

WHY INDEPENDENT KURDISTAN IS A PART OF RUSSIAN GRAND STRATEGY

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On a number of levels, the situation between the Islamic State of Iraq and Syria (ISIS) and the ethnic Kurds of Syria, Iraq and Turkey is creating a power shift that no one is discussing. In this article, I will explain why: 1) The Kurds have an unprecedented opportunity to achieve a political homeland; 2) Tehran's strategy of expanding Shia influence over the Sunnis is possible because of an independent Kurdistan; 3) Moscow is orchestrating an independent Kurdistan and 4) Turkey's recalcitrance against the United States and Western Europe squanders any chance of the Nabucco Pipeline going through Turkey.

The Russian and Iranians operate a joint command center in Baghdad's Green Zone to help Iraq combat ISIS. Iran's mass media quoted unnamed Iraqi sources that Russia and Iran have jointly established an operations cell in Baghdad to fight ISIS. The report even went as far as saying that at least 60 Russians and other experts were staying at the Royal Tulip Al Rasheed Hotel in Baghdad's Green Zone. The experts are training officers and pilots on tactics as well as the capabilities of Russian-made military equipment Moscow recently supplied. Among the most significant pieces of equipment are the attack helicopters that were just delivered to Baghdad.ⁱ

The Russians are clear about their grand strategy for the region. Of late, statements by Russia's Defense Ministry, Minister of Foreign Affairs, their Ambassador to the UN and the Secretary to Russia's Security Council are all in lockstep over its support to the Kurds in their fight against ISIS. Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov's recent lecture on Foreign Policy revealed that Russia has no intentions of lessening their military support of Syria and Iraq.ⁱⁱ Russian Ambassador to the UN Vitaly Churkin shared that the U.S.-led anti-ISIS coalition does not include Damascus and Tehran, who from the Russian perspective are logical allies in this fight. Secretary Nikolai Patrushev of the Russian Security Council visited Iran and stressed that Russia will continue to support both Iraq and Syria with weapons to strengthen their fight against ISIS terrorists.ⁱⁱⁱ

The Kurds have longstanding ties to Moscow. The key connection between the Kurds and Moscow are through the powerful Barzani Family. The relationship started many years back by Yevgeny Primakov, a young 'journalist' on his first assignment who later rose to become the head of the Russian Foreign Intelligence Service, Foreign Minister and later Prime Minister. In his part-memoir, part-historical work named "Russia And The Arabs," Primakov revealed how the Kurdish Republic of Mahabad came about during the Second World War in northwestern Iran. The patriarch of the Barzani tribe, Mustafa Barzani, served as its Defense Minister. When the Soviet troops withdrew from Iran in 1947, the Republic of Mahabad fell apart and Mustafa Bazrani with 500 fellow tribesmen sought asylum in the Soviet Union. According to Primakov, Mustafa Bazrani lived under the name "Mamedov" for 12 years.^{iv} Mustafa Bazrani (aka Mamedov) was the father of acting President Massoud Barzani and the Grandfather of current acting Prime Minister Nechervan Bazrani of Iraqi Kurdistan.

The Russians believe that this strategy cannot lose. Currently ethnic Kurds are spread across four countries (Syria, Turkey, Iraq and Iran) although Turkey denies them ethnic identity. Iraqi Kurdistan is politically the strongest. They were the first to get their ethnic identity recognized in March 11, 1970. They were also the first to elect National Council and form a government.^v Since

Syrian Kurds are struggling to survive, assistance from the Peshmergas or Iraqi side would have been unthinkable before. For the Iranian Kurds, such a benefactor also supports their agenda within Iran. This places the Barzani's tribe in a position to speak for all Kurds.

Given the recent the U.S. State Department comment that that the 'time to recognize the independence of Iraqi Kurdistan has not yet come'.^{vi} Primakov noted that American encouragement of outright independence of Iraqi Kurdistan would only have worsened the situation with NATO ally Turkey.^{vii} Russia on the other hand always supported Kurdish aspirations, even at a time when Saddam Hussein and Hafez Assad were their best customers.

