

THE KURDISH FACTOR IN THE MIDDLE EAST AND ITS ROLE IN THE SYRIAN CONFLICT

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The research focuses on the problem of the Kurdish movement aimed at self-determination and the influence of the Kurdish factor on the Middle East processes. We critically examined the articles related to the place of the Kurds in the current balance of power in the Middle East and provided the definition of the Kurdish factor as an important aspect in regional interstate relations. We highlighted all the possible scenarios of further progression of events, particularly in the ongoing Syrian conflict with noticeable Kurdish participation in it. The conclusion of the article presents the reasoning to substantiate the Kurdish awakening as a threat to the most powerful Middle East states, including Turkey, Iraq, Syria and Iran.

Key words: the Kurdish factor, the Kurdistan Regional Government, the Arab spring, the Syrian conflict.

First and foremost, the Kurdish problem is not something that is emerging here and now. For almost a century, the Kurds have struggled to free themselves from central control and overcome their landlocked location. Today, a rapidly changing region is presenting them with new allies and fresh opportunities. Consequently, there is a good reason to doubt that the Kurds will defer their quest for statehood once again. This is what makes the report ever more topical.

The Kurds have lived in a mountainous region known as Kurdistan for the past two millennia. Throughout their history they have remained under the thumb of various conquerors and nations. Since the early 20th century, the region has been divided between Turkey, Iran, Syria, and Iraq, all of which have repressed, often brutally, their Kurdish minority. The Kurds, with the size of population of 33-35 million people (according to unofficial statistics the number is 40-42 million), are the largest ethnic group in the world without their own state. This is one of the arguments in support of calling them a nation, not just an ethnic group, as, for example, the Belarusian nation is 4 times smaller, and there are no doubts that it is a nation.

And one more remark: if only the established international institutes lived up to their own declarations, the Kurds would have already had a state, which formation was actually included as a clause in the Treaty of Sevres at the conclusion of World War I. The treaty, however, is ultimately rejected.

The headlines of the most authoritative sources such as the Foreign Affairs Journal, the World Politics Review and the Foreign Policy Magazine often run as follows: «The Kurdish factor is getting more and more influential...»; «The Kurdish factor changes the dynamic of the political events in the Middle East...»; «The Kurdish factor plays its role in Syrian war...», nevertheless it is impossible to find the exact definition of this very factor provided by a media pundit. What can be said with certainty is that the Kurdish factor consists of the following components:

- Large ethnic minorities of Kurds are represented in Iraq, Turkey, Syria and North Western parts of Iran, where they claim their right to self-determination, that conflicts with the national policies of the above-listed states;
- More or less organized Kurdish movement promotes the idea of independence, supported by the following popular among the Kurds parties: the Kurdistan Workers' Party in Turkey, the Democratic Union Party in Syria and Patriotic Union of Kurdistan in Iraq;
- The Kurdish minority has beneficial positions in the economy of Iraq because of possessing on its territory the huge energy reserves (oil, gas and other minerals resources). In 2012 the Kurds produced 175,000 barrels of oil a day [1];
- The Kurdish armed forces mostly remain outside the law (the Kurdish fighters in Syria, guerrillas in Turkey) with the exception of «peshmerga», the official army of the Kurdistan Regional Government in Iraq, which formation became possible after the USA invasion of the state in 2003 and adoption of a new constitution.

Thus, the Kurdish factor based on shared national interests, confluence of political objectives and economic interdependence of Kurdish communities in the Middle East pushes all mentioned

states on the example of Turkey and Iraq towards an enduring strategic relationship, especially with Turkey's new assertive foreign policy role in a proxy regional Sunni-Shiite rivalry when the Sunni Iraqi Kurds stand out as a natural ally. However, a key part of the Turkey ruling party's economic strategy relies on energy imports for a fast-growing economy. Even if Turkey wanted to buy its oil and gas from Baghdad, the hydrocarbons would still have to pass through Kurdistan. These days, the Kurdistan Regional Government looks like the only neighbor Turkey has zero problems with [2]. It is hard to say the same about neighboring Syria, where Turkey adopted its hostile, anti-Assad approach, turning, therefore, Ankara and Damascus into enemies and giving impetus to the Syrian Kurds collaboration with their brethren in Turkey.

It is obvious now that the Kurdish factor is very influential with a remark that the lack of territorial integration, common political governance and cohesion as well as little unity of actions serve as huge obstacles on their way to independence. In fact, the movement is gaining ground separately within each of the four communities with all corresponding specific features, but the transborder activities are, and most probably will be, increasingly getting the Kurds national and political consciousness together [3]. And this is causing a huge problem not only for Kurds themselves, but for Turkey in particular because this whole escalation against the Kurds is part of what is going to backfire with Iran's attempt to mobilize the Kurds against Turkey. We will definitely see this as part of a much bigger trigger.

