

Kurdistan – autonomy or independence

(Speech in Tallinn, Estonia)

Sadi Ahmed Pire

Sadi Ahmed Pire, born in Erbil in 1954, was among the first members of the PUK, the Patriotic Union of Kurdistan which is now one of the 2 main Kurdish parties in Iraq led by Jalal Talabani, president of the Republic of Iraq. He is currently minister for construction of Kurdish Regional Government.

Ladies and gentlemen,

The Kurds are a Middle Eastern people estimated at about 30 Million people, whose homeland, Kurdistan, is a vast, mountainous region stretching from Turkish eastern Anatolia to south western Iran. Their language, Kurdish, is part of the group of western-Iranian languages. Several historical factors led to the disability of forming a unified country, though smaller Kurdish states did exist, first independent, later as part of the Ottoman Empire.

Kurdish nationalism has its roots in the 2nd half of the 19th century. With the peace treaty of Sevres between the Entente and the Ottoman Empire, a Kurdish state would have had to be found, but the rebellion of the young Turks, which resulted in the creation of modern day Turkey under Mustafa Kemal “Atatürk”, this treaty was replaced by the peace treaty of Lausanne, in which the Entente accepted the shape of modern day Turkey under the condition that Turkey accepts the rights of minorities. But it never did and still does not do, simply because a Kurdish influenced, I usually call it, “state identity”, is unacceptable for the Kemalist elite, for which a Turkish citizen has always to be a “Turk” It has to be admitted though that this “Turkishness” is not ethnically defined at all, since the Panturanic idea has for most of the time been a project way off the real political mainstream in Turkey. Turgut Özal, the Turkish prime minister in the mid-80’s, was of Kurdish origin.

Also in the other countries that contain sizeable Kurdish minorities the situation has not been much better, if not to say worse.

In Syria, Kurds are still extremely oppressed. Often they are even denied the citizenship if they claim to be Kurds. Also, their region is plain, making resistance pretty hard.

In Iran, Kurdish demands for self-rule were bitterly put down, especially since the dream of Iran Kurdish population materialised already for a short period of several months, in which the Kurdish Mahabad Republic, consisting of Iran’s Kurdish provinces, existed. This so called “Republic of Mahabad” just existed during 1946 under the umbrella of the Soviet Union, which wanted to secure the imports into reconstructing Russia, delivered by the US and Britain and had to face some opposition by the ruling Shah of Iran, that still shared some sympathy for his dead Arian colleague in Germany. It played an important role in forming a Kurdish national consciousness, as well as offering refuge to Mollah Mostafa Barzani, the founder of the Iraqi KDP, who had to flee from Iraq.

In Iraq, the regimes that ruled the country soon saw no possibility but to accept some extend of self rule because the Iraqi army just was not capable of controlling Iraq’s Northern provinces. The Iraqi Kurds, being always among the most nationalist, early founded organizations and parties with the single goal of gaining independence from the artificial, colonial product called Iraq. The most important of these parties were and still are the Kurdish Democratic Party and the Patriotic Union of Kurdistan.

The “KRG”, the Kurdish Regional Government, was founded in 1970, but right after its foundation a war against the troops of the central government began. Hostilities between the Iraqi

central government and the Kurds culminated at the height of the 1st gulf war, when “operation Anfal” was launched, during which numerous villages were bombed with chemical weapons, demanding the lives of hundreds of thousands.

After Operation desert storm, the Kurds got back full autonomy, with Baghdad only holding a symbolic authority over the region. This was achieved under the impression of the flight of virtually the entire Iraqi Kurdish population after operation desert storm. Kurdistan was in ruins, there was barely anything, no agriculture, no industry, not enough electrical power served by a medieval electrical grid. Hundreds of thousands of people that were left with the mental scars of war and an equal number had left the country.

The 90's were a difficult decade of slow reconstruction and division between the two main parties, the PUK and the KDP, which even fought an inner-Kurdish civil war against each other in 1996 during which the latter called for Iranian and the first even for Iraqi military assistance. It showed the traditional problem of the Kurds: Their outspoken disunity, the willingness of sacrificing the bigger goal on the altar of internal power struggle, often hidden behind the argument of seeking revenge.

