Who to Blame for the Absence of a Kurdish State after Sykes Picot?

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Jun 1, 2016
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Last month, many Kurds mourned the 100th anniversary of the Sykes-Picot agreement, signed on May 16 1916, which laid down the foundation for today's nation states in the Middle East. Arguably, no single ethnic group despises this agreement more than the Kurds, who often view it as a moratorium on an independent Kurdish state by the world's then super powers. An independent Kurdistan formed in the early twentieth century might have saved millions of lives and helped mitigate the risk of violence visible today in the nation states that formed as by-products of Sykes-Picot agreement.

Now a semi-independent Kurdistan in Iraq has become an anchor of stability in an increasingly violent region. It hosts millions of refugees and has been able to consistently defeat the Islamic State (ISIS) in battle. Similarly, Syrian Kurds in Rojava have been able to block ISIS's expansion, pushing the group back from majority Kurdish territories in Syria.

For me, the historical decisions stemming from Sykes-Picot have had severe personal consequences. Like most Kurds, I too suffered from the consequences of the Sykes-Picot agreement. I had been a refugee three times by the time I was 11 years old. My town Halabja was gassed by the former Iraqi government, during which I lost many family members along with the thousands of others who perished. Besides the attack on Halabja, an estimated 180,000 other Kurds were buried alive in Iraqi deserts, 8,000 Kurds from the Barzan area were slaughtered, and approximately 4,000 Kurdish villages were leveled during the 1980s.

This is only a sampling of the successive atrocities committed by regimes in Baghdad since the country's foundation in the early 1920s. This snapshot also leaves out the dire conditions of Kurds in Turkey, Iran, and Syria. In these countries, thousands of lives have been lost in their bid for political and cultural rights, alongside depopulation and forced assimilation of Kurdish areas.

The price of a continued lack of independence is clear. But Kurds must engage in self-reflection and ask themselves what went wrong in their bid for independence all those years ago. How did Arabs obtain several independent states from the remains of the Ottoman Empire and the Turks carve out a new country, yet the Kurdish hope for a sovereign state remain unfulfilled?

History shows that the lack of a coherent Kurdish national discourse combined with disunited, fragmented Kurdish leadership and personal rivalries among Kurdish leaders have been key factors in halting a Kurdish state from developing. These aspects were ultimately more responsible for this failure than the unwillingness of Paris and London to accommodate the Kurdish demand for a state in Kurdish majority areas. And 100 years later, it appears that the same factors today may continue to prevent the successful formation of an independent Kurdistan.

Of course, this does not absolve England and France from the wrongdoings done to the Kurds during the course of remapping the Middle East. But Kurdish leaders must also take responsibility. They cannot use foreign countries as scapegoats for their own failures in realizing a sovereign Kurdistan, either when interpreting history or the present.

In contrast to conventional thought that the Kurds were not aware of international affairs, there were in fact several notable leaders who realized the high stakes for the Kurds and attempted to persuade British and French powers to grant the Kurds their own homeland. But lack of consensus among these leaders prevented them from unifying into a forceful voice for Kurdish independence.

For example, Sharif Pasha acted as the Kurdish representative in the 1919 Paris Peace Conference and negotiated with both British and French representatives. He also signed an accord with the Armenians regarding disputed territories claimed by both Kurds and Armenians.

However, back in Kurdish-majority areas, Kurdish chiefs responded with animosity towards the accord with the Armenians. They consequently refused to recognize Sharif Pasha as the Kurdish representative, and the Kurdish Baban notables of Istanbul disowned themselves from the accord.

Another prominent figure, Amin Ali Badrkhan, wrote to the British Prime Minister, urging him to assist in realizing an independent Kurdistan. Yet the influential Kurdish leader Sheikh Abdul Qadir refused to sign the letter because he wanted Kurdistan to remain as an autonomous region with the Ottoman Empire.

Consequently, when the Kurdish leaders in Istanbul and elsewhere refused to back Sharif Pasha, he resigned as the Kurdish representative in Paris out of frustration. He subsequently adopted the idea of a Kurdish autonomous region within Ottoman Empire, a position similar to the other Kurdish leaders.

While not the whole story, this brief snapshot into Kurdish leadership during the First World War provides a deep insight into how personal interests trumped greater Kurdish national interests at a critical period, which impeded the potential development of an independent Kurdistan to disastrous effect.

Had Kurdish leaders in Istanbul and other areas backed Sharif Pasha during the Paris Peace Conference, he could have become an authoritative voice for the Kurds and potentially altered the political outcome for a Kurdish state.

A century later, we now must ask ourselves what Kurdish nationalists have learned from the past mistakes of former Kurdish leaders. Unfortunately, when one looks at the political situation in Iraqi Kurdistan and the way today's Kurdish leaders act, it is apparent that the leaders seem to have short memories and little awareness of certain portions of their own country's history, which has led to disastrous effect.

Iraqi Kurdistan is still divided between the Kurdistan Democratic Party (KDP) led by Masoud Barzani, the Gorran Movement led by Nawshirwan Mustafa, and the Patriotic Union of Kurdistan (PUK). The former controls the Duhok and Erbil provinces, while the latter two govern Suleimnayah, Halabja, and Kirkuk.

There is nothing wrong with "partisan zones of influence" in different areas. Indeed, there are robust and separate parties that operate in the United States. But there must be a functioning government that crosses partisan lines, as well as a parliament that operates as a real watchdog over the government and holds officials accountable. Unfortunately, this is not currently the case in Iraqi Kurdistan.

In Duhok and Erbil, the KDP and its members are enthusiastic about a potential non-binding referendum on the

future of Kurdistan in Iraq. On the other hand, PUK and Goran leaders view the move towards a referendum with deep suspicion and have not explicitly backed it. They believe that the referendum is a political maneuver by the KDP to ensure its grip over the government and distract people from the issue of presidential succession.

Unless Kurdish leaders set aside personal rivalries, interests, and egos for the sake of a greater Kurdish cause and engage in serious inter-party discussions, the chances of success are slim. Leaders must form a united Kurdish voice that authoritatively speaks for all Kurds, reactivate parliament, and institutionalize the Peshmerga under a centralized command. Otherwise the same scenarios of the last century may reoccur when the Middle East goes through another potential redrawing of borders.

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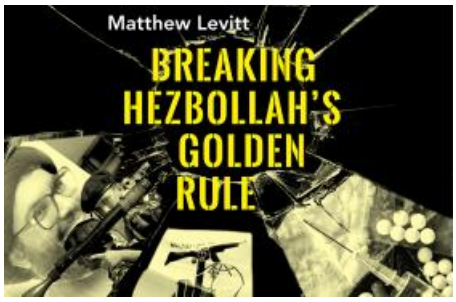

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