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What if a Kurdish state was established?

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Introduction

The establishment of a Kurdish national state to be home for the Kurds in Iraq, Iran, Turkey and Syria, is an old dream that the Kurds have had since the political map of the Middle East was drawn after World War I. The Kurds always recall their dream at the emergence of appropriate regional conditions and variables. However, this dream clashes with the countries where the Kurds live, as it violates their borders, geography and sovereignty.

Today, with the repercussions of Arab Spring revolutions, wars, and the dramatic developments that are taking place in the region, there is a Kurdish conviction that is taking root day after day that they are in front of a historic opportunity that may not be repeated, to achieve their old new dream.

First Axis: Consequences of Iraqi Kurdistan Region's secession

1) Secession's impact on the promised state:

The Kurdistan Region Government (KRG) has decisively made its decision to conduct a referendum on the region's secession from Iraq. However, things did not seem so easy in terms of the repercussions of this decision. In fact, political, social, and economic problems; and domestic and international consensus, as well as other factors, greatly impede the establishment of a Kurdish state in northern Iraq.

In this regard, the KRG has to deal with two important issues:

- a- The first issue is related to the oil-rich city of Kirkuk, which the Kurds are trying to annex to the Kurdistan region to ensure their statehood.
- b- The second issue concerns the Turkmens in the city of Kirkuk and nearby areas.

These two files are so complicated that the KRG cannot easily solve. The Arabs in Kirkuk have arable land and major interests as they are an inseparable part of the population of the city, in addition to their tribal extensions in the areas of Salah al-Din and Al-Anbar. This is not an easy matter.



The other most sensitive and dangerous file is the Turkmen file, the second nationality in northern Iraq. They are not nomads, but they are landlords. However, the fanatical nationalism of some Kurds makes them expand at the expense of others.

The Arabs and the Turkmen there have only two options:

- A) To accept the status quo if the Kurdistan region became an independent state, or
- B) To confront the Kurdish domination over their regions violently.

The economy of the Kurdistan region depends entirely on oil, which represents 95% of the Gross Domestic Product (GDP). The KRG has not been able to diversify its economy resources despite the significant stability and security enjoyed by the region compared with other Iraqi provinces. It is true that the situation in the Kurdistan region is better than the situation in the central government in terms of financial and administrative corruption, but the KRG has not succeeded in eliminating it (corruption) in its institutions, which is a very negative factor in the economy of any country.

2) Geographical implications:

In fact, if the promised independent “Kurdistan” was established,

- a) It would not have any seaport,
- b) It would be completely surrounded by countries that do not support its independence, and
- c) It would continue to depend on an oil-based economy, in light of the absence of manufacturing industry, the declining agricultural activity, the underdeveloped artisanal production, the rising unemployment, as well as the spending of a high percentage of the region's annual income in payment of employees’ salaries, and the financial and administrative corruption.

The U.S. occupation of Iraq in 2003 provided an opportunity for the Kurds who have since enjoyed the benefits of independence, including their own “flag”, “constitution”, and “national anthem”, as well as independent institutions such as the “presidency”, the “parliament”, and the “border guards”. Accordingly, the KRG receives official delegations at its airports, and holds talks, deals, and bilateral agreements on its territory. In addition, representatives of the Kurdistan region work independently away from the Iraqi missions abroad. Also, the KRG has its own forces, namely the Peshmerga, numbering about 200,000 soldiers. Furthermore, the KRG imposes strict



procedures on the Iraqi people from other provinces visiting the region similar to those imposed by sovereign states.

There is no doubt that the emergence of the Islamic State in Iraq and Syria (ISIS), and its occupation of some Iraqi territories, especially Mosul, helped the Kurdish Peshmerga forces to impose a new reality and annex the province of Kirkuk (which is originally a disputed area, not part of the Kurdish territory) in order to secure the economic potential of their promised state through the Kirkuk oil.

Among the factors that contributed to encouraging the Kurds to move towards independence is the political failure of the central government to solve the political and economic problems related to the rights of Kurds and their financial and economic shares in the state budget, as well as the differences of views between the two sides on economic issues and the Kurdistan region's share, which reached its peak in 2015 when the KRG decided to sell oil independently from the central government.

Also, the political situation in Iraq reached a state of closure and absence of openness towards others, because of the political forces' adherence to the positions and gains that they obtained after the occupation of Iraq on sectarian, ethnic, or regional basis. This made Iraq prey to political, sectarian, and provincial rivalries; and instead of moving towards strengthening the national unity, different parties moved to the opposite direction. However, the Kurdish situation may be just the beginning.

Second Axis: The Kurdish state and its regional, international relations

1- Turkey and Iran

Turkey and Iran oppose the establishment of a Kurdish state for the following reasons:

a) Turkey believes that the United States is working to weaken President Recep Tayyip Erdogan as a punishment for his growing role in the Middle East, his opposition to the establishment of a Kurdish state in Syria, where Washington is trying to build a military base (including two airports) as a substitute for the Turkish Ingerlik air base.

b) Turkey and Iran view the establishment of a Kurdish state as a threat to their national security, as it paves the way for similar steps by the Kurds of Turkey and Iran. Therefore, they oppose Barzani's separatist ambitions as a pre-emptive measure to protect their territorial integrity.

