

The Kurdish "mass-emigration" Why? What to be done?

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It is a well-known fact that the Kurds have in centuries either been deported or unwillingly have chosen to leave their home, going into exile. Although Kurds have sought a secure life in western countries since the First World War, the main waves of the Kurdish refugees have taken refuge in western countries during the 1970s, the 1980s and the 1990s. The main reasons for the Kurds to leave their home during the last 30 years have been considered as political. Events taking place during this period, like the collapse of the Kurdish armed revolt under the late Barzani (March 1975), the Islamic revolution in Iran in 1979, the military junta in Turkey in 1980, the Iraq-Iran war (from September 1980 to August 1988) and the Kuwait crisis and events following it are the events that should be seen in the background of the emigration of the Kurds. The most significant events during the Iraq-Iran war was the using of the chemical and biological weapons by the Iraqi regime especially against the defenceless Kurdish city of Halabja in March 1988 and the extermination campaign of *Anfal* which resulted in the disappearance of about 180,000 Kurds.

In the meantime the Kurds have been experiencing bloody armed conflicts: in Iraq since 1961, in Iran since 1979 and in Turkey since 1984. It is, however, worth noticing that although there have been a rather tense no-war-no-peace situation in Iraqi Kurdistan since 1991 and that the main Kurdish armed force in Turkey, Kurdistan Workers' party (PKK), has declared a cease fire since August 1999, the causes of renewing armed conflict are still there, primarily because the cease fire has remained without a positive reaction from the Turkish authorities.

Since the Kuwait crisis the problem of Kurdish refugees has gained very far reaching and grave dimensions. Large numbers of Kurds have been seeking asylum in different European countries. Moreover human tragedies have taken place as the asylum seekers have been taking extraordinary risks in the ways they have been taking and the means of transportation used in their efforts to come to Europe. Furthermore approaches adopted by European countries individually and of European Union in tackling the Kurdish refugees by, namely closing borders or expelling refugees to the unclear fate of Iraqi Kurdistan, have aggravated the situation.

The post Kuwait crisis period

As we know a Kurdish uprising broke out in Iraqi Kurdistan immediately after the liberation of Kuwait. This uprising was brutally suppressed, which led to a tragic exodus of over 1,5 millions Kurds. This very human tragedy led to the rousing of an international public opinion in the favour of the Kurds. After measures were taken by the international community, the US and European countries a return of the Kurds was made possible. A Kurdish administration in Iraqi Kurdistan came eventually to existence after general elections had been held in May 1992. In these elections the two main political forces of Iraqi Kurdistan – Kurdistan Democratic Party (KDP) of Masoud Barzani and the Patriotic Union of Kurdistan (PUK) of Jalal Talabani won the majority of votes and thus were able to monopolize the political power in Iraqi Kurdistan. Now a new period of a positive cooperation between the two parties was initiated and the Kurdish administration gained a momentum as to the support of the population in to the administration. A considerable international respect to the very Kurdish administration was also gained. In the Western World many observers started to speak of a Kurdish *de facto* state in Iraqi Kurdistan. The cooperation between KDP and PUK, however, ended in bloody-armed conflict in May

1994. In this conflict the prime loser has been the Kurdish people who so badly needed stability and tranquility, and the winners have been those regional actors which so willingly sought to destabilize the political life in the Kurdish region.

LEAVING KURDISTAN. WHY?

There're many reasons why people are leaving their home and seek an unclear fate. There are, however generally speaking, two categories of reasons or factors: 1) Political and security factors; and 2) economical factors.

The political and security factor:

I do think that the political and security factors are the most important cause of the Kurdish mass-emigration. In short, Iraqi Kurdistan's unclear political future and the fragile security situation are organically interwoven. In other words you can hardly separate these two aspects in the political and security reality of the reign. The main causes of this fragile and unsustainable political and security situation could be categorized in the following manner:

1) The Kurdish factor.

As it has been mentioned earlier in this presentation, the internal armed conflict between the KDP and PUK has played a significant role in the destabilization of the region. This conflict have had many negative consequences: firstly, two different administrations, a KDP-administration and a PUK-administration, have being created within the region. This development has above all been a severe disillusionment for the greatest majority of the Kurds; secondly, with this development the security situation within the region was profoundly deteriorated; and thirdly, the destructive role of regional powers increased in Iraqi Kurdistan, mainly through alliances between the regional powers with the KDP and PUK in accordance with the conflict lines between the two parties. The most tragic act within this negative phenomenon was the short-lived alliance between the KDP and the Ba`th-regime in Baghdad in August 1996.

Moreover the security situation has also deteriorated because of the activities of different Islamic groups, which have been trying, sometimes by the means of force, to impose *Shari`a*, that is Islamic laws and norms, and in some cases even a social order like that of the Taliban in Afghanistan. Most of these groups, if not all of them, are being supported by Iran. According to some resources even Iraq in one or another way has also supported some of these Islamic groups.

2) The Iraqi factor.

