



BORA
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Next war in the Middle East

Experts in the U.S. and some members of the American administration have recently been talking about "protecting Kurds from Turkey."

This approach reveals the fact that the dynamics of the region still cannot be understood precisely by the Washington elite, because the next war in the Middle East will not be between Turks and Kurds. The main axis of conflict in the region lies between Kurds and Arabs, and this conflict already started.

Kurds in the Arab world had been under great pressure during the last decades. Under the leadership of Mullah Mustafa Barzani, Kurds initiated two uprisings in Iraq. Around 100,000 people got killed during the first revolt between 1961 and 1970. As a sign of Arab solidarity, the Syrian army came to the help of Iraq against the Kurds in the 1960s. Iraq's promise of autonomy to Kurds had never been materialized. The second Kurdish revolt was in 1974-75 in Iraq.

The Baath regimes both in Iraq and Syria took several steps against the Kurds. With the Arabization policy, Iraq forced the Kurds to leave their homes and villages. The province of Kirkuk was redesigned, its name was changed to Al Tamim and its borders were drawn again. Similar actions were taken in Mosul. Arabization concentrated on moving Kurds out of the towns and villages which are close to oil fields in northern Iraq.

During the Iran-Iraq war between 1980 and 1988, Saddam Hussein reacted harshly to Iran's support of Kurdish groups against his administration. He attacked the Kurdish community, started his infamous Anfal Campaign and even used chemical weapons, killing thousands of Kurds. The use of chemical weapons and the massacre in Halabja became milestones of Kurdish-Arab hostility in Iraq. Kurds who escaped Saddam's lethal campaign took refuge in Turkey, and they were protected by the Turkish state against those brutal attacks.

Until the no-fly zone was established in the north of 36th parallel after the Gulf War in 1991, Kurds tried to survive in the form of big tribes in Iraq. They were under great pressure and their political activity was limited to the Baath regime's mercy. After they controlled northern Iraq with the support of the U.S.-led coalition they started to move away from Baghdad's orbit. Meanwhile, they were in an armed conflict among themselves. This conflict is worth mentioning. Conservative Barzani led the KDP, fought against the socialist Talabani-led PUK, which was supported by the Marxist PKK in the 1990s. Turkey supported Barzani against this coalition and helped him control Erbil.

The Kurdish-Arab ethnic hostility in Iraq was also visible during the Kurdish independence referendum on Sept. 25, 2017. After the vote, Kurds had to face and counter the anger of Baghdad alone, despite the previous encouraging statements from the Western capitals. The Iraqi army denied the decision of Kurdish independence. Neighboring countries supported Iraq, and, as a result, the Kurdish Regional Government (KRG) had to leave the oil-rich city of Kirkuk which they had controlled since 2003. Thousands of Kurds had to leave

Kirkuk on Oct. 17, 2017. Barzani and the Kurds lost a key political battle against Arabs.

In Iraq, the lines of potential Kurdish-Arab ethnic conflict are already clear. From Khanakin to Mosul, the line of oil and natural gas resources overlaps with Kurdish-Arab ethnic division.

Kurdish-Arab hostility has a similar history in Syria. Kurds were stripped of their citizenship, they were hardly given places in public posts, and their protests were suppressed by force. The Syrian regime implemented a similar policy with Iraq in order to form an Arab belt at the Turkish-Syrian border. In the census of 1962, 120,000 Kurds were stripped of citizenship and lost their civil and property rights. Sunni Arabs had been settled in Kurdish- and Turkmen-dominated region. In the last revolt before the civil war in 2004 in Qamishli, 30 people got killed by Syrian security forces.

When Turkey and Syria had good relations in the 2000s, Ankara encouraged Syrian President Bashar al-Assad to grant civil rights to Kurds and start a democratization process.

However, the hostility between Kurds and Arabs continued in different forms, in Iraq after the fall of Saddam and in Syria, after the civil war started.

Syrian opposition groups never forgive the PKK-affiliated PYD's support for Assad. They see the PYD as a regime-affiliated group working against the revolution. They also consider the PYD-YPG celebration after they took Raqqa from ISIL in 2017 as a provocation. Their forcing of Sunni Arabs to leave their homes and their use of jailed PKK leader Abdullah Öcalan's posters in the main square of Raqqa are considered as act of aggression and denial of Arab identity. The PYD's Kurdization of Arab villages and pressure on local people are being watched and noted closely.

Similarly the dialogue of the Assad regime with the PYD from time to time is tactical. Damascus is aware of Kurdish plans of independence and their close partnership with the U.S., which tries to topple the regime down. This is not acceptable for Assad.

For all these reasons, the partnership of Kurds and Arabs under the auspices of the U.S. within the framework of the SDF is not sustainable. The Arab-Kurdish conflict is based on real issues like sharing resources, territorial problems and identity issues. Forcing Kurds to pursue independence or autonomy without convincing Arabs makes them a target. And this is what western countries are doing now.

The future of Iraq and Syria must be determined by the people in accordance with the realities of the region. Any other plans, intervention by outside forces, empty promises of independence or autonomy are planting new seeds of hatred between Kurds and Arabs. The real threat Kurds face now is not Turkey. Tens of thousands of Kurds' lives had been saved by Turkey in 2014 when ISIS attacked the northern Syrian town of Kobane. I was a field reporter at that time covering Kurdish refugees' stories in the Turkish border town of Suruç. If this tragedy repeats in the future because of an ethnic conflict between Kurds and Arabs, it will be Turkey again opening its doors to civilians, again.