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Kurds of Iran: the missing piece in the Middle East Puzzle

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Brief Analysis

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The Kurdish factor has become a key element in the Middle East after the war against the Islamic State. However, this new interest in the fate of the Kurds is mainly focused on the Kurds of Iraq, while giving more political visibility to the Kurds of Turkey and Syria. The Iranian Kurds are the part of Kurdistan that receives the least attention in Western political and academic circles.

To explain why the struggle of Iranian Kurds is neglected, a structural or historical approach could be considered. Recent political developments, including events following the independence referendum of the Kurds of Iraq, once again marked the victory of Iranian strategy in the region, the disillusionment of Kurds without the United States, and perhaps a feeling of decline for all Kurds. But the recent protests in Iran might suggest another course of future events.

The fact that Iranian Kurdish factor is not sufficiently taken into account is paradoxical, especially considering U.S. tensions with Iran. The double standard is a persistent reality of international relations. And the attitude of Western governments, including the United States, toward the Kurds of each country, generally follows the policy of these governments toward each country in question.

But if there is a Kurdish nation that is divided over several states, a Kurdish question even if not the same in each one, then one cannot neglect a significant part of this overall picture. Iranian Kurds have considerable historical importance in the Kurdish movement, and considerable future potential in Iran.

Iranian Kurds experienced freedom and autonomy, and there was a center of gravity of the entire Kurdish movement, which impregnated the political and national identity of all Kurds after the creation of the only Kurdish Republic in history in 1946 and after the Iranian Revolution of 1979. Iraqi Kurdistan's regional government flies that republic's flag.

Today Iranian Kurds have special and strategic status. They are by far the group that possesses the highest degree of political awareness with tremendous organizing and mobilizing capacity. They constitute the second largest Kurdish settlement in the region and the third largest ethnic group in Iran. They populate areas rich in natural resources and arable lands, with access to trade routes in the Middle East and Central Asia. However, their demographic weight is proportionally less than that observed in other countries. Unlike the ethnic duality observed in other countries between Kurds and Arabs or between Kurds and Turks, there is a much more complex ethnic mosaic of at least six nationalities and several other minorities in Iran. The Kurds of Iran are confronted with a central power that is based on a much older tradition of statehood and domination, consolidated by an official nationalism that combines the Persian language and the Shiite religion. The Kurds of Iran are predominantly Sunni, although the religious factor is not a determining factor in the political identification of the Kurds of Iran as shown by the national awakening of the Shiite Kurds of the provinces of Ilam and Kermanshah in the last years.

In terms of facing obstacles, Iranian Kurds cannot escape the anti-democratic, centralist, and repressive nature of the regime. It is a state that, unlike Iraq, has not experienced the colonial legacy leading to the recognition of ethnic plurality, nor the frequent political changes that create opportunities for ethnic and democratic demands. At the same time, unlike Turkey, Iran has not experienced the semi-democratic space that offers opportunities for political participation, nor external influences such as those exercised by the European Union a few years ago in the field of respect human rights and minorities.

What the Kurds of Iran are asking for is not different from what the Kurds from other countries are asking for. They ask for recognition of their distinct identity, the end of discriminatory and repressive policies, autonomy in their own region, and equal access to power and resources at the country level. While basing their case on the right to self-determination of the Kurdish people, Iranian Kurds are not asking for secession from Iran. They struggle for the realization of their national rights in a democratic and federal Iran. The fact of inscribing their struggle in both a Kurdish and an Iranian register has conflicting political and identity consequences. It is a source of mistrust for the Iranians who believe that the solidarity of the Iranian Kurds with the Kurds of the other parts of Kurdistan is very significant. This was observed during the referendum of independence of Iraqi Kurdistan. It is also a source of doubt on the part of the Iranian Kurds themselves, who do not see their demands understood and accepted, either by the central government, or by the majority of the Iranian opposition.

Iran's Kurdish political organizations always remained faithful to some principles of political morality. They never wanted to be instrumentalized either by the foreign powers or by the states of the region, including during the Iran-Iraq war (1980-1988). They have concluded that their political struggle must not harm their Kurdish brothers in neighboring countries. For example, despite having the military wherewithal, with the emergence of the Iraqi Kurdistan Regional Government, Iranian Kurdish opposition forces have restricted their activism lest Iran should the KRG. These organizations denounced terrorism and adopted dialogue with Tehran. But dialog with the Iranian regime often comes with a cost. Abdulrahman Ghassemlou, Secretary General of the Iranian Kurdistan Democratic Party (KDP Iran), was assassinated at the negotiating table in Vienna in 1989 by Iranian agents who posed as negotiators. Still, the Kurds, in some occasions, sought to participate in the Iranian political space to bolster any hope for reformist candidates.

But the Iranian regime never budged. The Islamic Republic continues its denial of the legitimate and peaceful demands of the Kurds, while its repression continues. The Iranian regime is willing to tolerate the Kurds of other countries, but it can't grant any rights to its own Iranian Kurds.

The Iranian regime forbids Kurdish children to learn in their mother tongue. It prosecutes, detains, tortures, and executes civil and political activists. The regime has even resumed acts of terror and assassination of its opponents finding refuge in Iraqi Kurdistan. The Iranian Kurdistan continues to be militarized, and it still suffers

discrimination and underdevelopment despite the election promises.

Internal Kurdish factionalism has aided the Iranian regime in repressing Kurdish rights. The regime has weakened a key opposition group which in turn buttressed its grip on power. Iranian Kurdish groups owe it to the people whose grievances they represent to put their house in order and aim toward a shared goal. Indeed, the Kurdish parties in Iran have taken important steps toward coherent vision and activism.

Moreover, the international factor is of paramount significance. Iran is taking advantage of its strategic position and disruptive capacity wreak havoc in the region. No wonder that Western powers approach Iran with caution. Iran responds to pressure, which brought to the negotiation table over its nuclear program. Despite such pressure, the regime's destabilizing activities in the region continues. In the absence of a clear U.S. strategy to deal with the Iranian regime, the regime continues to play spoiler in Iraq, Syria, Yemen, and Lebanon. Such a strategy should not be reduced to a choice between military intervention and the status quo. Sanctions will only be effective only if accompanied by concrete measures designed to restrain Iran's influence in the region. Moreover, international pressure should tap into rather than alienate the wish of the Iranian people for democracy, freedom, and prosperity.

Unceasing public protests demand change. They are unprecedented in the diversity of demands and participants. They are slated to continue despite lack of leadership and brutal regime suppression. This is where the international factor can be decisive. The free world should support the Iranian people's, including the Kurds', struggle for freedom and political rights, and not shy away from agitating the regime. The regime systematically labels any form of protest as an instrument of foreign intervention. Iran should not get away with human rights abuses under the guise of sovereignty. In addition, it is important that the United States is not standing alone in the international solidarity shown towards the Iranian people. This solidarity should translate into concrete measures to reinforce moderate elements of the Iranian people and assist the protesters if the regime tries to repress them.

The viable way forward for Iran is through a government that is representative of and accountable to the Iranian people. Kurds strive to enjoy their political and cultural rights in a such an Iran. The Iranian people of all different ethnic backgrounds demand change and they have come to the streets to make their demands known. They deserve the support of the free world. ❖



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