

The Speech of Ingmar Karlsson on "Kurdish Question and Nationalism"

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Turkey considers the existence of a Kurdish state in northern Iraq as a direct threat against Turkey's integrity and is concerned that it might play a role of a Kurdish Piemonte, the region in Italy where the process of Italian unification started.

This threatening picture is based on a number of unsubstantiated suppositions. One is that there exists a monolithic Kurdish identity embracing both southeastern Turkey and northern Iraq and that the Kurds in Turkey would therefore more or less automatically identify themselves with a Kurdish state situated to the south of the Turkish border and ignore the regional differences as far as religion, language, and history itself are concerned. Another one is that the Iraqi Kurds would be in favour of "re-unification" with the Kurds from Turkey and would prefer this unification with their ethnic brothers over good neighbourly relations with Turkey, a country on which they would be strongly dependent both economically, strategically and geopolitically.

In such a state the Iraqi Kurds would become a minority. Here one can make a parallel with Moldova. After the collapse of the Soviet Union the general expectation was that this Romanian-speaking Soviet republic would, not least due to economical considerations - join Romania, but independence proved to be a more attractive option than a continued existence as a minority in a province on the outskirts of Romania.

In the Iraqi case not least the economical reasons speak against creation of a state reaching over the existing borders. There is really no reason to suppose that the 4-5 million Kurds in Iraq would be interested in uniting with and sharing their oil resources with 15 million Turkish Kurds. This is as unlikely as a scenario in which the Norwegians would suddenly declare that they would like to share their gas- and oil resources with their Swedish brothers on the Scandinavian peninsula.

If Turkey solves its Kurdish problem and grants the Kurds full political and cultural rights, it will diminish the attraction of an *de facto* independent Kurdish state in northern Iraq. To convert this

scenario into reality it is however necessary that the EU-process acquires new momentum and that EU membership does not seem unattainable for the Kurds in Turkey. A Turkey in the EU would guarantee Turkey's territorial integrity. The influence of the military over politics would dramatically decrease and a Turkish government without the military pressure would not be so scared of a Kurdish state in its immediate neighbourhood.

Whom does Turkey favour as her neighbour? A new Libanon in the form of a collapsed Iraqi state filled with anarchy or an in reality independent Kurdish state in northern Iraq that could even serve as a buffer state against an Arabic Iraq with brutal conflicts between Shiites and Sunnis? Turkey as the militarily stronger and bigger nation could instead be a sort of protector for an independent Iraqi Kurdistan.

The fear of a Kurdish mini state in northern Iraq is therefore anachronistic and in reality unfounded. Ankara must stop to look at the Kurds in Iraq as enemies and instead see them as their natural allies in their efforts to develop and stabilize the south-eastern Turkey.

Turkey should therefore recognize the Kurdish autonomy in Iraq as a political fact and develop relations with the two autonomous regions which in practice constitute the KRG. The Turkish government must accept the fact that federalism as a political system has come to Iraq and is going to stay there and that this fact is giving Turkey more possibilities than was the case a few decades ago.

In northern Iraq a Kurdish state in some form is unavoidable and this development is also in Turkey's interests. A stable Kurdish state there would be favourable for Turkey both from economical, national and strategic points of view, and it would also lead to an economic development of the Kurdish parts of Turkey and contribute to a growing welfare which would subdue the conflicts there. Even if the oil resources in Kirkuk would belong to a Kurdish state it would be

dependent on Turkey as the safest transport road leads through the Turkish territory. The city of Diyarbakir in southeastern Turkey could develop from an economically underdeveloped provincial city situated close to militarized and closed borders into a dynamic economic center.

Already today Turkey is the most important commercial partner for the autonomous Kurdish region. Almost 70% of all business contracts, both private and state, have during the recent years gone to Turkish companies, and shops in cities such as Erbil are filled with Turkish goods. Turkey's export to northern Iraq in 2007 was estimated at 5 billion dollars. According to the International Crisis Group about 1200 Turkish companies were established in northern Iraq in April 2007 and this resulted in a sort of "economical reconciliation". Almost 20 000 workers from Turkey, predominantly Kurds, are now working in Northern Iraq.

Turkey could be the ideal partner for the Kurds in Iraq. It is not a paria-state as the other neighbours but a NATO-member and a candidate-country for membership in the EU. Thus it would give the Iraqi Kurdistan a direct border with Europe and be an opening out of the geostrategical isolation the region is now suffering from.

