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FACTORS FOR COOPERATION AND CONFLICT IN SOUTHERN KURDISTAN

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With the rise of the modern Kurdish nationalist movement since the last decades of the Nineteenth Century and especially since the first decades of the Twentieth Century, a general pattern for cooperation and conflict can be observed during the modern history of the Kurdish people and not only in Southern Kurdistan.

The general dimensions of this pattern are represented by greater mobilisation and cooperation among the Kurds during times of optimistic visions and success such as the beginnings of the Sheikh Mahmoud movement and government, the Sheikh Said Rebellion, The Ararat independence movement and the Dersim revolt as well as the Mehabad Republic, the starting of the 1961 armed resistance movement for autonomy that culminated in the achievement of the March 11th 1970 Agreement for wide-range self-government, the successes of the Kurdish movement in Eastern Kurdistan after the Iranian Revolution in 1979, the start of the armed resistance movement in Northern Kurdistan in 1984, and the uprising of 1991 as well as the general elections of 1992 together with the establishment of The Regional Federal Administration in Southern Kurdistan.

Other times and periods that are symptomatic for such cooperative relations and mobilisation are incidents of "catastrophy" and mass traumatic happenings in Kurdish history, such as the failure and collapse of the Mehabad Republic in 1946, collapse of the movement in Southern Kurdistan in 1975, the use of chemical weapons by the Iraqi government against Halabja, Badinan and other areas of Iraqi Kurdistan, and the refugee exodus from there after the uprising in the aftermath of the Second Gulf War in 1991.

A third historical factor that has encouraged greater cooperation among the Kurds is certain changes or processes at the international level that have created certain possiblities and openings for discussing Kurdish rights or the general plight of the Kurdish people, such as the Peace Conference of Paris in 1920, the San Francisco Conference in 1945, the decolonisation process after the Second World War, the war between Iran and Iraq from 1980-1988, the Second Gulf War of 1991, the end of the cold war and the establishment of more than 23 new states, discussion of the Kurdish issue in international organs and forums, and greater mass media coverage of events in Kurdistan.

Strangely enough and contrary to common wisdom, the danger of external threat does not mostly or necessarily lead to greater unity and cooperation in Kurdish society. Except for the initial stages of ethnic mobilisation, with expressions and occurences of unity and cooperation, when faced with a real or imagined threat to their existence, such situations seem to lead to greater dissension, strife and blame labelling for the causes of the threat within the Kurdish nationalist movement.

On the other hand, the dimension of conflict within Kurdish society in the pattern mentioned above (apart from structural cleavages) is caused by failures, crises, competition over power and limited resources, and external intervention. For example, the failures of nationalist uprisings and movements (most of the above mentioned examples), loss of historical

opportunities in achieving their aims, mistakes committed by immature and incompetent leaderships, differences in outlook and aspirational visions between educated urbanised modernist elites and semi-literate reactionary tribal and traditional elites, and frustrations caused by external regional intervention that deepen internal divisions and encourage internal strife through support to different adversaries in the hard competition for power and resources in Kurdish society, or the opposite process of Kurdish political actors seeking outside support in tipping the balance in their favour in their competition with other Kurdish forces..

Turning now to the current situation in Southern or Iraqi Kurdistan, one can discern the following factors for cooperation and conflict there:

Factors for Conflict

Theoretically, one can think of a number of inter-ethnic i.e. Kurds against non-Kurds or intra-ethnic i.e. Kurds against Kurds types of conflicts. Among the most obvious types of inter-ethnic conflicts are those that have taken place between the Kurds and the majority ethnic group i.e. the Arabs and their power elites, since the establishment of the state of Iraq in the 1920ís and their inclusion into that state against the will of their own majority. **Another source of possible conflict is that between the Kurds and minority ethnic groups living in Southern Kurdistan e.g. Assyrians, Syriacs, Assyro-Chaldeans, Armenians, Turcomans and Arabs.** For example land legitimately belonging to Assyrians and Chaldeans was confiscated by KDP commanders in Badinan in 1993 and 1994. Some of their public spokesmen and representatives in the Kurdish National Assembly were also murdered under very mysterious circumstances after protesting against such unjust confiscations by KDP officials. Iraqi Arab settlers in the Kirkuk area and Arbil plain were at times subjected to collective forms of punishment by Kurdish resistance groups. A third type of such conflict is that of Iraqi Kurds entering into conflict with Turkey, Iran and possibly Syria.