The tumultuous events in the Middle East, which has become the world's most volatile region, provides an ample opportunity for Kurdish awakening. Turkey, Syria and Iran all see the independent Kurdish movement as a threat. The Kurds in Turkey have been using the intricacies of internal situation to press for democratic autonomy, as they call it. In Iran, they are still to rise from obscurity but the start of the process is there. In Syria nowadays the Kurds are demanding a federal system providing them with significant autonomy at least. After the US intervention and the developments, it spurred, Iraq has become the heartland of the Kurds' self-identity and the established Kurdistan Regional Government rules nothing else but de facto a Kurdish state. That's where the Iranian, Syrian and Turkish Kurds increasingly look for guidance.

Indeed, with its geostrategic location in the Middle East, the Kurdistan Regional Government (KRG) can also play a vital role for the regional security which would also contribute to the security of the Western interests in the region, in particular Israel. Having secular and democratic political orientation, the KRG can contribute to the Middle East appeasement efforts. It can offer the West a barrier to religious fundamentalism in the region. Western policy-makers should encourage these Kurdish potentials and in return provide security guarantee to the Kurds against any regional threat.

On an economic level, Kurds can develop mutually beneficial relations with the Middle Eastern and Western States. The huge energy reserves (oil, gas and other minerals resources) present within the Kurdistan Region can provide immense contribution to the Western nations' energy needs.

Before the Arab Spring set in, the three states had attempted to collaborate with each other to counter the Kurdish aspiration for self-identity or even independence. It's all over now. Turkey is not an Iranian friend now; it has become a bitter enemy of Syria. For all these countries the chances to quell the Kurdish movement have diminished significantly. The Arab upheavals accelerated the collapse of the Turkish-Iranian-Syrian axis [4].

Syria remains volatile and unstable with ethnic and religious groups fighting one another. The Syrian Kurds are likely to draw lessons and follow the successful example of the Iraqi Kurds in establishing an enclave of their own while the rest of the country is involved in war. Actually, the Iraqi Kurdish forces have already started training the Syrian Kurdish fighters [5]. The Syrian war has allowed the Kurds, occupying the far northeast of the country, to carve out a relatively autonomous and stable region, free of government and, what's more important, rebel control. The Syrian Kurds are pushing for self-rule and there is nothing Turkey or anybody else can do with this reality. Syrian Kurdistan has started on its way to acquire the trappings of a state [6].

So, what might that situation in Syria look like in consideration of further Kurdish struggle? Possible scenarios are the following: a political settlement; the restoration of a «national» government under a new strongman; permanent partition; a terrorist redoubt, however the most likely progression of events including all involved actors is a continuing armed conflict lasting many years. The dynamic of strategic competition in Syria can also be expected to further strain relations between and within the pro-opposition and pro-Assad blocks. The current proxy war being played out between the Western-aligned states in Syria against the so-called «rejectionist axis» including Kurds will not improve the prospects of negotiating broader regional disputes as Iran's nuclear program [7]. The stakes of the conflict in Syria are such that the country is likely to remain an arena for strategic competition for years to come. The internal actors involved in the conflict have laid out dramatically opposed positions that leave little room for a negotiated settlement. Internally, Syria's combustible ethnic and sectarian makeup incentivizes groups to seek external support. The result is fertile terrain for strategic competition that will persist well beyond any formal resolution of the conflict.

Meanwhile, the USA plans now seem to promote the aims of the Kurds, since a likely Kurdish independence will create a country under firm American influence just in the centre of the most volatile area of the world, namely the Middle East. Moreover Iran would be greatly pressured because of the existence of its handful Kurdish minority, and the Americans would gain a pressure level on Teheran, not easily confronted by the latter.

On overall, many external observers of the conflict in Syria view Kurdish community as a potential «king-maker». Syria's Kurds represent a large undecided group, and the military capabilities of their cross-border brethren in Iraq conjure images of a well-armed peshmerga that could tip the military balance [8]. As for Baghdad, it has stability concerns not altogether different from those of Ankara. Iraq is vulnerable to spillover effects that include the burden of hosting refugees and emboldening of Kurdish ambitions. Meanwhile, Turkey's fears of Kurds' alliance have already made it break off all contact with the Syrian government by withdrawing its ambassador and other diplomatic stuff. Now it is more than certain that the Kurdish issue will grasp the world's headlines over the coming years. Here you have the freedom of choice in what way to treat the Kurdish factor, and hopefully, while there is a conflict and different ways to prevent it from escalating, the solution will be finally found.

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