The real and potential threat from the Iraqi regime is the most important factor contributing to the emigration of Kurds to western countries. Although American and British jets are protecting the Kurdish region; the population in the region are terrorized and in fear of a possible assault from Iraqi forces. The worst thing is the probability of the *Halabjasyndrome* becoming a reality, that is of the Iraqi regime using again chemical and biological weapons against the Kurds. Along the *frontline* between the Kurdish armed forces and the Iraqi forces is rather an indefensible line. In other words the Iraqi forces have the ability of invading the Kurdish region and committing another massacre on the population. It is accordingly a natural reaction for the most of the Kurds to think that they are at any moment to be left to the mercy of Iraq's dictator. In fact during the last 10 years the regime in Baghdad have many times declared that it would forcibly resume control over the Kurdish region. In fact, after the terror attack of 11th September

in the US, the Iraqi regime has been sending many signals, and in fact taking some measures, that indicates the determination of the regime to regain control over the region. If the regime is to be successful, then there is a real fear that the Kurdish population will be subjected to mass-punishment, because the Kurds – *as the regime see it* – have committed an act of *collective treason* by cooperating during the last ten years with Iraq's most hated enemy, the US.

Moreover, the arabization policy, that is ethnic cleansing, adopted by the Iraqi regime in the Kurdish areas that are still under the regimes control has during the ten last years led to the deportation of tens of thousands of Kurds to the Kurdish-controlled areas.

3) *The regional and international factor.*

As mentioned above regional actors have made their negative view of the developments in Iraqi Kurdistan apparent, particularly the establishment of an own administration. This negative attitude has taken many forms, namely the trilateral cooperation between Tehran, Ankara and Damascus and many incursions by the Turkish army into Iraqi Kurdistan. As a matter of fact the conflict between KDP and PUK since May 1994 has facilitated the influence of regional powers, especially that of Ankara and Tehran, over the Kurdish region.

However the most serious anxiety and *fear*, as long as the population in Iraqi Kurdistan is concerned, is steaming from the terrifying scenario that British and US protection of the region may at any moment come to an end. This may, for instance, happen as soon as the sanctions against Iraq are removed. Although Britain and the US have occasionally reaffirmed that they would continue protecting the Kurds, the Kurdish region yet in fact doesn't enjoy any international recognition or any international commitment of protection.

The economic and social reasons

It is a well-known fact that the economic sanctions, imposed on Iraq since August 1990, have seriously affected the civilian population. As a matter of fact the Kurdish region is being subjected to two kinds of sanctions, from Iraq and the UN respectively. These sanctions have been causing many hardships. The human conditions have, however, been considerably changed to the better since 1996, when the UN-resolution 986 was implemented, that is petrol for food and medicine. It has been emphatically observed that, in spite of the sanctions, the material and health conditions of the Kurds are considerably better than those of the Iraqi population outside the Kurdish region. This doesn't mean that all social and economic hardships have been set aside by the implementation of the resolution 986. The everyday-material-life of the Kurdish population is still being characterized by many difficulties, one of which is the very high rate of unemployment and that the salaries gained by the employed are in most cases by no means enough, even for the maintenance of the lower limits of every day life.

WHAT TO BE DONE?

The two Kurdish parties KDP and the PUK and the administrations managed by them have not systematically and according to a clear-cut strategy tackled the phenomenon of the mass-emigration. The conflict between them has undoubtedly been a contributing factor for this negative state of affairs. During last year, however, there have been some signs that the two parties have had an identical approach to the problem. On the other hand there are some deficiencies in their approach. During his visit to Europe, for some time ago, the Prime Minister of the KDP-government Mr. Nechirvan Barzani did present two alternatives in order to cope with the problem of emigration. According to Barzani, the international community should either economically support the Kurdish region or provide "permanent" security guarantees to the region in order to set a stop to the mass-emigration. I do think

that you can't put the sign of equality between the two alternatives. The economic factor should be subordinate to that of the political and security one because of a "simple fact": the majority of the population in the Kurdish region have emphatically made it plain that they would continue to accept economic and social hardships, provided they escaped Saddam Hussein's control. In other words the population in Iraqi Kurdistan do consider the threat from Saddam's regime as far more serious problem than that of economic and social hardships.

Some concluding remarks

I tried above to present the two, as I see it, the most important reasons for the mass-emigration of the Kurds to Europe. No doubt the political and security factors are decisive in this regard and should be emphasized as long as the causes as well as efforts to find profound solutions to the phenomenon are concerned. Within the Kurdish context a lasting peace – which should pave the way to new elections and a legitimate administration – is an urgent priority. Such a development may radically improve the psycho-political climate within the region. The conflicting parties, the KDP and the PUK, will be first winners: they would regain the trust of the population. The lost hope of the political future of the Kurdish region also would be restored, a hope that to a great extent has been lost because of the fighting between the two parties. In a time of major challenges and changes internationally, the two major Kurdish parties have no choice but to immediately come to terms of sustainable peace and a joined administration. If this eventuality becomes real, then the Kurds may regionally and internationally gain a far stronger position.

On the other hand, Iraqi Kurdistan's gloomy political future remains the most important factor as long as the behavior of the population in the region is concerned. Instead of taking measures leading to the closure of the boundaries of the European democracies or to mass-deportation of thousands of Kurds, the EU-countries and the member countries individually should try to understand in a more positive manner the phenomenon of the Kurdish emigration. They should above all work for stability and a sustainable security *in* and *for* the Kurdish region. A clear-cut recognition of the Kurdish declaration of the federative system and future guarantees for the Kurds in the post-sanctions Iraq are among measures badly needed.

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