If the Kurds in Iraq patiently work on creating an administration and economy of their own, look after the security of their borders, and keep out of the chaos in the Middle East it will in the long run be impossible to ignore their demand to be given the right to take care of their own affairs.

A sensible Kurdish policy would therefore be not to insist on independence. Being geographically closed off and having hostile neighbours are not the best pre-requisites for building up a state and a new society. The states the Kurds are most dependent on, the US and Turkey, would not allow such a development. Having to choose between Turkey and an independent Kurdistan Washington would always choose Turkey. Within the framework of a formally independent Iraq on the other hand the Kurdish parts would be a sort of American aircraft carrier in the region with a military presence that would support the security of the Kurdish region.

A Kurdish state in the northern Iraq could become

a state that also Kurds in other countries could identify with but without necessarily radicalizing Kurds in Turkey, Syria and Iran. The knowledge that there is a Kurdish state and that one could move there would dilute the separatist ambitions. A survey carried out in Turkey in November 2007 among the citizens of Kurdish origin showed that 95% of them would not leave Turkey in case a Kurdish state were created in northern Iraq.

If the Iraqi Kurds are patient and continue building their society within the framework of an Iraqi federation or confederation and keep away from political games and the chaos in the rest of Iraq and the neighbouring countries, it will at the long last be impossible even for their closest neighbours to be against their right to self-determination and independence.

One of the pre-requisites is that they fully realize the truth hidden in the following Kurdish proverbs:

Patience is bitter but it brings sweet fruits.

It is better to have a calf of one's own than to be a co-owner of a cow.

Between Iceland's achievement of freedom from Denmark in 1944 and the collapse of communism in 1991 only three national secession movements have been successful. Singapore peacefully divorced Malaysia in 1965, Eastern Pakistan became free from Pakistan as a result of a bloody war in 1971 and became Bangladesh and after a long civil war Eritrea managed to break away from Ethiopia in 1991. The independence of East Timor from Indonesia can be considered as a belated consequence of the Portuguese process of decolonization. The collapse of the Soviet Union and of Yugoslavia has resulted in the establishment of nation states that earlier enjoyed a formal autonomy of varying degrees into independent states. This applies also to Kosovo. When in 1989 Milosevic revoke Kosovo's autonomy the area had in its main features the same position as the federal republics. The division of Czechoslovakia was a result of political negotiations.

None of these cases can be considered a parallel to the Kurdish question. The situation of the Kurds today can rather be compared to the situation of

Poles between the last Polish division in 1795 and the First World War after which Poland was able to re-emerge from the ruins of the German, Austrian-Hungarian and Russian empires. A "Greater Kurdish state" can only be envisioned if the whole region with Kurdish populations would suffer the same total collapse as these empires did in the First World War.

The Kurds of today are furthermore not as united in their nationalist quest as once the Poles were in 1918. In many respects they are more divided than the Germans were when the German Empire was created in 1871, and the Italians before their unification in 1861. One of their nationalist leaders, Massimo d'Azeglio then said: " We have created Italy now, thus we have to create the Italians ". This task has not been fully completed even 150 years later.

In addition to this the Kurds do not have any unifying national personality like Garibaldi or Bismarck. No Kurdish leader has shouldered the role of an "Atakurd", a Kurdish leader and representative of a pan-Kurdish national idea. Instead, the leadership has been effected by clan-thinking and even as far as the de facto independent Kurdish state in Iraq (KRG) is concerned it is still too early to see if politicians like Jalal Talabani and Massoud Barzani have been able to leave their role of clan-leaders and warlords behind them and become Kurdish statesmen. Both of them have been fighting as much against each other as against the Iraqi regime that denied the Iraqi Kurds their right of self determination. Still today the KRG in reality consists of two separate states, Barzanistan and Talabanistan.

A united "Greater Kurdistan" would bring together groups that have been living separated from each other in four different states for more than 90 years. Their cultures, national awareness and strategies for political mobilization have developed in different directions and thus the risks for internal power struggles in such a state would be numerous. The questions of contention would include even such elementary things as which one or which of the languages would have official status and which alphabet would be used but the latent antagonisms are of more serious nature. The attacks of the PKK against other Kurdish groups in Turkey should not be

forgotten, neither the recurring civil wars between PUK and KDP in Iraq and KDPI and Komala in Iran.

Neighbouring states and other forces that are against a greater Kurdish state would make use of these historical facts. Turkey has been able to make use of the various Kurdish groups and their conflicting interests and play them off against each other. The long and bloody war in the southern and southeastern Turkey was not only a war between the PKK and the Turkish army but also a Kurdish civil war between the PKK and the so-called village guards. This split and internal division has also through history made the Kurds a useful instrument for their neighbours' divide and rule policies. During the long and bloody war between Iraq and Iran in the years 1980 - 1988 Kurds were used by either side as the fifth column.

