

THE ROJAVA KURDS AND THEIR REGIONAL ROLE

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In the last round of Syria peace talks in Geneva, the Kurds were left without an invitation. No true peace process could, however, bring any tangible results without the Kurdish decisive participation. The Kurdish self-government in Rojava (North and North-East Syria) is the only military-political power, apart from the Assad regime, that managed to thwart the attacks of the then formidable "Islamic State" and to organize its territory in a rather secular and orderly manner. It can be also argued that the Kurds of Rojava are now attracting the interest of the superpower, as well as of regional powers. The ascent of the Kurdish regional role should be examined in three levels.

First, the Rojava quasi-state experiment is bound to reconfigure the situation in a post-war Syria. Notwithstanding the future of Assad in a post-war Syria, the Kurds have now a great opportunity to establish their claim for wide autonomy, following perhaps the example of Iraqi Kurdistan. Such an outcome would make Syria the second country in the Middle East that adopts a federal system. The example of Iraq is not very bright as the federal organization of the Iraqi state has stopped neither the Kurdish track to independence nor the Sunni discontent and finally their rebellion. However, the adoption of a federal system as an acceptable system of governing in the Middle East could send shivers down the spine of neighbouring countries, foremost Turkey.

Second, the ascent of the political-power of the Kurds in Syria could change the internal Kurdish configuration of power between the Iraqi Kurdistan leadership, the Kurdish leadership in Turkey and the Kurds in Syria. Up until the Syrian civil war the Syrian Kurdish organizations were thought to be largely influenced by the Kurdish organizations in Iraq and most importantly by the PKK in Turkey. The new Kurdish political-military entity in Syria seems to become ideologically self-luminous and sets a new paradigm of political organization, not only for the Kurds in Turkey, Iraq and –we should not forget- Iran, but also for Arab Middle East states and societies. The ascent of a new player within the Kurdish power configuration is further facilitated by two other developments: The weakening of the Barzani faction's grip on power in the Iraqi Kurdistan and the strategic impasse of the Kurdish organizations in Turkey, after the brutal militarized response of the Erdogan's government against their political struggle.

Third, the Kurdish ascent in Syria complicates also the plans of regional powers and the USA vis-à-vis a possible outcome of the civil war. Russia has sided resolutely with Assad's regime and it has a keen interest in keeping the whole country under a government with a sizeable Assad component. Possible Kurdish demands for decentralization and federal system would complicate negotiations with other powers, the USA and most importantly Turkey, Saudi Arabia and Iran. Tehran is the power that alone managed to keep Assad in power and has a very serious stake in keeping the Iran-Syria-Hezbollah alliance intact. A decentralized, federal Syria might weaken this axis. What is more, Iran has a large Kurdish minority and a decentralization-federation example would raise security concerns. For Saudi Arabia, the Rojava entity is an antagonist to a Sunni Arab preponderance in Damascus and, thus, their strengthening is not serving their plans for a strong Sunni Arab government in Syria. Moreover, the largely secular outlook of the Rojava self-government is running against the Saudi Wahhabite doctrine. Last, but not least, Turkey sees in a loosely autonomous Rojava, not only a very dangerous precedent but also a possible safe-haven for PKK activists and guerillas.

The only, perhaps, powers that could favour Kurdish independence in Iraq and loose federation for Syria are the USA and Israel. Washington has been left without credible allies inside Syria. Their Sunni allies are militarily inefficient and politically fragmented, whereas the only reliable Sunni forces are the Salafist-jihadist groups. A possible rehabilitation of the Assad regime would have been a major blow for American prestige. Israel, on its part, would favour a Kurdish state in Iraq and a possible loose federation in Syria if this could weaken what is perceived as the grip of Tehran on the region. However, neither Washington nor Tel Aviv would be willing to assist militarily the Kurds in Syria in case of a confrontation with Assad and his various allies, if there is a deal between the USA and Russia on power-sharing in Syria. Despite Washington's discomfort with Ankara's adventurism, no Administration is ready to choose the Kurds at the expense of Turkey as major ally in the Middle East.