

Kurdish Independence: A Reality Check



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A supporter holds a poster of imprisoned Kurdish rebel leader Abdullah Ocalan during the Nowruz celebrations in southeastern Turkish city of Diyarbakir. (AP Photo/Burhan Ozbilici)

Zvi Magen & Gallia Lindenstrauss / Jan. 12, 2016

Declaration of Kurdish independence only in Northern Iraq is a more likely scenario. Resumption of wide spread violence in Turkey makes the situation of the Kurds there quite bleak.

Latest developments in the turbulent Middle East region have concentrated the international attention to this area. In that context, special interest is directed to the Kurdish issue, which has become one of the major factors that affects the situation in this complicated theatre. The Kurds are the largest ethnic group in the world without an independent state, and according to some estimates number more than 40 million. They reside mainly in Turkey, Iraq, Iran and Syria. The two centers of gravity among the Kurds are the Kurdish Regional Government (KRG) in Northern Iraq and the Kurdistan workers' party (PKK). The PKK is dominant in Turkey, and the PKK's affiliate organizations are dominant in Syria and Iran.

Since the first Gulf war (1991) and the establishment of a no-fly zone over Northern Iraq, the KRG has achieved the most towards the goal of Kurdish independence. However, its close cooperation with Turkey, mainly for the aim of exporting its energy sources through Turkey, is seen at times as a betrayal of the Kurdish greater cause. This is even more so since the collapse in July 2015 of the peace process in Turkey between the government and the PKK and the resumption of wide spread violence. However, there is also some modus vivendi between the PKK and the KRG, as some of the PKK top rank finds refuge in the Kandil Mountains in Northern Iraq.

The transnational dimension of the Kurdish problem has periodically made it easier for the countries in which there are significant Kurdish minorities to cooperate in quelling the Kurdish independence aspirations but has also made completely eliminating these aspirations difficult. In the present situation the Kurds in Iran are the furthest away from independence and the resumption of wide spread violence in

Turkey also makes the situation of the Kurds there quite bleak. The Kurds in Iraq and Syria, while enjoying greater autonomy, suffer from the grave economic and security repercussions of the weakening of these states.

The rise of the Islamic state (IS) has both been a threat and an opportunity for the Kurds. A threat, since IS has attempted to conquer Kurdish strongholds and IS-initiated terror attacks in Turkey have targeted mainly the Kurdish population. An opportunity, since the Kurds are seen as the best performing local actor in the struggle IS, and the redrawing of the borders in Iraq and Syria by IS opens the possibility for the Kurds to also carve territory to establish a future independent state. In Syria, the Kurds have already managed to unite the self-declared autonomous cantons of Jazira and Kobani and have made the first steps to unite also the canton of Afrin. Turkey has declared crossing the Euphrates River and uniting the canton of Afrin as a red line, but it remains to be seen whether it will stand strong in enforcing this.

The Kurdish problem has the potential to become an even more important factor in the Middle East, which is undergoing dramatic changes. The Syrian crisis highlighted the increasingly significant role of the Kurds in the turbulent situation in general, and as the fighting force against IS in particular. To some degree the Kurds benefit from the chaos, becoming now a potential key actor in the geopolitics of this theatre and a lever used by outside actors. The growing Kurdish role in the region affects the interests of the main global powers. The situation of the Kurds seems to have improved because of the support and positive attitudes from both Russia and the United States. With more support from Russia and the West, the Kurds could potentially gain independence.

Russian-Kurdish relations have a long history, starting with the Soviet ideological and operational support of the PKK. The ties were reactivated in 1990's because of the Russian need to obtain levers of influence in the Middle East. Today, for Russia's Middle East strategy, the Kurdish factor has become an effective lever again for promoting its regional and global policy. Russia, due to its multifaceted policy in the Middle East and its military intervention in Syria, has become a key strategic player that has the ability to contact all the countries involved in the regional turbulent situation. The Russian military involvement has given the Kurds a boost. Today, Russian-Kurdish cooperation includes political contacts with different Kurdish political movements and organizations and the establishment of political and economic cooperation, including energy issues. It is based as well on the aim of fighting against IS.

However, the Russian-Kurdish relations are not without contradictions. There is a challenge for Russia – on the one hand, to further diversify its relations with the Kurds and support Kurdish desire of establishing an independent state. On the other hand, the support to the Kurds should not be seen as compromising its relations with its other strategic partners in the region, such as the al-Assad regime and Iran. So far, Russian diplomacy is balancing around this dilemma: how to minimize the cost in ties with these and other Middle Eastern countries concerned about the issue of a Kurdish independent state and how to maximize the gains of supporting the Kurdish cause. Meanwhile, it seems that because of the Turkish-Russian crisis, the Kurdish factor has become again an apple of discord between Russia and Turkey, and as a result, an important lever against Turkey.

The United States is active as well *vis-à-vis* the Kurds, without necessarily always operating in accordance with Turkish interests on this issue. Washington is supportive of the advancement of the Syrian Kurds in Northern Syria but seems to be hesitant to support Kurdish independence in Iraq. Israel has had a long and mostly positive relationship with the Kurds (mainly those of Northern Iraq), and has already declared that it will support Kurdish independence. Thus, there is potentially space for international cooperation on the Kurdish issue.

It is not surprising that given the large number of Kurds there is also significant division among them. This makes the establishment of a larger Kurdistan entity highly unlikely. The existence of the two centers of gravity in the form of PKK and the KRG makes also a unification of the Kurds in Syria and the Kurds in Iraq a difficult prospect. The Kurds in Syria say their demand for a future political solution is a decentralized regime, not the complete break up of Syria. Thus, declaration of Kurdish independence only in Northern Iraq is a more likely scenario, and today more than ever many actors in the international arena are going to welcome this possibility and not act to hinder it.

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