It is noteworthy that the number of Kurds in Turkey is about 10 million Kurds, representing 20% of the total population, while the Kurds of Iran represent the country's third ethnic population with a population of 7.5 million. These demographic figures, which outweigh the population of Iraq's 6.5 million Kurds, are likely to fuel Kurdish separatist tendencies in both countries.

c) Turkey and Iran view any agreement on the establishment of a Kurdish state in the Kurdistan region as a justification for the secession of the Kurds in either country. Despite the different nature of the political systems in Turkey and Iran, both of them ensure at least the theoretical rights of the Kurdish minority. While the religious character of Iran denies ethnic demands of all nationalities, however, the Turkish government under the Justice and Development Party provided significant rights for its Kurdish minority but within the Turkish country. The federal formula for the Kurds in Iraq ensures the integration of the Kurdish faction while maintaining its autonomy. Also, the Kurds of Iraq enjoy all their cultural, social, and political rights. The situation of the Syrian Kurds is not much worse than the rest of the Syrians. Anyway, there are no obstacles in the way of the Kurds' integration with all sects and races in these countries as partners in citizenship.

d) The close relationship between the Iraqi Kurdistan region and Israel and the Kurds' reliance on the Israeli support to their secession project against the will of all world powers, raises the concerns of neighboring countries, especially Iran and Turkey, which view the whole matter as a hostile move, threatening their national security.

e) Iranian and Turkish fear that the emergence of a new state, forcibly separated from Iraq, is likely to lead to: the outbreak of national wars, the creation of another hotbed of tension, and the fragmentation of efforts exerted to eliminate ISIS and terrorism in general. Undoubtedly, the Kurds in Syria may attempt to do the same thing similarly to what could happen in Iraq especially that this lines with the U.S. intention to occupy part of northern Syria, where it keeps some military bases and does not intend to evacuate them in the near future.

2- KRG's relationship with the central government

Erbil's relationship with Baghdad on the one hand, and with its neighboring countries on the other, is likely to worsen, according to observers.

In light of the developments in Erbil, there will be two possible scenarios for Baghdad reaction, namely:

- a) The first scenario is that the Iraqi central government will use force at both diplomatic and military levels to eliminate the Kurdish dream of statehood. This scenario is likely to occur in light of the policies of the ruling Shiite national alliance, which is based on the marginalization and exclusion of other Iraqi sects, whether Sunni or Kurdish. Accordingly, the ruling Shiite alliance will not hesitate to use force in the face of the KRG. In addition, the KRG will attempt to penetrate the Kurdish component in the Kurdistan region, by winning loyalties and consolidating the Shiite presence in Erbil to abort the Kurdish aspirations of secession.
- b) The second scenario is that the Iraqi central government will adopt a policy of dialogue and negotiation with the KRG. It should be noted here that the Iraqi government, under its current circumstances, does not need to open new conflict fronts added to its internal problems. Therefore, the central government is likely to apply policies of "containment" and negotiations with the Kurdistan Region Government during the coming period.

3- Kurdistan's relations with the international powers

The Kurds, whether in Iraq or Syria, have become active allies of the United States and the international alliance against the Islamic State in Iraq and Syria. This encouraged them to link their aspirations to establish Kurdish entities in Iraq and Syria with the international alliance's need for their military role in fighting terrorism. Despite the international forces' awareness of this Kurdish goal, but the contexts of interaction with it indicate a general state of lingering towards the Kurdish aspirations, especially in Iraq. There is some kind of cautious rejection by the international community for the idea of Kurdish secession at the present time due to the inappropriate circumstances amid the ongoing fight against ISIS and terrorism in the region. In addition, the establishment of a Kurdish state in Iraq may lead to a new cycle of conflict between the Iraqi government and the KRG, especially in light of rejection of the idea altogether by major regional countries.

However, the cautious international rejection of the idea of a Kurdish state in the Kurdistan region of Iraq does not negate the implicit consent of some international powers, specifically the United States, to the entire idea of independence. The U.S.

cooperation with the Kurds of Iraq is clear, especially after drafting the Iraqi constitution in 2005 under the US occupation of Iraq (2003-2010), which gave a distinguished status to the region.

In fact, some of the provisions of the constitution, which codified the idea of federalism in Iraq, opened the way for other religious, sectarian, and ethnic communities to aspire formation of new Iraqi provinces. However, the rejection of the idea by successive Shiite governments discouraged such aspirations, especially those of the Sunni community.

It is known that there is an unprecedented military and logistical support provided by the United States to the Kurdish Peshmerga forces as an ally in the fight against ISIS. The same is true for the Kurds of Syria, the main ally of Washington in the face of ISIS within the Syrian territory.

However, Russia rejects the idea of a Kurdish state in northern Iraq completely although it has announced deals of up to \$ 4 billion in the fields of energy, oil, and gas with the KRG.

The European countries, Turkey, and Iran clearly declare their opposition to the idea of secession of the Iraqi Kurdistan region.

While Saudi Arabia only expressed its readiness to mediate between the Iraqi central government and Erbil to reach a solution, some UAE officials expressed their support to the Iraqi region's secession. Also, Ibtisam Al-Ketbi, Chairwoman of the Emirates Policy Center, had signed a memorandum of understanding with the Kurdistan region to help organize the referendum process there.

Conclusion

There is implicit support from the United States for the establishment of a Kurdish state in northern Iraq, even if it was in the long run. The question is: Does this implicit support encourage the KRG to ask the current US administration for an explicit support of the Iraqi region's independence, away from Baghdad?

The available data on Washington's relationship with the government in Iraq and the KRG indicates that it will support a negotiating track between the two parties regarding the region's independence, which will lead to the establishment of the Kurdish state in the end. But some analysts suggest that Washington will press Baghdad to take steps concerning the official separation of sovereign powers between the Iraqi government

and Erbil (as equal sovereignty prevents each party from interfering in the affairs of the other), which, according to the U.S. point of view, will prevent the militarization of relations between Baghdad and Erbil after the elimination of ISIS.

