlled territory.

KURDISH DILEMMA IN POST-MOSUL IRAQ:

Even the gravest threat of ISIS in Iraq did not prompt for a permanent resolution between the Iraqi's Central Government and Kurdistan Regional Government on the numerous clashes. The all above dispute was on Tamim province, which includes Kirkuk; Oil rich city. Control over the Kirkuk city give one's government leverage over the economical paradigm. However, Iraqi Security Forces collapsed in the face of Islamic State offensive in June 2014, and ISIS presence

in Mosul became a security dilemma for the Kurdish territorial integrity. Peshmerga foreplay the scenario by Seizure the Kirkuk city and deploy its forces in the borders against ISIS to secure its Kurdish territory.

Kurdistan State of affairs currently faces a “seven major shocks” to the region over the last three years that has impacted the status quo:

- The 2014 economic crises, including the budget cut of Baghdad
- The ISIS invasion of Iraq
- The ensuing influx of refugees and IDPs
- The drop in global oil prices
- The recent political crises over the presidency and
- The related cabinet crises
- The transformation of bi-lateral relations with regional power (Turkey)

All above mentioned political and demographic challenges posed by these shocks are considered to be non-existential threat to the Kurdistan as compared to economic drains to the system.

ECONOMIC ARGUMENTS (OIL GAME):

Oil has always been central to the Kurdish scrape for international legitimacy. Already in 1972, Mullah Mustafa Barzani, the leader of the Kurdish nationalist movement in northern Iraq, declared that "if he won control of those [Kirkuk oil] fields, he would give the oil to America." (Latham, 1976) Semi-autonomous region of Kurdistan is entitled to 17 percent of Iraqi's overall budget in order to pay its bills with stable revenues, to support over millions of refugees of Syria and Iraqi Sunni's and backing its Peshmerga military forces to fight against the ISIS. High need for Revenues is a priority for KRG by means of oil enriched territory of Kurdistan bypassing Baghdad to export its oil resources in the world market. Kurdistan is exporting 500,000 barrels per day (bpd) of oil, directly exporting to as many as 10 countries. In March 2014, Baghdad halted the budget of Kurdistan as KRG was secretly exporting the oil to countries suspected by Baghdad Central government long ago. Kurdistan stopped its own oil supply to threaten the Baghdad economy and openly exports the oil to the countries during the crises times as mentioned above and generated revenue of \$3 billion by independent Oil sales in 2014 especially to Turkey and trading houses. Mr. Ashti Hawrami, Minister for Natural resources, declined to name the importing countries of Kurdish Oil, which Reuter's report The Israel and Hungary as importing ones. KRG generates around \$800- \$850 million a month in 2015. The need to cooperate against ISIS nearly paved a resolution of Oil dispute. In 29 Jan, 2015, Iraqi government incorporated a budget 2015 in which it would restore a 17% share of national revenue with KRG and additional \$100 million to facilitate Peshmerga in exchange of 500,000 barrels of oil per day to SOMO (Iraq's state marketing organization). However, deal could not

rest for long because of the KRG complains regarding late and incomplete payments and broke off in mid-2015.

"If you ask any Kurd, they will always tell you that their main dream is independence," Hawrami said. "But at the government level, the main policy focus has been economic independence. We are aspiring to solve our own problems and we have enough resources to do it."

The economy is the existential threat to the Kurdistan Region, Dy. PM Qubad Talabani, if Kurdistan's economy fail all the other issues would become irrelevant.

KRG RELATIONS WITH OTHER STATES:

USA:

In his Fourteen Points, President Woodrow Wilson promised the Kurds a sovereign state. Throughout the 20th Century there was shift in the relations between U.S and Kurds sometimes supporting and sometimes ignoring the Kurds. After the ignorance of 1970-80's of Kurds, which ends-up in genocide of Kurds by Saddam Regime, the U.S helped Kurdish ethnic minority in Iraq by ensuring its autonomy, as reserved in autonomy agreement imposed by Iraqi government in 1974 (rejected by Mullah Mustafa Barzani on the Kirkuk territorial dispute), with the Safe Haven operation (No-fly zone over Iraqi Kurdistan) conducted by the West powers in the aftermath of Persian Gulf War of 1991. Kurds in Iraq have tried to preserve a "special relationship" with the United States and use it to their advantage. U.S helped KRG in recapturing its territory from ISIS in 2014 by assisting with air-strikes to Peshmerga and pledged its support in form of arms and ammunitions as well as USAID in KRG.

