

Federalism: A Solution More for Israel than for Iraq

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Revealing both the double standards of U.S. policies and the propaganda-oriented Israeli advocacy of “minority rights” in the Arab world, the U.S.-allied Iraqi Kurdish and sectarian leaders reacted angrily to James Baker-Lee Hamilton report because it recommended what they perceived as a possible American retract from federalism in Iraq and the Israeli Jews condemned as a catastrophic declaration of war an Israeli Arabs’ “future visions” because those visions could lead to a “federal” Israel.

Israel is still not “Jewish” neither in the demographic nor in the religious sense and the “Jewishness” of the state is still a strategic Zionist goal; hence the Israeli mainstream calls for the “transfer” of “non-Jews” and the Israeli official policies that boil down to nothing less than being ethnic cleansing practices. Jimmy Carter’s Palestine Peace Not Apartheid was only the latest reminder of this existential problem that threatens both the very existence of the indigenous Arabs in Israel as well as the Zionist dream of Jews to lead an independent Jewish life.

Israeli Jews have to choose between Apartheid and a democratic state. A federal Israel could solve both an Israeli internal ethnic problem and as well be the right just, lasting and comprehensive approach to solving the Arab and Palestinian-Israeli conflict, which would spare the region more wars and violence; the ingredients of success are much more authentic than the U.S. , Israeli and Iranian-backed separatist and sectarian calls for federalism in Iraq . This approach would allow for the return of Palestinian refugees without “throwing the Jews to the sea” and would allow the Jews to lead an independent life without condemning Palestinians to an eternal exile in Diaspora.

Of course the expected Israeli-U.S. rejection of this approach rules it out as unrealistic politics, but the rejection would in no way make the arguments for it less authentic. The promotion of federalism in Iraq is increasingly developing into a double-edged weapon against its U.S. and Israeli advocates and could also turn against its Iranian supporters, whose multi-ethnic country of Persians, Arabs, Kurds, Balushis, etc. will certainly not abandon its Islamic unity for a western-style pluralistic federal alternative.

According to the last updated CIA World Factbook online, Iraqi Kurds represent between 15%-20% of the population and the “non-Jews (mostly Arabs)” represent 23.6% of all Israelis. While the Kurds share with the Arab majority of Iraq the same religion, culture, historical heritage, wide-spread inter-ethnic marriages and have never had an independent state of their own, the Israeli Arabs are all either Muslims or Christians, with a distinctive oriental Arab and Muslim culture and no common historical heritage whatsoever with their Jewish compatriots, who by the sword, dispossessed and displaced the Arab majority to create their “Jewish” state and who are to this day ruling out the emergence of a Palestinian – Arab state on only a portion of their ancestral land.

Nonetheless, the U.S. and Israel have incessantly incited and supported a separate Kurdish entity in northern Iraq and since the U.S.-British invasion of Iraq in 2003 imposed as a fait accompli a “constitutional” federal system that would honour that support and as well address a similar Iranian-supported sectarian “separation” in the south, but could not yet be translated into a reality on the ground.

However neither Washington nor Tel Aviv would even ponder the possibility of a potential similar solution for the second class citizenship of the larger Arab minority of more than 1.2 million in Israel , which has a much better case for a federal arrangement with the Israeli central government. Instead the colonialist settlement of Arab land, the “transfer” and the ongoing ethnic cleansing of Arabs were the components of the official Israeli Jewish solution, which had and have its strategist representatives in Israel ’s successive governments, with Washington either turning closed eyes or only verbally and shyly protesting.

The contradictory U.S. policies between Iraq and Israel would potentially lead to the failure of its plan for an un-viable federal Iraq and to the failure of the viable “vision” of a federal Israel and would certainly lead to a repetition of American and Iranian betrayals of Iraqi Kurds, whose national aspirations were always opportunistically used by Washington and Tehran against the central government in Baghdad whenever this government is out of step with their regional strategies.

Iraqi Kurdistan enjoys now a de facto independence, protected by the U.S. occupation, but regional factors prevent declaring it officially and Kurdish U.S.-allied leaders are smoke-screening their separatism by claiming a federal link to Baghdad, only to buy time until the regional rejection could be overcome or outmanoeuvred.

In September last year prominent pro-Iran Shiite leader of the “Supreme Council for the Islamic Revolution in Iraq,” a U.S.-financed and Iranian-trained militia, who was hosted later in the year by President George W. Bush in Washington, Abdel Aziz Al Hakim, used the celebration of the birth of the Al-Mahdi, a 9th century Shiite imam, to renew his call for an autonomous Shiite region in central and southern Iraq. “Federalism will lead to stability and security in Iraq ,” Hakim told worshippers during Friday prayers in Karbala , adding: “Look at the example of federalism in Kurdistan , it is evidence of the success of this system.”

“If federalism cannot be assured, Iraq will not remain one state,” warned Iraqi U.S.-allied Kurdish leader Massud Barzani, adding: “We will not make any compromises.” Would Israel and Iran tolerate a similar de facto independence for Israeli Arabs or Iranian Kurds? How would Israel and Iran react were their respective Arab and Kurdish minorities to mobilize a 75,000-man Peshmerga-style militia of their own? Would they continue to support “the bad example” of the Iraqi Kurds?