Yet it goes further than that. Like Tehran, Russia disdains Saudi Arabia's influence in the region. The fall of Bashar Assad and his Alawite power base means that Syria would pass into Sunni hands. This translates to a pipeline built by Qatar and extending between Qatar, Saudi Arabia, Jordan and Sunni Syria.^{viii} It might also mean competition and pressure to lower prices than the Russians would have wanted. Nonetheless Russia pays \$2 million annually to use the port at Tartus, Syria (which I mentioned in my 2012 article "Do Not Pay Your Rent with a Blank Check: An Overview of Russian Military Bases"). Compared to the \$2 billion paid to Kyrgyzstan to hasten the departure of U.S. forces from Manas Air Base,^{ix} this appears small yet the point can be made that such a presence lends itself to greater strategies. Currently the port at Tartus is known as the region's 'arms bazaar.'

In another article ("The Cat and Mouse Game: How Russia and Iran can Circumvent Nuclear Non-Proliferation through a Regional Rail Agreement," published October 26, 2014), I explained the major interests of the Caspian Sea countries sharing a railroad linking Russia, Kazakhstan, Turkmenistan, and Azerbaijan linking with Iran.^x All are energy producers. Furthermore this link Iran with independent Kurdistan, Iraq and Syria. In other words a *fait accompli* in the energy market.

This is roughly what a 'Caspian Sea' pipeline would look like when merged with a Shia-led 'Islamic pipeline':



An independent Kurdistan is not necessarily a divided Iraq. Tehran will convince the Shia-led government in Baghdad to support an independent Kurdistan so long as economic union remains

with Baghdad. The most prevalent example of such a relationship is the agreement between the Principality of Liechtenstein and Switzerland. Since 1924, Liechtenstein uses Switzerland's currency, postal service and represents Liechtenstein diplomatically around the world.^{xi}

The Russians believe that winning requires being on the ground. Russia and Iran understand that they will get the credit for winning the war against ISIS in the eyes of both the Shia and Kurd communities. With influence on both factions, the 'Caspian pipeline' and the 'Islamic pipeline' will be controlled each step of the way as illustrated above. Since 50% of Iran's gas resources are within the "South Pars" field, which is said to potentially be able to supply 110 million cubic meters of gas per day to the "Islamic pipeline".^{xii} South Pars divided between Qatar and Iran; one of the largest gas fields in the world contains 28 trillion cubic meters of gas and 45 billion barrels of oil.^{xiii} One of the main developers of South Pars is Russia's Gazprom, along with partners Total of France and ENI of Italy. As the recent death of Total CEO Christophe de Margery in Moscow came as a shock at first it still explains how deceased was close to Russia;^{xiv} as life goes on the joint oil ventures between Paris and Moscow are close despite sanctions currently in place against Russia.

France in the mean time has already positioned itself to capitalize on Russian gains. France has already sent their first diplomatic mission to Kurdistan. Prime Minister of Iraqi Kurdistan Nechervan Bazrani recently received the newly appointed ambassador of France to Iraq, Mark Baretto who in turn assured France's continued military and humanitarian support. For his part Minister Barzani expressed appreciation that French President François Hollande visited Irbil as a demonstration of France's political support to Kurdistan.^{xv}

As a result, Turkey has not only hampered the U.S. and EU but also itself. While Ankara will not embrace any notion of Kurdish independence, any misstep will incur the wrath of Kurds inside and out of Turkey but also a Russian-Iranian alliance. Given this scenario, Ankara's frosty relations with Washington and Brussels will come back to haunt it. NATO would be hard-pressed to declare Article V on behalf of a country that has done everything in its power to thwart U.S. and European Union ambitions in the region. With a Russian brokered continuous pipeline connecting the Caspian Sea countries (Russia, Kazakhstan, Turkmenistan, Azerbaijan) with Iran, Iraqi Kurdistan, Iraq to the Russian-leased port at Tartus, Syria, the project 'Nabucco pipeline' that would have gone through Turkey will be practically dead.

Endnotes:

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