

KURDSKA VSTAJA IN SIRSKA KRIZA

KURDISH AWAKENING AND THE SYRIAN CRISIS

Povzetek Sirska kriza ustvarja razmere za kurdsko vstajo v občutljivi regiji Bližnjega vzhoda. Avtor v članku poskuša analizirati možnosti za kurdsko revolucijo, ki bi lahko spremenila meje Bližnjega vzhoda z oblikovanjem velikega Kurdistan. Za razumevanje širše problematike Kurdistan uporabi tri glavne parametre, ki so povezani z regionalno politiko in medsebojnimi odnosi. Prvi parameter je problem Kurdiv v Turčiji in vloga separatistične organizacije, imenovane Delavska stranka Kurdistan (PKK). Drugi parameter je iraški Kurdistan na severu države, deloma avtonomna pokrajina, ki bi lahko pomenila predhodnico velikega Kurdistan, tretji parameter pa je povezan z možnostjo, da kurdska manjšina ustvari avtonomno kurdsko enklavo v Siriji. Vendar pa ni zaznati očitne in usklajene namere različnih kurdskih skupnosti, da skozi vsesplošno vstajo ustanovijo veliki Kurdistan.

Ključne besede *Kurdske manjšine, Delavska stranka Kurdistan (PKK), Kurdska regionalna vlada (KRG), kurdska vstaja ali revolucija.*

Abstract The Syrian crisis has been creating the preconditions for a Kurdish awakening in the sensitive region of the Middle East. The paper tries to analyse the prospects for Kurdish revolution that could redraw the borders of the Middle East with the creation of the “Greater Kurdistan”. The understanding of the greater Kurdish matter is approached through three significant parameters that relate to the regional politics and correlations. The first parameter is the Kurdish problem in Turkey and the role of the separatist organisation called “Worker Party of Kurdistan” (PKK), the second one is the Iraqi Northern Kurdistan a semi-autonomous region that could be used as precursor of the “Greater Kurdistan” and the third one relates the possibility of the Kurdish minority to create an autonomous Kurdish enclave in Syria. Nonetheless, there is no apparent and coordinated effort by the different Kurdish communities towards the creation of the Greater Kurdistan through a general uprising.

Key words *Kurdish minorities, Worker Party of Kurdistan (PKK), Kurdish Regional Government (KRG), Kurdish awakening or revolution.*

Introduction The Arab Spring has dramatically affected the balance of power in the Middle East. The revolution of the Arab world has had an impact on the policies of regional powers for the control of the entire region. Certain winners are the casts of Sunni Muslims (variations of conservative Islamist movements) who had been oppressed by dictators for decades and the big losers are the authoritarian regimes (Egypt, Libya and Tunisia) who fell by the storming revolutions of the Arab Spring. However the puzzle of these uprisings has not been completed as Syrian rebels are continuing to battle against the forces of the president Bashar al - Assad. The crisis of Syria could subsequently incite the awakening of Kurds¹, the stateless largest ethnic group in Middle East, who live under minority status in Turkey, Iran and Syria.

The breakdown of the regime of Damascus could create a Kurdish enclave in the territory of Syria putting Kurdish populations to the forefront of regional politics for the following reasons, Firstly, the Kurdish minority of Syria has created a unified front and it has managed to protect its region from the fight between the rebels and Assad. Secondly, the Kurds retain ethnic and religious characteristics that separate them from the rebels of the Free Syrian Army; in fact they have not participated in the revolution and they have shown restraint towards the Syrian state. A possible fall of the Assad may work as a triggering event for the realisation of their cause, even in Syria. Thirdly, a total revolution of Kurds in the Middle East could have only a common aim, the establishment of a “Greater Kurdistan” that will provoke the redrawing of the borders in Middle East. Subsequently, Turkey and Iran will lose parts of their territory to their Kurdish minorities², who in turn will form the “Greater Kurdistan” that will also include the Kurdish semi-autonomous region of Northern Iraq. The number of Kurdish population worldwide, according to CIA World Fact book is 30 million; moreover the native communities are organised into solid populations that are spread in the greater geographical area of the Minor Asia and Middle East, comprising territories in Turkey, Iraq, Iran, Syria and Armenia (Roy, 2011).³

The effect of the Kurdish issue in the regional chessboard of the Middle East could be analysed via: (a) the complex Kurdish problem in Turkey and the role of

¹ *The revolution of the Kurdish minorities could lead to the creation of a “Greater Kurdistan” that includes territories from Turkey, Iran, Syria, Iraq.*

² *The Kurdish minorities have been oppressed by secular authoritarian regimes for many years. There are Kurdish minorities in Turkey, Syria, Iran and Iraq.*