TURKEY:

Turkey's policy towards Kurdistan has historically focused on Kurdish insistence on autonomy and pave for their independence. As in Turkey, largest ethnic minority around 20 % populations, which comprises of 14 million people, are Kurds inhabited in 11 provinces in the south-east of Turkey. There have been active Kurdish separatist movements since 1984 by a Kurdistan Worker's party (PKK; Partiya Karkere Kurdistan) with armed insurrections in southeast Turkey. A threat to territorial integrity, Turkey conducted periodically cross-border military operations against the PKK group camps in Iraq, YPG; a successor of PKK working in Syria. Even so, Turkey showed no offence against the Kurdistan autonomous region in Iraq and did not oppose the KRG's seizure of Kirkuk city. Ankara is evolving relations with KRG by influx investments (485 Turkish companies working in KRG) and flourishing trade especially in oil which symbolizes Turkey's President Recep Tayyip Erdogan geo-political relations with Massoud Barzani(President of Kurdistan Democratic Party).

“The KRG is completely dependent on Turkey. [Kurdish president Masoud Barzani] has a tacit alliance with Erdogan But in the eyes of Kurds, the perception that the KRG is with Turkey is very problematic,” he added. “KDP wants the PKK to be reduced in capability at this time. PKK are a potential spoiler in the Ankara-Erbil alliance and a political rival to the KDP.”

Despite initial suspicion of separatism, Turkey found the oil-rich, landlocked and relatively peaceful KRG a ripe market for trade. And in Turkey, the KRG’s economic dependence is the only thing keeping the KRG afloat. Another political move by Erdogan aim was to show Turkey’s Kurds that a different Kurdish rhetoric is possible - one that rejects the confrontational Abdullah Ocalan’s PKK-BDP rhetoric and is reunited with the state. Hence, a good gesture was shown in the pre-election period towards Barzani (KRG) by the Erdogan’s ruling Justice and Development Party (AKP) that has made a major political maneuver ahead of the municipal polls to force the PKK-BDP duo to tone down its rhetoric and moderate its attitudes with respect to the settlement process.

He also resumes fight in July, 2015 by launching two-front campaign against PKK in northern Iraq and IS in Syria.

By inviting Barzani to Diyarbakir, Turkey has also attempted to show that it favors a “pluralistic” approach in the settlement of the Kurdish conflict, a message addressed also to the PKK-BDP quarters. It has tried to prove to Turkey’s Kurds, the people whom the PKK-BDP relies on or seeks to control, that other alternatives are available and could be put onstage if need be. Moreover, it has demonstrated that it is capable of enlisting Barzani’s support to strengthen those alternatives.

IRAN:

Iran views Kurdish independence as objectionable. The two rivals of Iran in the region, Turkey and Israel whereas share opposite views. That’s what actually concerns Tehran more. Even after the historic devastating wars between Iraq and Iran, Tehran supports the Baghdad strategically and advisory against the ISIS threat in Iraq. Tehran has assisted Peshmerga with military equipment almost immediately after the ISIS major offensive in northern Iraq. "Tehran’s fears about Iraqi Kurdish intentions are rooted in deeper fears about Iraq imploding as a nation-state." However, Iran has periodically operated against the Iranian opposition Kurdish groups centered in Iraq which includes Iranian Kurds’ Free Life Party of Kurdistan (PJAK; Partiya Jiyana Azad a Kurdistanê) Kurdistan Democratic Party of Iran (KDP-I) and Komaleh.

ISRAEL: (The Unmentionable Friend)

Kurdistan leaders specifically Mullah Mustafa Barzani, well-placed ally and Kurdistan Democratic Party (KDP) have time-honored relationship with the Israel that roots back to 50

years to the days when Arab unity was an existential threat to the Tel Aviv. Israel supports the initiatives that support the dis-integrity of Arab states. It was no more surprise when PM Benjamin Netanyahu expressed his strong support for the state of Kurdistan in June, 2014. (Netanyahu endorses Kurdish independence, 2014) Israel was the first recipient country for the shipments of Kurdistan Oil from Ceyhan. It is however a quiet, secretive relationship of Kurdish leadership about Tel Aviv supports. The Kurdish majority areas in Middle East surrounded between the Arab States (Iraq, Turkey and Syria) and rivalry state of Iran would be of a strategic interest for Israel to be 'official' friend in the closed borders of the above mentioned states.

SYRIA:

The KRG has trained some Syrian Kurdish militia forces to secure an autonomous Kurdish area if Assad loses control and sent about 200 Peshmerga to assist Syrian Kurdish forces (YPG, a successor to the Kurdistan Workers' Party, PKK) in the successful defense of the town of Kobane in 2014-15 from the emerging threat of ISIS with the mutual assistance by Turkey.

