

The Kurds:: Neither the Twin of Palestine Nor the Clone of Israel

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Begin-Sadat Center for Strategic Studies (2017)

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# PERSPECTIVES

THE BEGIN-SADAT CENTER FOR STRATEGIC STUDIES

## The Kurds: Neither the Twin of Palestine Nor the Clone of Israel

by Jose V. Cipurut

BESA Center Perspectives Paper No. 624, October 23, 2017

**EXECUTIVE SUMMARY:** The Kurds are an ancient tribal people indigenous to West Asia. Between 1918 and 1925, they were made part of four newborn countries, each of which continues to deny its Kurds their fundamental freedoms, let alone nation-statehood. Neither “a second Israel” nor “a second Palestine,” Iraqi Kurds are ready to govern themselves as a functioning democratic nation – an authentic nation-state in a region substantially constructed from without.

Not all Kurds seek sovereignty. Kurds in Turkey, Iraq, Iran, and Syria differ from one another and from the Kurds of the Diaspora (western Europe and the Americas). It is not inconceivable that Turkish, Iranian, and Syrian Kurds would be content with autonomy alone, provided it were real. Nor is it unthinkable that they might be citizens of a single Kurdish state but permanent residents elsewhere, or might benefit from dual nationality.

Why, then, do the Iraqi Kurds seek sovereignty? And which set of internationally unrecognized sovereign frontiers do they have in mind? Is it the constitutionally demarcated contours of the KRG (Iraq’s internally autonomous Kurdish Regional Government, now belatedly seeking “negotiations”)? Or is it the borderlines that include Iraqi land controlled by the KRG as a result of Baghdad’s war of liberation from ISIS (which are now difficult to “renegotiate”)? Or perhaps they are thinking of an even newer fence: enclosing the extra patches (including Kirkuk) of annexed remunerative land (which is now “non-negotiable” after the recent military confrontation)?

More to the point, perhaps, what would the future of such a landlocked sovereign entity augur, absent peaceful conditions conducive to regional

acceptance and international acknowledgment likely to provide legitimacy and security?

In that regard, the British-American consensus on the prematurity of the referendum sounded right (even if, in ironic pseudo-equivalence, it would have compelled Turkey to experience its own "Palestinian problem"). A mere peaceful democratic referendum among the Iraqi Kurds – not even a declaration of independence – triggered a harshly punitive blockade, with explicit threats of military intervention, by both Turkey and Iran in prior consultation with the government in Baghdad.

The "independence" project was doomed not so much by the recapture of Kirkuk by Iraq as by the split induced by Iran between the Barzanis and the Talibanis – a move that punishes US ambivalence, shatters Israeli hopes, and reaffirms Tehran's increasing clout in the region.

Turkey's and Iran's concerns over the emergence of a sovereign Kurdish state along their border with Iraq, on lands directly connected with those inhabited by their respective Kurdish minorities, are rational, given the inequalities long inflicted on and repressions suffered by those minorities. The risk of these minorities one day seeking to share the freedoms of Iraq's Kurds could turn into a real menace only if these states do not resolve their differences with their minorities and with other regional stakeholders first.

Do not the 30 million Kurds living in Turkey, Iraq, Iran, Syria, and elsewhere, constituting the largest dispersed tribal nation in the world, merit a sovereign homeland of their own, on at least part of the vast lands to which they are indigenous? The answer to this question is far from simple, if the history of each constituent of this divided and scattered people is individually taken into account. Yet this crisis was foreseeable. It could have been avoided if all the parties involved had condescended to open up to one another in mutual respect from the very beginning. Even now, should all the parties convene to discuss matters, reach peace within and between the respective entities, and guarantee proper latitudes for development with adequate freedoms, all could end well.

Turkey's and Iraq's declarations that they "would not allow a second Israel to emerge in the region" were telling for purporting to place their resentment not on Judaism as a faith, but on Zionism as a "land-grabbing ideology." (Never mind that their learning circles, madrassas, mosques, streets, markets, and media all spew Jew-hatred.)

For centuries, Kurds who once governed from their own kingdom in the region scraped by in distinct, tribally configured agglomerates. Propitious circumstances caused the Iraqi Kurds to stumble on the opportunity and means

to circumscribe, consolidate, and literally earn a lucrative conjoined area they could democratically set out to govern, administer, and defend militarily. These days, however, freedom cannot simply be just wrested; it needs also to be conceded, especially when it is stuck in an unfriendly neighborhood.

Unlike Palestinian Arabs whose newly constructed national identity is still a work in progress, Kurds have been not only historically autochthonous but also unceasingly assertive of their national identity, despite the aspirational differences in their respective worldviews. They never missed an occasion to manifest their yearning for freedom as a people, whether under Arab, Turkish, Iranian, Iraqi, or Syrian chauvinist domination. Kurds did not have to be severed from their passports by their rulers to start wondering who they ought to become and what befitting name they should acquire. If anything, they have often had to downplay their national self-awareness, despite their readiness to self-govern, and their ability – offered the proper conditions – to transform their people into a functioning democratic polity.

Hence, all they now need to do, in order to concretize their ongoing pursuit of freedom, would be to endeavor to build region-wide conciliatory means through which their landlords and neighbors could agree to grant them their coveted legal status – a tall order, indeed. Yet for any independent Kurdish state ultimately to emerge, “the Kurdish problem” in each of these regional countries will have to be solved first.

Like Israelis, Kurds too have a deep territorial attachment to their national homeland. Unlike Israelis, however, Kurds were never internationally recognized as a nation-state. The Lausanne Treaty (voiding and replacing the Sèvres Treaty) at the end of World War I, as well as the United Nations Organization at the close of World War II, conveniently ignored them. The French and British, as potentates in charge, and their “creations” (Lebanon, Syria, Iraq, and Jordan), like nationalist Turkey (itself a product of the ashes of the Ottoman Empire), chose to pretend the Kurds did not matter. The Kurds’ effacement ought no more to be taken for granted.

The time would seem to have come for the international community to recognize the grave mistakes committed by the West in the past, and to redress those oversights in ways that at long last restore dignity to a stateless nation. It can do this by granting sovereignty to the one Kurdish territorial branch now clearly ready for it – before that readiness is compelled to manifest itself by force of arms. Such a productive initiative should prove far more justified than any further investment in time and effort towards concocting a state *ex nihilo* out of two non-national halves preordained to turn against each other. It is also preferable to the hatching of a politically unstable, economically fragile entity, forever irredentist and continually in need of outside assistance. Such an entity would be eternally

dissatisfied and, if opportunistically allied to Islamist Sunni and/or fundamentalist Shiite movements, could prove a constant threat to all its neighbors, and well beyond.

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