³ *Treaty of Sèvres, (Aug. 10, 1920), post-World War I pact between the victorious Allied powers and representatives of the government of Ottoman Turkey. The treaty abolished the Ottoman Empire and obliged Turkey to renounce all rights over Arab Asia and North Africa. The pact also provided for an independent Armenia, for an autonomous Kurdistan, and for a Greek presence in eastern Thrace and on the Anatolian west coast, as well as Greek control over the Aegean islands commanding the Dardanelles. Rejected by the new Turkish nationalist regime, the Treaty of Sèvres was replaced by the Treaty of Lausanne in 1923. (<http://www.britannica.com/EBchecked/topic/536839/Treaty-of-Sevres>)*

separatist organisation Worker Party of Kurdistan⁴ (PKK) which has been waging an armed cause for more than thirty years against the government of Ankara (b) the importance of the Iraqi Kurdistan as a semi-autonomous region that could be used as precursor of “Greater Kurdistan” (c) the preconditions for the awakening of Syria’s Kurdish minority and its strategy to create an autonomous Kurdish enclave and (d) the prospect of a total Kurdish uprising to achieve a “Greater Kurdistan” that will provoke dramatic changes in the borders of Middle East.

1 TURKEY AND THE COMPLEX KURDISH ISSUE

The Kurdish issue has been playing a vital role to the formation of the Turkish domestic politics and has been defining the terms of Ankara’s foreign policy in the Middle East. The worst possible scenario for Ankara is the creation of a Kurdish state that could encompass territories from Turkey, Iran and Syria.

The oppression of Kurdish minority by the state was based on the dogma of “Turkishness”⁵; a Turkish secular nationalistic idea that emphasises solemnly on Turkish identity and tolerates no other, with the exception of Turkish. It is not a new idea, as it started with the revolution of the Young-Turks that resulted the establishment of the modern Turkish state. The first big Kurdish action against the authoritarian state of affairs took place in 1925 and it was crushed by violent and bloody reaction; however passions have never truly subsided. In 1984, the Kurdish separatist movement appeared again in the form of the Worker Party of Kurdistan (PKK) which has been designated as terrorist group by Turkey, the US and the European Union. The bloody war between Turkish state and PKK has provoked so far more than 40.000 casualties, and it subverts the prospect for a peaceful solution. PKK is the most notorious enemy for Ankara’s government because the Kurdish organization has been fighting an armed struggle against state authorities for an autonomous Kurdistan and for the promotion of the legal rights of Kurdish minority.

The government of the prime – minister of Turkey Recep Tayip Erdogan announced in July 2009 the “Kurdish Initiative”, a political action that granted several rights to Kurdish minority (Unver Noi, 2012)⁶, in order to achieve a peaceful resolution.

⁴ *The major Kurdish organisation in Turkey who wages a bloody guerrilla war against Turkey’s state. PKK has the ability to influence the outcome of the Kurdish issue inside Turkey and it maintains military bases in Iraqi Northern Kurdistan.*

⁵ *Turkey adopted a new Penal Code in 2005. Articles 300-302 of Turkey’s new Penal Code replaced similar provisions of the 1926 Penal Code. Article 301 outlawed even speech that, for example, could be construed as “insulting Turkishness. Communication from The Commission to The European Parliament And The Council, “Enlargement Strategy and Main Challenges 2010-2011, TURKEY 2010 Progress Report” Brussels, 9 November 2010 SEC(2010) 1327 pp 20, 32 (http://ec.europa.eu/enlargement/pdf/key_documents/2010/package/tr_rapport_2010_en.pdf)*

⁶ *“The initiative marked the achievement of several rights for Kurds, 1) the use of formerly Kurdish titles for districts was permitted; 2) legal barriers for speaking Kurdish during prison visits were eliminated; 3) Kurdish language and literature departments at various universities were established; 4) giving Kurdish names to Kurdish children was permitted; 5) TV channels broadcasting in the Kurdish language were allowed”. (Michael M. Gunter (2011), Kurdish nationalism in the aftermath of the Arab Spring, Foreign Policy(http://mideast.foreignpolicy.com/posts/2011/11/08/kurdish_nationalism_in_the_aftermath_of_the_arab_spring))*

Despite the intentions of this opening policy at the end it did not produce successful results due to the embedded distrust between the government and the Kurdish political leaders. In parallel, the hard-line elements of the PKK challenged the correctness of the wish of Abdullah Ocalan (the imprisoned leader of PKK) for a political agreement. The hardliners feared that an agreement without the participation of PKK could weaken the influence of the organisation on the Kurdish population in the southeast provinces of Turkey. PKK has maintained bases and military camps in North Iraqi Kurdistan and their fighters can easily wage inroads in Turkish territory.