More importantly, what would the U.S. , the strategic ally of both Israel and the Iraqi “federalists,” say and how would it react? Of course Washington would react on a case by case basis, which would produce contradictory policies that would reject federalism in Israel but support it in Iran . And if President George W. Bush is to adopt the recommendations of the Baker-Hamilton report Washington would also retract from supporting the Iraqi “federalists.” This is another stark example of Washington ’s double standards policy in the Middle East as well as of the absurdity of both U.S. and Israeli verbal propaganda advocacy of minority rights.

U.S. betrayal of Iraqi “federalists” is now highly probable, but the U.S. betrayal of Israeli Arabs is a 60-year old official policy. Kurdish as well as Arab-Palestinian betting on U.S. and Israeli tactical promises could in no time prove tragically counterproductive because occupying powers could not be but in solidarity and foreign occupation could not last forever. Kurds in particular, whether in Iraq or elsewhere and in spite of a lot of their legitimate grievances, could not be winners by exchanging a proven historical alliance with the regional Arab majority for temporary and unproven possible alignment with other minorities whose disloyalty to their historical coexistence with Arabs is still in doubt, despite the Israeli and U.S. incitement.

Last December Israeli Jews and Iraqi “federalists” were united in angry reaction, but ironically in contradictory stances vis-à-vis federalism: Barzani and Hakim were joined by the head of the system that is developing under the U.S. occupation, Jalal Talbani, in pledging they were “in no way abiding” by the Baker-Hamilton “unrealistic and inappropriate” recommendations “imposed on us,” which are “contrary to the principles of federalism and the constitution that forms the basis upon which the new Iraq is built,” “contradict U.S. assurances,” represent “interference in the country’s internal affairs” and strengthen “the central government.” They warned the recommendations threaten Iraq’s territorial integrity, in a thinly veiled threat to secede.

The Israeli Jews’ furiously blasted a 27-page “Future Vision” of their Arab-Palestinian compatriots, which clearly envisage a federal Israel, thus undermining in an outburst of fury the “Israeli example” on which all their propaganda was based to incite the ethnic, religious and sectarian minorities coexisting peacefully for thousands of years among their Arab neighbours.

“This week, the leaders of the Arab minority in Israel declared war in their own way on the Jewish national state in the Land of Israel ,” wrote Avraham Tal in Haaretz on Dec. 11. Why? Because “even if Israel one day arrives at an understanding with the leaders of the Palestinian Authority and all of the Arab states about taking the demand for the right of return off the agenda, the demands of Israeli Arab citizens for a right of return for descendants of the uprooted to their forefathers’ villages and their other nationalistic demands will ensure that the flames of the conflict are not extinguished,” Tal wrote.

Tal was right: Here lies the hard core of the conflict and the key to peace as well, namely the fact that a just and lasting peace is based on the Palestinian Right of Return, a fact that has almost drowned in the “brainwashing” rhetoric of the futile “peace processes;” a Palestinian state on a 20 percent portion of the Palestinian ancestral homeland is part, and not all, of the solution.

Tal did not represent only the mainstream Israeli Jewish reaction, but more importantly the leftists and liberals who have traditionally but unsuccessfully struggled for 60 years for “equality for Arabs,” whose “visions” now reflect their despair as well as their conviction that a “state-for-all-citizens solution” has proved a dead end. Israel’s official policy has created a “national minority” out of them after they hoped in vain for too long for an equal status with their Jewish compatriots.

In a “Future Vision of the Palestinian Arabs in Israel,” published by the Higher Follow Up Committee of the Palestinian Arabs in Israel last month, they only “envisaged” some of the demands of the Iraqi Kurds, which Israel supports and which the Iraqi Kurds already enjoy: They demanded collective rights for the Arab national minority to secure individual equality,

a veto power on decisions of national import (on “transfer” for example), equality in immigration rights by annulment of the Jewish Law of Return or the legislation of a Law of Return for Arabs, separate representation at international institutions, representing Arabs in the Israeli flag and national anthem, and envisaged the creation of a national network of institutions to develop their national identity as a central strategy in their struggle for collective rights.

The Israeli Jews have to reconsider; so the Iraqi Kurds, whose current leaders have explicitly or implicitly identified with the Israeli propaganda about the Arab majority’s “oppression” of the minority Jews and Kurds in the region, a view that is still promoted by a “selected” article by Ariel Natan Pasko, dated March 17, 2004, which is still posted on the official Web site of Iraq’s Kurdistan Regional Government:

“As the discussion of “democratization” of the Middle East continues, an important point that must be made time and time again, is the importance in building structures that liberate the minorities of the region from oppression ... Contrary to the propaganda that the region is Arab/Muslim, these minorities are remnants of the indigenous peoples, before the great Arab imperialist wars of the 7th century, and “Islamicization process” that followed” and “have all resisted “Arabization” for over 1,000 years,” Pasko wrote, adding: “Only Israel, the Jewish State, has fully liberated itself – in the political sense – from this Arab/Muslim oppression.”

This twisted rewriting of history to serve the purposes of foreign invaders of the Arab land has caused wars and tragedies and still could cause more of the same. Reconsideration by Kurds and Israelis in particular of this tragic path could prove a turning point in the regional history. However, given the status quo, more bloodletting is in the offing before the two peoples come to their senses to make their leaders change course.

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