ISIS:

KRG used to feel itself secure from the emerging threat of Islamic State of Iraq and Syria until advancement of around 30 miles made by ISIS in the city of Irbil (KRG Capital) endangers KRG soon after the collapse of ISF (Iraqi Security Forces) in the confrontation of Mosul in August, 2014 near the Kurdistan region. KRG now shares a long tensed border with ISIS which created a substantial panic among the Kurds and U.S concerns were raised regarding their military personnel in the region which prompt direct U.S military action with KRG forces to reverse the IS-led fighters' advancements in Kurdistan territory of Irbil. Peshmerga which retreated easily from KRG regions of minority groups; Yazidi's, Christians and Zorastrianism practicing Kurdish people, now confronts the ISIS more intensely than any other force in Iraq against ISIS, as Peshmerga drove out IS from strategic Iraqi town of Sinjar within months operation.

THE CHANGING REGIONAL OUTLOOK:

Kurdish Nationalist movement has started out from late 19th Century and with the history of betrayal after First World War, and oppression of Nationalistic movements of Kurdish by Iraq and Turkey by military intervention to prevent the establishment of a Kurdish state, Kurds adopt a pragmatic approach that aims for autonomy within the framework of the corresponding states of Turkey, Iraq, Syria and Iran. The ultimate vision of Kurdish movements is the creation of a

unified, large, independent state. However such ambitions of Kurds pose a grave strategic threat to the concerned states in Middle-East.

KRG, in Iraq, rules the autonomous region that has existed since 1991. Post-2003 Iraq War, KRG's strategy has been aimed at fortifying a de facto "state within a state." However, the developing conditions in the Iraq are creating an opportunity for historic change in the Kurds' political and diplomatic situation, particularly after the emergence of ISIS forces offensive launch in the region in 2014. Peshmerga is the only military force confronting the ISIS threat effectively and have been able to stop and even reverse the advancement in Iraq.

The prolonged instability and violence or collapse of the state in Syria and Iraq as well as a major change in Turkish attitudes may create the right conditions for the establishment of a Kurdish state. In the present situation, the Kurds in Iraq are using the opportunity to strengthen their position within that country and gain wide international recognition of their "almost independent" status while preserving the option to declare a fully independent state if and when favorable conditions arise in the international arena.

The ongoing debate on the independence of Kurdistan state ensue the implications for the International status quo in the Middle East, with the possibility of disintegration of Iraq and Syria. However, the unbending defiance of Turkey and Iran towards the autonomous demand of Kurds jeopardizes the peaceful solution to the Kurdish demands.

CONCLUSION:

The fall of Mosul, the expansion of ISIS, the Iraqi government paralysis, the remobilization of Shia militias and above all, the rise of Kurdistan have aimed at the restructuring of the region of Iraq in order to culminate the consensus of the groups living there, further interpreting the policies of unifying Iraq in the interest of western powers deemed outrageous. The threshold of restructuring Iraq is on the seceding of the Kurdistan Region according to its federal or confederal (like Kurds committee in Syrian region) design, or exercising its full right of Self-Determination perhaps as the Republic of Kurdistan. Folded page cannot be unfolded or lines fixated on that page cannot be detached. Kurds in Iraq have consistently refused to follow a path that would result in abandoning the powers they enjoy, and have even taken steps to extend their autonomy to the point of having economic sovereignty within a federal Iraq - thus bringing them into serious dispute with Baghdad.

By ignoring the realities of Kurdish strength in Iraq, the U.S. and European powers are at the brink of risking the influence in the Iraq region by provoking a key ally (Kurdistan) 'in an increasingly unpredictable Middle East environment. But by acknowledging Kurdish strength, however, the United States could be drawn into a complex restructuring of the Iraqi state, or even witnessing a new Republic of Kurdistan and being involved in the reordering of a new Middle

East state system. It is understandable that the collapse of states and emergence of new ones in the Middle East illuminates a scenario that is complex, challenging and could be dangerous with unknown and unintended consequences. Such pave of secession can spill over the domino effect in the region for the like-minded groups like; Kurds in Turkey, Syria and Iran, and also, perhaps, Shi'ites in Saudi Arabia and maybe even Basra secession movement in the south of Iraq.

A political solution for Kurdish national aspirations - a fully independent Kurdish state or Kurdish regions that enjoy wide autonomy in the framework of existing states, is necessary for the peace, stabilization, and successful development of the Middle East.

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