In July 2011 Kurds decided to propose a plan for the creation of the “Democratic Autonomous Kurdistan Model” - within the Turkey’s borders in order to self-govern their south-eastern regions. The Congress for a Democratic Society (DTK), a platform for Kurdish associations and movements, together with the main Kurdish Party Peace and Democracy Party (BDP) presented the aforementioned plan declaring that the Kurds do not want to live any longer without status. The 850 delegates of the DTK, proclaimed a “democratic autonomy” for the peaceful resolution of the Kurdish question.⁷

The negotiations between the Turkish government and PKK are theoretically the best solution from the Turkish government point of view. Nevertheless, there is still an inconsistency in the policy of the Turkish government towards this issue: On the one hand, PKK is a terrorist organisation for the Turkish population and it has been killing thousands of them. Orhan Miroglu, a prominent Kurdish author, argues “that the PKK’s war is no longer the war of the Kurds but that of others. This is to say that the PKK has become a war machine, a proxy of other wars in the region” (Dagi, 2012). On the other hand the government of Ankara hesitates to negotiate with the PKK since it does not want to displease the majority of the Turkish citizens. Furthermore no government in Turkey would survive if it decides to discuss with the PKK out of weakness during the time of a violent aggressive campaign against Turkish targets (Dagi, 2012). This signifies the military power of the PKK that significantly influences stability in the southeast regions of Turkey. Any military action by Turkey has failed to restore control. Perhaps, as an alternative dispute resolution to the problem, which insofar is not manageable by force, the Turkish state could resort to measures that aim to incorporate the isolated eastern regions following EU principles by which it has to abide as an EU candidate country. Accordingly, the passion of the Kurdish minority for freedom and the protection of their rights could perhaps abate with the implementation of a integrated investments, growth and development policy of the south – eastern provinces. Better standard of living of Kurdish minority would reduce the influence of PKK that exploits the poverty and the hopelessness of the population making it successful to recruit new fighters.

⁷ *Pro-Kurdish independent deputy Aysel Tuğluk told reporters in a declaration that the Kurdish people had declared democratic autonomy while remaining loyal to the national unity of Turkey, respecting the country’s territorial integrity and basing their move on democratic national principles. She also referenced international human rights documents that allowed them to do so. (Kurdish group declares democratic autonomy within Turkey’s borders, Zaman Newspaper, 14 July 2011 (<http://www.todayszaman.com/news-250503-kurdish-group-declares-democratic-autonomy-within-turkeys-borders.html>))*

Moreover the government could take some political initiatives as a basic precondition to win the “hearts and minds” of the Kurdish population, such as lending greater support to Kurdish citizens and reviewing the controversial articles of the new Constitution (Esayan, 2012). Whereas Turkey could even bring up know how from the EU, it failed to do so. The Turkish political scene does not favour the conciliations among the parties and the plethora of ethnic and religious minorities (e.g. Christians, Alevis that combine Anatolian folk Shi’ism with Sufi elements, Arabs, Kurds, various Islamic groups etc) because of the lack of a particular social contract (Bacik, 2012). According to Gokhan Bacik (2012) the *“Turks and political parties are locked in themselves. Since none of these groups has the ability to establish a social contract none serious problem of Turkey’s, such as the Kurdish one or the one related to the status of the Alevis, can be resolved. As things stagnate, each group is poised to annihilate the others. Thus, the Turkish political scene is one of the most lethal in the present-day world”*.

The conflict between Turkey and PKK takes a new dimension because of the Syrian crisis and the role of Syrian Kurdish minority who could struggle for an autonomous enclave. Turkey’s political elite is concerned with the growing presence of the Syrian Democratic Union Party (PYD), which has close relations with the PKK, in the Kurdish areas of northern Syria (Dombey - Fielding, 2012). The prime-minister of Turkey Recep Erdogan warned that Turkey won’t hesitate to intervene militarily in Syria’s north region, i.e. the Kurdish territories (Today Zaman, 2012). Whether this could be effective is questionable: A brutal wave of PKK counterattacks could stem from the Iraqi North Kurdistan and from Syrian Kurdish areas and could produce catastrophic effects on the military plans of the Turkish army for the extermination of PKK.

2 THE POLICIES OF THE IRAQI NORTHERN KURDISTAN

The Iraqi Northern Kurdistan is the first semi-autonomous Kurdish territory in the Middle East and it is ruled by the Kurdistan Regional Government (KRG) of the president Massud Barzani. The latter has the ability to influence the regional balance of power. Barzani is involved in the policies of Syrian Kurds and at the same time discusses with Turkey for the “problem” of the PKK. The independent political and military structures of the Iraq’s Northern Kurdistan supported by the revenue from its oil fields increase its leverage and its status among the Kurdish populations in the Middle East. The Northern Kurdistan behaves as a “mini-state” that could be perhaps the hub for a state that would include the Turkish, Syrian and Iranian Kurdish minorities living in the greater region.

The creation of the Iraqi Northern Kurdistan has its roots in the Gulf War 1991 where the UN-authorized coalition forces led by the United States attacked the Iraqi forces in response to Iraq’s invasion and annexation of Kuwait. After Iraqi forces suppressed an initial post-war Kurdish uprising, in mid-1991, the U.S. and the allied forces established a “no-fly zone” over the Kurdish areas, protecting the Kurds (Katzman,

2010). The US attack on Iraq in 2003 contributed to a large extent to the creation of Kurdish Northern Iraq as the Iraqi Kurds became equal members on the new political scene, participating thus in decision- making regarding the future of the state.

