

03.10.2017

Kurdistan Is an Israeli Game-Plan for the Region



Let's begin with the fact that no other actor, not even perhaps Kurds themselves, stand to gain as much from the establishment of an independent Kurdistan in the Middle East than Israel. Israel's support for a Kurdish state has real material basis. This makes the whole Kurdish question very dicey, subject to change according to geo-political expediencies and recurs as and when promoted. But what explains Israel's support for Kurdistan? That's simple enough to grasp: it will do a lot of damage to its major rivals in the region: Iran, Iraq, Turkey and Syria, and give Israel a strategic advantage. As a matter of fact, Israel's co-operation with Kurds has a long history, which goes as far back as the 1960s and 70s when Israel armed Kurdish militias in northern Iraq to internally destabilize it. At that time, the main Kurdish actor was the leader of the Barzani clan, Mullah Mustafa Barzani, whose son Masoud Barzani is now the (self-declared) president of the Kurdish region of Iraq.

Kurds comprise roughly 22% of an Iraqi population of 37 million; 20% of a Turkish population of 79 million; 15% of Syrian population of 18.5 million, and about 9 % of Iranian population of about 80 million. While numbers do not in themselves mean that conditions for an independent Kurdistan exist, it does signify the damage that an independent Kurdish state can do to all of these countries.

Besides it, the other major factor that makes Israel a big supporter of Kurdistan is oil. This explains why elite Israeli political circles as well as the mainstream media are openly supporting referendum—and that too on the basis of Kurds' long history of 'persecution' at the hands of what a Haaretz report called "tyrannical leaders of Iran, Iraq,

Syria and Turkey.”

Notwithstanding the sympathy and victim mentality that Israel tends to invoke every now and then, what really attracts it is the oil that Iraqi Kurds have under their control—and that this oil should continue to reach Israel uninterrupted. By [August 2015](#), Israel was already importing three quarters of its oil from Iraqi Kurdish region. This has been happening ever since, and before that time, despite the fact that Iraq does not recognize Israel and has no official ties. Israel, therefore, does have a special relationship with the Kurdish Regional Government (KRG), and it is in its interest that a Kurdish state should come into being. Therefore, it is no surprising to see Israel’s leadership seen supporting Kurdistan. It was only a few days ago that Israeli media quoted their Justice Minister Ayelet Shaked saying that “The Israeli and American interest is that there should be a Kurdish state, firstly in Iraq. It’s about time that the United States supports this.”

While the ‘oil-factor’ signifies the economic dimension of Israel’s support for Kurdistan, strategic factors are no less significant also. These were perfectly explained in a September 28 report of Haaretz, which says:

Beyond the historical friendship between the two nations, it is clear why Israelis are supporting the Kurds. Kurdistan is located at the strategically critical junction of Iran, Iraq and Syria – the area where Iran is hoping to establish its “Shi’a Crescent” land corridor, which would allow it to transport arms and fighters directly to Hezbollah’s strongholds in Lebanon. A free and pro-Israel Kurdistan on Iran’s borders will not only stymie Iran’s designs but will also be a major strategic asset in the region.

Recognizing the difficulty of actually materializing the idea of a Kurdish state in the Middle East, the report mentions a potential way-forward:

The Kurds' only option is using patient diplomacy to negotiate an orderly breakup with Iraq and some form of trading relations with its hostile neighbors. The U.S., which has some leverage on Turkey and Iraq, may be able to quietly help behind the scenes, and Israel will certainly be urging the Trump administration to do so.

Big Problems ahead!

However, while the US has officially not supported the idea of referendum, the fact remains that it continues to arm Kurds—something that the US’ NATO-ally Turkey sees as a matter of great concern, leading to significant rupture in the two NATO allies’ bi-lateral relations.

It is, however, not the US alone that Israel has to convince to support Kurdistan. Divisions within Kurds themselves pose a serious challenge, let alone the combined opposition of Iran, Iraq, Syrian and Turkey to the idea of a Kurdish state. For instance, Turkey is life-line for KRG’s oil exports to Israel and other countries. KRG can, therefore, not afford to offend Erdogan. But this isn’t even the basic problem. The problem lies in what Erdogan wants in return, which is totally unthinkable – the KRG forcing the PKK in Turkey and the YPG in Syria to lie low. While Barzani may be willing to do even that to win Turkish support, for the PKK, Barzani is no more than a thug, and a self-declared leader of the Kurds--hence, capable of exercising no real influence.

What adds more to this problem is that even Iraqi and Syrian Kurds aren’t on the same page as far as their goal of Kurdistan is concerned. The Syrian Kurds, emboldened by the US support, are planning to establish their own federation within Syria. While the Syrian Kurds count around 8% of the population, control 25% of the territory and 40% of oil and gas resources if they keep their control over the oil and gas rich province of Deir-Ezzour, they are already in the middle of translating this source into political power. Local community elections are already happening and elections to parliament are expected to happen in the next year.

This, if materialized, would put Syria and Turkey into an alliance against Kurds. A rich Kurdish Federation in Syria and “state” in Iraq will definitely create a serious menace to Turkey, and an Ankara-Damascus alliance would oblige Syria to turn a blind eye to the Turkish forces present in the north of the country and postpone its claim to recover its territory for a while. This will permanently pit the Kurds against two countries, creating a deadlock.

None of this, however, means that the Kurdish question will lose its significance in the post-ISIS Middle East because of apparent difficulties standing in the way of Kurdistan. With two different Kurdish territories now on the maps of Iraq and Syria, what we can expect in the future is more chaos and no other power will be more active in fomenting conflict than Israel, for Israel sees in Kurdish question an unprecedented opportunity to destabilize all of

its major rivals, and secure a big source of oil.

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