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Must Kurds Still Count On Uncertain Allies?

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Brief Analysis

The majority of Kurds had serious hopes that Kurds in Iraq and Syria would have a better political future when Islamic State was defeated in Mosul and Raqqa. Kurds had prevented the spread of global terrorism. They did not expect a gift, but they hoped that their basic rights as a nation would be respected. Will Kurds be abandoned, despite all they have done in the fight against global terrorism so that people can take the subway, dance at a concert or enjoy a football match in London, Paris, Washington or Stockholm?

I am afraid that Kurds have reasons to fear that yet again. After four years of war against IS, Kurds have not realized their dreams. Almost every Kurd is now worried about the Kurds in Syria because the disaster of last fall's Kurdish independence referendum in Iraq is still fresh in their memory. If Kurds cannot count on outside support, perhaps they should rely more on their own expatriates for wise counsel in dealing with their many foreign and domestic dilemmas.

Some graduates, politicians, and intellectuals in the Kurdish diaspora returned to Iraqi Kurdistan after autonomy was established there (under U.S. air cover) in 1992, seeing a possibility to help build a Kurdish state. But once there, realities kicked in. Being 'on the ground' is not the same thing as having worked for Kurdistan from the outside, so conflicts were perhaps bound to occur. Many of these diaspora volunteers complained that their advice was not heeded, and a number decided to leave.

Today though, there is a realization that all good forces are needed to counter the very real challenges that the Kurds are facing, not least the Turkish war against the Kurds in Syria. Knowledge and education gained in the diaspora could be very useful in different parts of Kurdistan. It could contribute to deeper democratic structures, more

freedom of speech, equality and a truly independent legal system. The question is if the present (and future) Kurdish leadership will realize the importance of the diaspora and fully utilize it.

Iraqi Kurdish Miscalculations, on Every Front

Unfortunately, recent events are not very encouraging in this regard. Disregarding outside advice, the Kurdistan Regional Government in Iraq (KRG) held the Kurdish independence referendum on September 25, 2017. However, the joy was short-lived when the Iraqi army, supported by Iraqi Shia-militia, and Iranian military advisers took over the oil-rich city of Kirkuk on October 16, 2017. The Kurds were shocked when the KRG lost all the so-called disputed areas that they had taken from the Islamic State. I have experienced this kind of sorrow twice in my life: in 1975 and in 1991 when Iraqi Kurds were betrayed by two different U.S. administrations.

After the shock and sorrow, many questions were raised. How could KRG President Masoud Barzani misjudge international and domestic opinion and support? How could he - without support from superpowers like the U.S. - challenge the Kurds' neighbors of Iraq, Iran, Turkey, and Syria?

U.S. Secretary of State Rex Tillerson had written a friendly letter to Barzani asking the KRG to postpone the referendum for just one year because of the war against IS. Barzani did not read or he did not interpret this letter correctly. If the U.S. was not ready to support a Kurdish referendum, Barzani should have considered this fact.

The KRG's assessment of Turkey and its president, Recep Tayyip Erdogan, was also incorrect. For economic reasons, and to avoid conflicts with many international powers, Erdogan pretended to be a friend to Barzani and KRG. But after the July 2016 military coup-attempt, Erdogan rescinded most of the rights extended to the Kurds at the beginning of his rule in 2002.

And the rocky American relationship with Erdogan does not mean that the U.S. would risk its relations with Turkey, a NATO ally. The U.S. does not like to have to choose between Turkey and the Kurds.

Even the Kurdish analysis of relations between the U.S. and Iraq was not thought through. If Baghdad is a plaything in the hands of ayatollahs in Teheran, this does not mean the U.S. will automatically support Kurds in a conflict with Baghdad. The U.S. has its own agenda and wants the present prime minister in Iraq, Haider al Abadi, to be re-elected in May 2018 because his rival, Nouri al Maliki, is much more of an Iranian slave than Abadi. How could an Iraqi Shia-politician win an election after having accepted an independent Kurdish state?

The domestic preparations were also not adequate for the Kurdish referendum. Even in the Stockholm, where I live, I heard on a daily basis that key individuals in two major parties, the PUK and Goran, had not given their wholehearted support to Kurdish independence. The PUK had many meetings with Iraqi and Iranian representatives after the referendum. Then the PUK Peshmergas did not fire a single shot in Kirkuk when Shia-militia arrived there. When I saw other Kurdish Peshmerga crying outside of Kirkuk, I understood that the dream of an independent Kurdistan had been postponed.

As a result, the military in the KRG has lost a lot of its good reputation the territory of the KRG has been reduced considerably, as has its income from oil exports. Baghdad's budget for Kurds has been reduced to 12 percent and may be delivered to Kurdish provinces, not to a federal KRG. There is little consensus inside the KRG. Party interests still go before national interests.

Surprises do, of course, occur in politics, but I believe it will take a long time for Kurds in Iraq to become a strong partner in negotiating with Baghdad. First of all, corruption and nepotism in the KRG must end. Secondly, the KRG must build its institutions, develop democracy with a multi-party system and abide by the constitution.

Parallels with the Kurds in Syria

Similar troubles, along with equally heavy but unreliable dependence on outside powers, afflict the Kurds in neighboring Syria today. The PYD, the largest and strongest Kurdish party, which controls a large part of Syria, is still not allowed to participate in Syria peace talks in Geneva.

Worse yet, Kurdish successes in Syria have greatly annoyed Erdogan. He threatens Kurds in Syria almost every day and has begun a major military operation against the YPG (the military branch of the PYD) in the northwestern Syrian province of Afrin. What Kurds in Syria want more than anything else is to be regarded as a political player, not just foot soldiers waiting for orders. However, the fate of Kurds in Syria is in the hands of Russia and the U.S. Only these two superpowers can reach an agreement that would allow Kurdish federal states in Syria. In addition, at the internal level, if Kurds in Syria are to have a federal state, they must build their institutions and establish democracy with a multi-party-system -- as in Iraq.

Eventual changes in Iran and the Kurdish question

Nevertheless, in the longer term, changes in Iran might offer some hope for Kurds there, as well as in nearby Iraq and Syria. Many protests and demonstrations took place in almost every city and town in Iran last December and January. Protesters did not just protest food prices or economic problems or for basic human rights. They openly showed their hatred toward the ayatollahs' regime. They asked for political reform in Iran toward a secular system. Protests have diminished for the time being but may start again because dissatisfaction is so widespread.

A political change in a secular direction could alter the power balance throughout the Middle East and in the Shia - Sunni competition. A change in Iran would delight the political leadership in the KRG and in Kurdish parts in Syria, as well as their inhabitants. If Iran weakens, then Iraq and Syria will also weaken as states. Chances to take back Kirkuk and disputed areas in Iraqi Kurdistan would increase considerably. It may also mean that Kurds in Syria can have a federal state without spilling more blood. Yet this remote hope, based on fragile, distant prospects for fundamental change inside Iran, is testimony precisely to the very troubling near-term fate of the Kurds in both Syria and Iraq today. ❖



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