The new Iraqi Constitution grants considerable political and territorial rights to the Kurds (Unver Noi, 2012)⁸ who greatly suffered under the regime of Saddam Hussein. The central government of Baghdad and the KRG have a long – running dispute for the revenue and the management of the oil fields located in the Iraqi Kurdistan. On the one hand, Baghdad maintains that it has every legal right to centrally manage any oil resources located in Iraq. On the other hand, the KRG unilaterally challenges the authority of Baghdad, signing agreements with international oil companies. The basic explanation that the KRG signs these contracts with international companies stems from the delayed revenue transfers from the central government (Erbas, 2012).

According to Denise Natali (2012) *“one of the unintended consequences of the KRG’s zealous energy-sector development and maximalist territorial ambitions has been the strengthening and the manifestation of the Iraqi nationalism. Instead of forming a regional Sunni Muslim alliance, Iraqi Sunni Arab groups have reacted against Kurdish overreach by forming together with the Iraqi Prime Minister Nouri Maliki in an anti-Kurdish block. The recent reconciliation between Maliki and key Sunni Arab leaders such as Salih al-Mutlak and Qutayba al-Jaburi, as well as Sunni Arab tribes in Kirkuk and Mosul, reflects this reactionary trend and the constraints it poses to increased Kurdish autonomy”*.

The leader of KRG, Massud Barzani has been presented as power- broker in the Kurdish complex regional policies. On the one hand, Barzani has criticised the campaigns of attack from PKK and it does not desire the PKK to exert influence among Iraqi Kurds. On the other hand, KRG tolerated the use of the Iraqi territory by his compatriots in PKK. Nevertheless Northern Iraq maintains political and economic relations with Turkey and it has access to the western markets (Marcus, 2012). However Barzani can use the PKK as a tool to exert pressure in Ankara as the attacks from PKK on the Turkish targets in southeast provinces provoke political and social tension inside Turkey.

In parallel Barzani is also involved in the Syrian Kurdish political scene as he has managed to reconcile the two rival Kurdish groups: the Kurdish National Council (KNC) and the Democratic Union Party (PYD), which have relations with the PKK (Marcus, 2012). Moreover Barzani stated that the KRG is training Syrian Kurdish fighters in North Iraq who will be sent back to Syria to defend their territorial areas (Affar, 2012). The KRG is playing its own political game in the Kurdish issue and maybe it seems quite probable that has already calculated the reactions of the regional powers concerned by the prospect of creation of a “Greater Kurdistan”.

⁸ *The constitution not only retained substantial Kurdish autonomy but also included the Kurds’ insistence on “federalism,” providing them with a regional government. The constitution recognizes the three Kurdish provinces of Dohuk, Irbil, and Sulaymaniyya as a legal “region” of the KRG, with the power to amend the application of national laws not specifically under national government purview, to maintain internal security forces, and to establish embassies abroad. In addition, Arabic and Kurdish are the official languages. (Unver Noi, 2012)*

My view is that a greater Kurdistan will be not be realised in immediate future unless the Kurdish Northern Iraq becomes an independent state that will work as hub and metropolis. Northern Iraq will undoubtedly become the main and first Kurdish hub, given its stability and economic prosperity based on its control over the oil reserves. The triggering event is the independence of Kurdish Northern Iraq either unilaterally or through mutual agreement with the other parties in Iraq. This will eventually encourage the self determination Idea of the Greater Kurdistan in the peripheral Kurdish communities. However, the idea will continue to exist as “Soft Border”, economic, cultural and trade ties based on the common culture and nationality are strong among the Kurdish communities of the Near and Middle East. Whether the Kurdish autonomous region in Northern Iraq evolves into an independent state, or the peripheral communities maintain their autonomy and/or become mini-states depends on several factors that are analysed above.

3 THE SYRIAN KURDISH AWAKENING

The Syrian Kurds make up 9% of the total population⁹ and consider that the rebellion against the president of Bashar Assad could be a unique opportunity for the creation of an autonomous Kurdish region. However, the Syrian Kurds do not participate in the rebellion. In contrast, the local Kurdish parties have decided that the civil war in Syria must not reach to their region (Escobar (a), 2012). They kept an independent stance despite of the fact that the last fifty years the Syrian Kurdish populations had been oppressed by the authoritarian regime of Damascus (Dugulin, 2011)¹⁰. Meanwhile the Kurdish issue strained the relations between Turkey and Syria. Hafez al Assad (the father of Bashar) regime supported originally the PKK’s war against Turkey and its Kurdish fighters waged attacks from the Syria territory. Moreover, Hafez Assad had offered shelter for years to the leader of the PKK, Abdullah Ocalan, but a security agreement in 1998 between Damascus and Ankara forced PKK fighters to seek haven in Northern Iraq.