The Kurds in Turkey, Iraq, Iran, and Syria have two things in common, however. They feel a common Kurdish identity even though it may be of differing intensity, and that they are all depending on the majority population in the states in which they live. The ethnical Kurdish nationalism has been strengthened by kemalism and its rigid and restricting definition of the Turkish nation, by the socialist Arab nationalism of the Baath-party in Iraq and Syria, and by first the Shah-regime and then the authoritarian system of the Islamic fundamentalists in Iran.

The possibilities to mobilize support for their struggle for their civic and human rights from outside have been limited as all Kurdish regions have been surrounded by states with Kurdish populations of their own and thus distrustful of the real intentions of their Kurdish populations. The only common political position that has been uniting Turkey, Syria, Iraq and Iran since the 1920-ies has been their opposition to any Kurdish state. The foreign ministers of these states have been holding regular meetings to discuss "the Kurdish question" and have pledged to prevent the creation of any Kurdish state..

A "Greater Kurdistan" would pose a threat against the territorial integrity of Turkey, Iran, Iraq and Syria. None of these states would accept an independence claim of the Kurds, as the pre-requisite of this would be the division of their

own territories. The main problem for the Kurds today is therefore to achieve the basic human and civic rights in the states they are living in at present. It is only in Iraq that they are recognized as an ethnic minority. In Syria 250 000 Kurds are stateless and in all states except Iraq they face a number of restrictions as far as their cultural rights, free access to media, and schooling in their own mother tongue is concerned.

The future development of the Kurdish nationalism depends not least on the political development in those countries where they constitute a minority. Repressive methods will only make it more aggressive and increase the membership in the radical groups. A continuing emigration and brain-drain from the Kurdish regions to Europe and to the economical centers in the countries in which they live may further worsen the economical and social position and lead to a situation where an extreme political islamism inclined to violence could become stronger than the ethnic nationalism.

If, on the other hand, the development will be heading towards pluralism and democracy the aggressive Kurdish nationalism will decrease and the socioeconomic development will go in a positive direction. Then perhaps the next generation will not see ethnicity as the only and determining factor for their identity. In Europe the idea of the national state has started to give way for both the regional and supra-state nationalities. Also in Turkey and in the Middle East one can notice that the ethnic nationalism, once imported from Europe, is receding and that people are reverting to those sub-identities that once were typical for the Ottoman society and its tolerance of people with different cultural and religious backgrounds.

The Kurdish diaspora can play an important role. Can they contribute to furthering the ideas of democracy in their old home countries or will their views be strongly influenced by romanticized and retrospective pictures which do not correspond to the present-day situation? In an ideal world also the Kurds, the world's biggest people without a state of their own, would be living in independence since long ago, but the world we are living in is not and never will be ideal. To try to create a greater Kurdish national state by taking to arms is an illusion that would

bring about more misfortunes over an already suffering people.

In the Iraqi Kurdistan a basis is now being built for higher education to be provided in the two biggest Kurdish languages. The universities there can develop into a proper alma mater for all Kurdish students irrespective of which country they live in as a minority. Kurdish culture and literature are flowering and the Iraqi region in Kurdistan is about to become a center for Kurdish culture and Kurdish political awareness. Kurdish experts and specialists in different fields are coming from neighbouring countries and from Europe to participate in building up the Kurdish society there. If this development is allowed to continue and the Kurdish diaspora is not considered to be a threat against the already established power structures then the demand for more democracy and decentralisation will also increase in the neighbouring countries.

The Kurds can now enjoy the positive aspects of the globalization. During the lifespan of one generation they have gone from a tribal society governed by sheikhs and agas to having five different satellite channels with TV shows in both sorani and kurmanji. By means of internet and mobile phones they are in permanent contact with the Kurdish diaspora in Europe. Nobody can nowadays forbid the use of the Kurdish language as a means of communication. Whatever happens in a region inhabited by the Kurds becomes immediately known throughout the Kurdish communities. The globalization and the establishment of large Kurdish communities in the diaspora make it impossible to try to stop the legitimate Kurdish demands for political and cultural rights by using military means or by oppression.

A "Greater Kurdistan" will nevertheless remain a utopia. Those who dream such dreams had better think of another Kurdish proverb:

When Allah closes one door he opens a thousand others.

Ingmar Karlsson