In the sphere of intra-ethnic conflicts, a number of real and hypothetical conflicts can be pointed out. Firstly, conflicts that have or may take place between Kurds of Iraq and Kurds from Iran (both political forces and refugees residing in Southern Kurdistan like KDPI, Komala, Khebat, etc.). Such conflicts have taken place earlier between Iraqi KDP and KDPI of Iran. Secondly, conflicts between Kurds of Iraq and Kurds from Turkey mainly the Kurdistan Workers Party (PKK) and the refugees in Atroosh camp. Conflicts between the joint Regional Government of Iraqi Kurdistan and PKK forces took place in October 1992 and between PKK and Iraqi KDP in March 1995 and ever since May 1997. Consequently, Iraqi KDP unashamedly refused refuge to Kurdish refugees from Turkish Kurdistan and expelled them from their areas of control. These have now through UNHCR mediation been granted assylum by the government of Saddam Hussein.

Thirdly, certain political, social, religious, regional, tribal and language cleavages within the Kurds in Iraq might and have led to a number of conflicts over the years. For political conflicts, one can mention the recurrent fighting between the Patriotic Union of Kurdistan (PUK) and the Kurdistan Democratic Party of Iraq (KDP-Iraq), between the KDP and the Socialist Party (SP), between the PUK and the Islamic Movement of Kurdistan (IMK), between Hizbollah and some of its splinter groups, between KDP and IMK, between the joint Regional Government before 1994 and some leftist and dissatisfied groups, between

pro-Iraqi government Kurds and all other anti-government Kurds, and recently a very sinister act of collective murder has taken place by the PKK in Southern Kurdistan against a group of Iranian Kurds belonging to a mysterious organisation calling itself "The Union of Revolutionaries of Kurdistan" that were refugees in Arbil in Iraqi Kurdistan. It is reliably reported that they were closely associated with Iraqi Intelligence, Iraqi KDP and KDPI.

Social cleavages between different classes, between the new ruling Kurdish elites of KDP and PUK that have replaced the Iraqi Arab ruling elite and the rest of the Kurdish population, between deportees and internal refugees from Kirkuk, Khaneqin and Mosul area and the "normal" or "regular" population of the areas of the no-fly zone. Incidents of conflict and mass protest movements of dissatisfaction with the Kurdish administrations in Arbil and Sulaimania, especially among the very poor, the unemployed and the downtrodden have occurred on a number of occasions in the last few years.

Religious cleavages that exist within Kurdish society among the Sunni, Shiite, Ahli- Haqq, Yezidi, Shabak and other religious convictions might become an explosive source of future conflict at certain times despite the long history of religious pluralism and tolerance in Kurdistan.

Language or dialectal cleavages between Kurmanji or Badini, Sorani, Hewrami, and Feyli might become a source of future conflict if the current political and geographical divisions between the areas controlled by PUK and KDP are further entrenched. This will most likely strengthen sub-national and local loyalties instead of common national ones as a result of division and warlordism and the exercise of collective intimidation and harassment against each sides supporters and sympathisers. These in turn might further strengthen earlier existing extremely harmful and divisive tribal and regional cleavages in Kurdish society.

One of the most important factors that has given rise to conflict is the lacking of a democratic and a pluralist political culture within the parties and movements that exist in Southern Kurdistan. The totalitarian character of these organisations that were modelled on non-democratic nationalist, socialist and communist parties in the Middle East (ironically their leadership organs are still called "Central Committee" and "Political Bureau") resulted in applying ruthless methods for gaining power and acquiring scarce resources by every means in a very poor society without any regard to human life and dignity. This tendency combined with the traditional values and norms of a hierarchical and vertical tribal and social system leads to extreme drives towards monoplisation of power and immense hindrances towards tolerance and acceptance of the other, like what we observe now with the KDP. Hence, every dissension from itís line of thinking and policy is considered as treason and every demand for pluralism by newly aspiring political organisations is considered a threat to itís very existence and therefore must be eliminated.