The Syrian Spring changed the status of the Kurdish minority as it has managed to distance itself from both the opposition rebels (the Syrian National Council (SNC)) and the regime of Damascus. The military forces of Assad have retreated from the Kurdish areas and they have been fighting against Sunni Arab rebels in Damascus and Aleppo. Thus the Kurds have full control of their territory.

Logically Kurds would wish to exploit the vacuum of power in Syria in order to promote their political and territorial rights. According to Joshua Landis, a Syria expert at the Center for Middle East Studies at Oklahoma University, “the Kurdish parts of Syria will undoubtedly become the focus of the power struggle that is

⁹ *In Syria Sunnis comprise 87% of the entire population, Shiites make up 13%, and Kurds only 9%. Syria International Religious Freedom Report 2006, US Department of State,*

¹⁰ *Syria’s Kurdistan has experienced discrimination through land expropriation, incarcerations and widespread intimidation at the hands of the government. Without the right to obtain any form of national identification or passport, the Kurds are de facto non-citizens in Al Assad’s Syria (Dugulin, 2011).*

emerging in the region over Syria. Sunni Arabs and Turks will line up against it. Shi'ite forces will be inclined to encourage Kurdish independence if only to hurt the Sunni Arabs even though this seems at odds with Baghdad's own distaste for Kurdish aspirations" (Markey, 2012).

Two major rival Kurdish parties exert influence on the policies of the minority. The Syrian Kurdish National Council (KNC), which was created in October 2011 and the Democratic Union Party (PYD) that controls Syrian towns along the Turkish borders, such as Kobani, Derik and Afrin. The two Kurdish political entities have agreed to put aside their differences and their strategies towards common aim, the protection of Kurdish territories and they managed to put aside their differences. The agreement was sponsored by Massud Barzani the leader of Iraqi Northern Kurdistan. According to Gonul Tol 2012 *"through the KNC, Barzani wants to expand his influence over Syrian Kurds. But after downgrading formal links to Syrian Kurdish parties in a gesture to Ankara, Barzani has only limited power over rural Kurds in Syria close to the Iraqi border. KNC's standing among Syria's Kurds is no better. It is a coalition group of more than a dozen organizations but they are small and divided with little influence, especially in the western part of the Syrian Kurdish enclave"*.

Nevertheless, the biggest and the best organized and armed party is the PYD which has the ability to mobilize large crowds of Syrian Kurdish crowds. The PYD was formed in 2003 by former fighters of the PKK and its ideology is based on the thinking of Abdullah Ocalan who believes that the purpose of the fight is only the "self-determination". (Tol, 2012).

The Syria Kurdish autonomy is considered a very controversial issue with internal and international effects. Except from the concerns of Turkey the prospect of a Syrian Kurdish autonomy provokes the concerns of the central Syria opposition, the Syria National Council (SNC) that includes mainly Arabs, such as the Muslim Brotherhood. A significant number of Syrian Kurds believes that the Arabs in SNC have hostile feelings for the Kurdish expectation for freedom even though its new leader is a Kurd (Markey,2012). In addition many Kurds fear that the domination of Islamist conservatives in Syria is not the best option for the protection of the rights of the Kurdish minority (Reese, 2012).

4 THE PROSPECTS OF A "GREATER KURDISTAN"

The developments in Syria are shifting dangerously the regional balance of power and the Syrian Kurds have emerged as a crucial player in the conflict. Some analysts argue that the Arab Spring is being transformed into the Kurdish Spring. The cataclysmic changes that derive from Syrian Crisis favour the prospect for the creation of a "Greater Kurdistan". According to O'Leary Brendan, McGarry and Khaled (2005) *"Greater Kurdistan encompassing most of this Kurdish population might form a nation-state of over twenty-five million persons. Its numbers would match an Iraq without Kurds. Combining elementary demographic calculations with*

elementary geographic analysis makes it obvious that two of the potential sites of lesser Kurdistans, those in “south-eastern Turkey” and “northeastern Iraq,” have contiguous and dense concentrations of Kurds near mountainous and forested environs favourable to the sustained conduct of guerrilla warfare, at least until recent changes in military technologies”.

According to a leading Turkish journalist Mehmet Ali Birand (2012) “Kurds cannot find a better opportunity. They may or may not succeed, but they will surely want to make use of this opportunity. Well, this is Turkey’s biggest fear: Kurds in Iraq and Syria acting together and gradually turning themselves into one unit. In the future they may annex other “sections” in Turkey and Iran and form a “greater Kurdistan”. Another Turkish analyst, Ertugrul Ozkok (2012) argues that “there is a strange situation both in Iraq and in Syria: Arabs are fighting each other; people are dying. The Kurds are taking one more step on their path to an independent state. Besides, they are able to achieve this without firing one bullet, without losing one soul”.

Ankara, of course, rejects the prospect of a “Greater Kurdistan”, since its south-eastern Kurd-populated regions will be part of the new Kurdish state. Nonetheless, despite the political and military resources committed by Turkey, a general uprising continues to be a strong possibility.

