



The Kurdish issue returns to prominence

By: Ted Galen Carpenter – November 28, 2013

An ethnic issue from a century ago is returning to bedevil Western policy makers. During and immediately following World War I, the status of the Kurdish population in the Middle East was an important, controversial matter confronting Europe's Allied powers. The British Foreign Office promised Kurdish leaders that the Allies would establish an independent Kurdish homeland, but Western leaders soon discarded that promise. Instead, the Kurdish community was divided among Turkey, Iran, and the newly created colonial dependencies, Syria and Iraq. Today, the Kurds remain the largest population in the international system without an independent homeland.

That grievance has festered for decades creating more than a few crises, including an ongoing secessionist rebellion in Turkey led by the Kurdistan Workers Party (PKK). Another notable episode occurred during the early 1970s when both the United States and Iran encouraged an uprising by Iraq's Kurdish minority - only to later abandon them to Saddam Hussein's tender mercies. Following the Persian Gulf War, though, Iraq's Kurds achieved a major first step toward establishing an independent state. Exploiting Washington's decision to establish no fly zones in Iraq, which prevented Saddam's government from utilizing its most effective military assets, Kurdish militias soon established a tenuous control over most of northern Iraq. They consolidated that control following the US-led overthrow of Saddam, and today Kurds rule an autonomous region. Iraqi Kurdistan has become easily the most stable, prosperous part of Iraq.

Both Baghdad and Ankara, however, have viewed Kurdistan with more than a little uneasiness, seeing that entity as the possible embryo of a larger, fully independent Kurdish republic. At the same time, though, Turkish business leaders have been eager to participate in Iraqi Kurdistan's economic boom, and economic ties between Iraq's Kurdish Regional Government (KRG) and Turkish businesses have grown rapidly, despite the undercurrent of suspicion between the two governments. Moreover, as violence has resurged in Iraq in 2013 and chaos now threatens to engulf much of the country, some Turkish opinion shapers have begun to consider the previously heretical possibility that Iraqi Kurdistan might be a useful buffer between Turkey and a volatile, rump Iraq. Dov Friedman, a researcher at the SETA Institute in Ankara, openly urged both Washington and Ankara to stop backing Baghdad against the KRG government.

Turkish concerns about a bigger and more independent Kurdistan have rebounded, though, over the past few months as the Syrian civil war intensified and Kurdish militias established control over much of heavily Kurdish northeastern Syria. On several occasions, those units inflicted defeats on pro-Al-Qaeda elements of Syrian insurgent forces seeking to topple the Damascus government.

Turkey frets that a self-governing Syrian Kurdish region would soon merge with its Iraqi counterpart, creating a larger, more powerful *de facto* state. Turkish Deputy Prime Minister Bulent Arinc emphasized that his country was committed to Syria's territorial integrity and warned that his government will not tolerate the creation of another autonomous Kurdish entity on Turkey's border. Ankara's concerns are not mere paranoia, since KRG President Massoud Barzani has already stressed that his forces will not stand by idly while "terrorists" brutalize Syrian Kurds. The KRG, he pledged, will use all of its capabilities to defend "Kurdish women, children, and [other] citizens in western Kurdistan." His use of the term "western Kurdistan" causes consternation in Ankara and other capitals, because it implies the existence of an expanded, unified Kurdish political entity stretching across the Iraq-Syrian border.

The resurgence of the Kurdish issue involving multiple Middle Eastern countries puts the United States and its Western allies in an awkward position. US leaders already worry that ties with Turkey have frayed in recent years and are anxious to show their support for the position and interests of a valued NATO ally. Washington also shares Ankara's goal of keeping Syria intact in a post-Assad era. Obama administration officials certainly do not want to encourage the creation of a separatist Kurdish entity in Syria - especially given the vehement opposition of both Ankara and Baghdad to such a development.

Yet Iraqi Kurds have been the only consistent, pro-Western, pro-American segment of Iraq's population, and the Syrian Kurds appear to harbor similar sentiments. Moreover, Syrian Kurdish militias have been the most successful fighters against the Al-Nusra Front and other militant Islamist factions in Syria. By opposing Kurdish secession in Syria, the United States might weaken an ally that is successfully combating the West's dangerous terrorist adversaries.

Some members of the foreign policy community in the United States have already begun to argue that Washington should shift its policies and support Kurdish ambitions. Writing in the November 12 issue of the *National Interest Online*, University of California researcher Ali Ezzatyar insists that there "is a rare historic opportunity now for America to be ahead of the curve on a major regional event involving an important ally: Kurdish independence."

In any case, the decision that the Western powers made after World War I to parcel out Kurdish territory to multiple Middle Eastern countries appears to be less and less viable. Like it or not, the Kurdish issue is back on the front burner, and Western leaders need to take heed before it explodes.