Inside Iraqi Kurdistan, a clearly visible schism still can be found. The power is divided between these two parties, and everyone is either on the side of Talabani's PUK or Barzani's KDP.

With the American invasion in 2003, at least the administrative signs have disappeared and Kurds have a united position concerning the Iraqi central government. And this unity pays off: The Kurds are now in the strongest position since WW1, with the president and the secretary of state of Iraq being Kurdish. Also, the Kurdish autonomous region is the safest, richest, most liberal and fastest growing region in Iraq.

Well, needless to say secession is extremely popular, and with Turkish influence in Iraq diminishing, not to mention the de facto nonexistent Iraqi central government, the dream of millions of Kurds seems to come closer.

But is it, to put it simple, “worth it”? Because even if America guarded a hypothetical newly founded sovereign Kurdish state, its new neighbours would be anything but happy. The militaristic Kemalist circles in Ankara would go crazy, and even if a Turkish invasion was avoided somehow it is very unlikely that a country, which used even to prohibit the use of the adverb “Kurdish”, would recognize Kurdistan. The same goes for Iran, Syria and probably also for the rest of Iraq, leaving Kurdistan landlocked and surrounded by enemies. I mean, Israel at least has the Mediterranean as non-hostile neighbour. Kurdistan wouldn't have anything.

On the other hand, of course, there is the tiny chance of a rebellion breaking out in the whole of Kurdistan, resulting in a unified Kurdish state. Something that would have to be achieved against the interests of 4 countries, 2 of them having populations comparable to Germany's and one of them, Turkey, having one of the biggest armies in the world. Frankly, this is impossible.

But what else would then justify secession that would, undoubtedly, lead to isolation, economic misery and eventually, I am sure, to a negative development in the field of civic rights?

In my opinion, nothing but an irrational nationalist fantasy. Kurdistan is not an end in itself, or, spoken in other words, it is not about living in a Kurdish state, but about living in a state that recognizes the rights of the Kurdish people, its culture and history. At the moment this is the case for Iraq. And as democracy will eventually spread from Iraq to the rest of the Middle East, Kurdish rights will. With the Iraqi Kurdish cities of Sulaymaniyah and Erbil developing more and more into centres of Kurdish culture in the Middle East, demands for similar rights in the neighbouring countries will grow as well.

The chances for such a development are pretty good – you only have to consider that the political systems of all the countries surrounding Iraq are subject to a huge demand for reforms.

In Iran, the Islamic Republic is not reflecting the values of the majority of the population and also fail in the field of economy, forcing dozens of thousands of Iranians to emigrate every year.

In Syria, Bashar al Assad has to reform a country that is almost paralyzed by almighty officials.

It has to be admitted that the Turkish Republic has a future, it is a system that can and in the light of a future EU membership has to be reformed and in fact, the current struggle of Erdogans government to limit the power of the Turkish Military has to be seen in this context.

Syria and Iran will not be capable any more of denying its populations basic rights by pointing their fingers towards Israel or the USA.

So, the strategy has to be making the status of Kurdistan inside Iraq a model for the rest of the Middle East. This can be achieved through various measures. For instance by supporting the spread of Iraqi Kurdish TV channels, newspapers and internet services. This would be an important measure which would have the side effect of making the Iraqi Kurdish, or Southern Kurdish dialect, the Kurdish lingua franca, comparable to the Egyptian Arab dialect.

Also scholarships for non-Iraqi Kurdish students as well as pan-Kurdish sport events organized in Iraqi Kurdistan would certainly be of benefit.

One of the most important measures is already commenced: Offering a high standard of living to the Iraqi Kurdish population and controlled immigration from other Kurdish areas in neighbouring countries, which are usually completely impoverished.

Already, Kurds in Syria, after violent protests, have brought the Syrian president, Bashar al Assad, to make concessions. Although al Assad can add these reforms regarding the Kurds to the list of reforms blocked by his fathers almighty apparatus, it is, in my opinion, a clear sign that this strategy is way more efficient than continuing to wage wars against the central governments of 4 countries, which already cost the lives of hundreds of thousands of Kurds, as well as of Turks, Arabs and Iranians.