However probable the creation of a “Greater Kurdistan” may be it all depends on the outcome of the Syrian crisis. The “Balkanization” of Syria is considered a possible scenario that could also lead to a creation of a Kurdish state with territory of Turkey, Iran and Syria. In such a case, Syria will fragment into three separate states: one will be to northeast one, a Kurdish enclave; the other will be to the west coast, a mini-state for Alawites and the rest of the country will be controlled by the Sunni majority (Huges, 2012).

The breakup of Syria will undoubtedly affect the neighbouring countries, Turkey, Iran and Iraq, as well as Iran that has a considerable Kurdish minority. The Kurdish issue has been played by the regional states against each other on the race for domination. Now it is evolving into a destabilisation factor, to a boomerang for all those who used the matter to their opportunistic benefit. The existing post colonial artificial borders maybe will not survive when the Kurdish population of the Middle East seeks to establish the first Kurdish State after many years of oppression. An article in “The American Interest” points out that “*the Kurds have been disappointed many times before, but they will surely hope that this time will be different. The experience of self government in northern Iraq, where first the no-fly zone and then the weakness of central government in Iraq since 2003 have given Kurds their longest and most successful experience with power in modern times, has increased Kurdish capacity for political action and whetted the appetite of many Kurds for freedom*”. (Russel, 2012).

A “Greater Kurdistan”, a Free Kurdistan could rapidly transform the artificial borders of the Middle East as it will cover a geographical area from Diyarbakir (Turkey) through Tabriz (Iran) (Peters, 2006). In accordance to the principles of self-determination the establishment of a Kurdish state requires first a strong unity from the basic players of the Kurdish minorities and then an adequate coordination. So far this has not been the case. The various Kurdish fractions, such as the Turkish Worker Party of Kurdistan (PKK), the Syrian parties (i.e. the Kurdish National Council (KNC) and the Democratic Union Party (PYD)) should have put aside the different political and ideological background. The global Kurdish aspirations for self-determination create expectations for freedom among the Iranian Kurdish minority. Hence, the Kurdistan Democratic Party of Iran (KDPI) and Revolutionary Society of Iranian Kurdistan’s Toilers (Komala), have signed a strategic agreement as “the foundation of a big political union” in Iranian Kurdistan (Rudaw, 2012).

Our estimation is that the most vital and key role for the materialization of a Kurdish state could be played, perhaps only, by the leader of Iraqi Northern Kurdistan, Massud Barzani. According to Pepe Escobar (b, 2012), Barzani “*certainly sees a Greater Kurdistan independent from Arabs, Persians and Turks. But for that to happen in a grand scale he would have to conduct himself as a unifier - not only sharing power inside Iraqi Kurdistan but also managing conflicting Kurdish aspirations in Syria, Iran and Turkey. This implies a visionary streak plus tremendous diplomatic skills*”.

The creation of the Kurdish State affects the regional balance of power in the greater area. Without disregarding the role of the Saudi Arabia in the formation of politics in the Near and Middle East, I will analyse only the position of Israel, a powerful ally of the United States in the region. For Israel, the creation of a Kurdish state could constitute a kind of buffer state against Islamist threat, as Kurds are considered to have solid national identity and be moderate Muslims compared to the Sunni and Shiites of the greater Middle East. Moreover Israel could exploit Kurdish issue as diplomatic leverage to influence Turkey to adopt friendlier stance to Israel. In the past when Turkey and Israel had close relations Tel Aviv refrained from showing much support for Kurds. Nowadays the relations between Turkey and Israel have dramatically deteriorated and Ankara turned into a strong criticiser of Israeli policy on Palestine; moreover it implements the neo-Ottoman policy of its Foreign Affairs Minister, Dr Ahmet Davutoglu¹¹. Hence, Israel, conversely to its previous position on the matter, is currently reconsidering the geostrategic importance of Kurds as potential leverage to be used against its neighbours; in the same way as it has been used so far by Iran and Syria against Iraq (David McDowall, 2004). According to Dr. Sherkof Abbas, President of The Kurdistan National Assembly of Syria “*A Kurdish state in the North will block the spread of Sunni Islam, encouraged by such countries as Qatar, Saudi Arabia and the UAE. It will also weaken Iran and its proxy, Hezbollah, and will put*