Finally, external intervention by the regional states i.e. Turkey, Iran, Iraq and Syria play a very important role in provoking and giving cause to intensified intra-Kurdish conflict in Iraqi Kurdistan by supporting one or the other party in the competition for power and resources, by inciting incidents of disagreement and war, and by luring one or the other party with false promises and temptations. The Kurdish movements, too, due to their consideration for their own sectarian interests only, rather than those of the Kurdish nation as a whole, become an easy prey to these cynical games of medieval power politics by the governments of these regional states. The Kurdish movementsí geopolitical situation in a landlocked area

of the Middle East does not help them either to get out of this strategical straitjacket, if the wish ever existed !!!

Factors for Cooperation

Apart from the causes mentioned above, one can think of a number of conditions and factors that might encourage cooperation among the parties in Iraqi Kurdistan.

Firstly, Strong mediation by forceful negotiators from the United States and Europe might be able to "convince" (in a manner similar to the Dayton process) the two Kurdish parties in Iraqi Kurdistan i.e. PUK & KDP to return to a peaceful process with formation of a wider new coalition government and holding of new democratic elections under international supervision. This would be able to complement and build on the meagre Shaqlawa process that has been going on for few months.

Secondly, development of a sound constitutional framework for power sharing for the region of Kurdistan would deal with many fears and suspicions that paralysed the earlier coalition administration which was based on a very strange 50-50 principle. Unfortunately, the KDP refused the adaptation of a constitution for the Federal Kurdistan Region in 1992 out of fear of antagonising the Iraqi Government.

Thirdly, the oil for food program together with direct developmental aid to Kurdistan under UN and NGOís supervision has already led to cooperative relations among the parties such as a common delegation to the UN headquarters, confidence building measures concerning electricity sharing arrangements, infra structure improvements and the free movement of people. A lifting of UN sanctions on Iraqi Kurdistan together with an increased package for economic aid will certainly influence the parties towards more cooperative relations because they will become more self reliant and escape influence from Iraq, Turkey and Iran as a result of sanction busting along their borders for customs duties. The imbalance in incomes between the PUK and KDP would also disappear. A factor that has played an important role in the conflict between the parties.

Fourthly, formulation of clearer policies by the allies in the Gulf War, especially by the United States, about the future of Iraq and stronger support for the opposition in an effective manner in doing away with Saddamís regime and establishment of a democratic federal system in Iraq would give very strong signals to the Kurdish parties and incite them towards more cooperation for such future options. One can already note such indicators from recent press reports.

Fifthly, Continuation of international presence and involvement in the affairs of Iraqi Kurdistan until a democratic alternative is achieved in Iraq is a paramount guarantee for stability and cooperative relations among the Kurdish parties and movements. Absence of such a presence would leave them at the mercy of dubious regional political regimes that would work feverishly for inciting strife and discord in Kurdistan in order to regain control in the area and carry out genocidal policies again.

Sixthly, the fear of loosing every thing and be faced with a vengeful Saddam in power without any international protection might force the Kurdish parties to cooperation. Such a serious threat to their relative de facto freedom since 1991 coupled with war fatigue and public pressure from the masses of the people in Kurdistan might be yet another factor.

No doubt, apart from economic, political and diplomatic support, establishment of interest groups and institutions for the advancement and strengthening of a civil society together with institutions for the preservation of human rights and respect for the rule of law together with well trained cadres in conflict resolution would further enhance cooperative relations within Kurdish society.

Finally, education of the higher, middle and lower level leaderships of all Kurdish organisations in Southern Kurdistan in the basic and elementary rules of a democratic political culture and the most basic norms of democratic governance are the most important conditions for peaceful and cooperative relations among the different parties in Southern Kurdistan.

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