¹¹ Davutoğlu Ahmet, *Stratejik Derinlik, Türkiye'nin Uluslararası Konumu (The Strategic Depth)* (İstanbul, Küre, 2005) <See also Greek Translation, *Άχμετ Νταβούτογλου, Το στρατηγικό βάθος (to stratigiko vathos), translation, Nikolaos Raptopoulos, Neoklis Sarris (ed) (Πιούιτητα (Piotita) publishers 2010)>. See also, Alexander Murinson, “The Strategic Depth Doctrine of Turkish Foreign Policy”, *Middle Eastern Studies, Vol. 42, no. 6 (2006), pp. 945-64*.*

an end to Turkish, neo- Ottoman ambitions” (Blade, 2012). Kurds could establish close relations with Israel even through some parts of Kurdish people might have mixed feelings towards Israel (Blade, 2012). According to Natham Guttman (2012) “the long-term relationship between Israel and the Kurds is one based on mutual interests and often unspoken understandings. For Israel, Kurdistan was an island of non-Arab friendship and a possible bridgehead to the Gulf. For the Kurds, Israel offered an alliance and a path to the West while struggling for self-determination in Iraq, Iran, Turkey and Syria. Former Kurdish leader Mustafa Barzani, Masoud Barzani’s father, was considered a friend to Israeli military and defence officials” (Guttmann, 2012). So the Kurds are given the opportunity to exploit this recent Israeli policy in their favour and work as bridge for the control of Iran. In this context, the Kurds could consider other potential alliances; perhaps with the Iranian Azerbaijanis in order to weaken a common front of Arab Shiites, Sunnis and Turks.

However Kurdish expectations for the creation of a “Greater Kurdistan” could mitigate with a semi- autonomous status in the Kurdish regions of Turkey, Syria and Iran. According to professor Ofra Bengio at the Moshe Dayan Center for Middle Eastern and African Studies only the Kurdish Northern Iraq is likely to achieve independence as it has clear- cut borders and Arabs need to obtain special permit to cross the border. Nevertheless Kurdish population of Syria, Turkey and Iraq have bolstered their ties increasing their trans-border activity (Blade, 2012).

5 KURDISH NATIONALISM

Kurds have developed strong nationalism. The socio-economic and political changes on the Kurdish population in 1950’s (e.g mechanization of agriculture, industrialization, consequent revolts, rural-urban migration, emigration, political mobilization the expansion of public education and mass communication) weakened the tribalism of the Kurdish society and provided an impetus for developing larger Kurdish nationalism (Meho, 1997). For example in Turkey more than 35 percent of the total Kurdish population lives in Istanbul, Ankara, Izmir and other major Turkish cities, let alone the Kurds who moved into major Kurdish cities like Diyarbakir, Antep, Malatya, and Urfa. Many of these migrants left Kurdistan either voluntarily or forcibly. There are also about 400,000 Kurdish immigrant workers in Germany alone, not to mention other European countries. According to Meho (2012) *“Kurdish emigrants in Turkey become more socially and politically conscious, and their awareness of their Kurdish identity and ethnic solidarity is strengthened. As for the Kurdish immigrants in Europe and elsewhere, many were able to form their own associations, without harassment from the state. The children of these Kurds attend schools and achieve greater political awareness and self-confidence Such improvements in the social, economic, and political status of the Kurds has become a vital source for the development of Kurdish nationalism in Turkey”.*

The deprivation of political and cultural rights of Kurdish minorities by the Kemalist ideology, the violent suppression of Kurdish uprisings and the social and economic

marginalisation of Kurdish populations by the governments of Turkey, Syria, Iraq, Iran, has significantly strengthened Kurdish nationalism. In addition Kurds cannot easily trust promises from the Turks and Arabs because they increasingly feel that have been betrayed of them. The founder of the modern Turkish state Kemal Atatürk abandoned his ideas to preserve Islam and the Caliphate, and instead energetically launched a westernising political programme. This development according to Oliver Roy (2005) “gave rise among Kurds to a sense that their contract with the Turks - hitherto justified by the brotherhood of all Muslim peoples - had come to an end. Moreover, the promises of Turkish-Kurdish brotherhood during the War of Independence (1919-1923) gave way to an exclusive Turkish nationalism. The post independence Republic did not recognise any identity other than Turkish. Either it simply denied the existence of the Kurds, or it saw ‘Kurdishness’ as ‘feudal’ and ‘reactionary and the Kurds as an ‘oppressive’ ethnic group and class, the historical mission of which was, in its view, to exploit and destroy progressive and revolutionary ‘Turkishness’”.

And this has been the oxymoron of the Turkish policy: On the one hand, Turkish nationalists allied with the Kurds to eliminate the Christian self-determination efforts during the war of independence; on the other, they abandoned this policy, by replacing religion with Turkishness as the cohesion factor of the new state. This shift encouraged Kurdish nationalism turning it more powerful than religion, which could be considered as connection factor among Kurds and Turks, Arabs. At least two thirds of the Kurds are Sunni Muslims, in contrast to their Arab and Turkish Sunni neighbors who adhere mostly to the Hanafi School, and from their Azeri and Persian neighbors who are Shiites.¹²

The young Kurdish populations are characterised also by a growing Kurdish nationalism. The young Kurds of the impoverished south-eastern regions of Turkey (because of the political, social negligence and violent suppression from security authorities) have developed a more radicalised nationalism. The fight of PKK against Turkish military has solidified the aspirations of the young Kurds for the secession of Turkey and expectations for the materialisation of a “Grater Kurdistan”. In addition the children of Kurds of Diaspora in Europe and elsewhere attend schools and achieved greater political awareness and self-confidence. A vital role to the preservation of Kurdish nationalism plays the Newroz celebration, taking place on March 21, is New Year according to the Kurdish Calendar and it plays. In the eyes of the people of Kurdistan, Newroz means a lot more than a simple celebration of a New Year. Newroz signifies unity and brotherhood for national liberation, emancipation and empowerment of the oppressed. It is of greater importance because it has become an annual event registered in every Kurd’s memory to further their salvation and independence in a political sense. Newroz point out Ahmad (2012) “provides this identity

¹² There are, however, many Shi’i Kurds who constitute 10 to 15 percent of the total Kurdish population, i.e., 3 to 4 million concentrated in southern Kurdistan (Iran) and in the districts of Khanaqin and Mandali in Iraq. 15 Most of the remaining Kurds are adherents of heterodox, syncretistic sects “with beliefs and rituals that are clearly influenced by Islam but owe more to other religions, notably old Iranian religion.” 16 Such sects include the Alevis (or the Qizilbash), the Ahl-e Haqq (‘People of Truth’) and the Yezidis, in that order. There are also a few thousands of Christian Kurds and 100,000 Jewish Kurds residing both in and outside Kurdistan (Meho, 1997).

for modern Kurds as a result of the status quo of being Kurdish in the modern Middle East. It defines emancipation and liberation due to the long fought for cause of Kurdish independence which, in effect, amongst other things, has politicized to the core many aspects of the Kurdish way of life, including this traditional New Year”.

Conclusions The balance of power in the Middle East has been shaped by the interventions of great powers, more recently by the USA that invaded Iraq in 2003 and created a New Middle East Order with the creation of semi – autonomous Iraqi Northern Kurdistan. The secular, and at the same time, authoritarian regimes (who did not respect for decades the fundamental human rights) collapsed after the storming consequences of the Arab Spring. The desire for freedom is the critical factor that could lead the Kurdish minorities to achieve the creation of a “Greater Kurdistan”.

The national feelings of the Kurdish population have increased and it is believed that they are really ready for the establishment of a separate nation. The status of Iraqi Northern Kurdistan and the Syrian Crisis strengthens these aspirations for freedom. Northern Kurdistan constitutes a successful model and it has an ability to govern its regions. The income from the oil recourses allows Kurdish Regional Government (KRG) to dedicate necessary funds for the development of its area. Moreover, the occasion of the Syrian crisis encouraged the Syrian Kurdish minority to form a common front and it took control of its areas. The rebellion of Sunni population against the regime of Damascus put Syrian Kurds to the forefront of the regional policies.

Thus regional turmoil complicates the decision – makers of Turkey, Iran and Iraq as the Kurdish issue becomes now more complex and more dangerous than ever before. A “Greater Kurdistan may also include the territories of Kurdish minority of Turkey and Iran. Thus the Kurdish issue could define the fate of the regional politics in Turkey and Iran. The two regional powers cannot use the Kurdish issue against each other and it is extremely difficult to follow a common line. On the one had Turkey is most notorious critic of the Syrian president Bashar Assad, while it maintains a sunni profile (that is on many occasions sponsored by Saudi funds). , On the other hand Shiite Iran is a peripheral protector of the Shia muslims, culturally close with Alevis and Ismailis, and an ally of the regime of Damascus, maintaining strong influence to Lebanon and south Iraq.

Finally the creation of a “Greater Kurdistan” could be materialized under the following five preconditions: (a) when Kurdish nationalism meets the levels that gives Kurdish population more self-confidence to implemented the plan of the “Greater Kurdistan” (b) the unification of all Kurds under a common leadership who could meet the expectations of Kurdish population for a independent Kurdish state, (c) The independence of Kurdish Northern Iraq as the first and main hub for the unified Kurdish State, (d) the exploitation of the Syrian Crisis of Syrian Kurds to create an autonomo- us sustainable enclave that could be unified with other Kurdish regions of Northern Iraq, southeast Turkish provinces and Iranian Kurdish regions, (e) the support of the

United States that is considered a crucial factor. Washington would encourage the creation of an independent Kurdish State if it sees that Turkey is starting to maintain close relationship with conservatives Sunnis Islamists (Salafistes) of the Middle East threatening the American national interests.

However the stance of the USA is not yet clear towards Kurdish aspirations for autonomy. The Iraqi Kurds has been a close ally of the Americans during the war against Saddam Hussein and Washington supported the Kurdish claims for a “semi-autonomous” status inside Iraq. The USA wants to avoid another trap in the Middle East after the bloody adventure in Iraq and the White House has shifted the American strategy to Asia and the Pacific. Thus the efforts of Kurdish minorities for an independent state directly depend on the rapid geopolitical developments and the Kurdish determination to maintain a common front.

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