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Russia renews Kurdish bonds

By M K Bhadrakumar

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An unusual visitor arrived in Moscow last Tuesday - President of the Kurdistan region in northern Iraq Massoud Barzani. The Kurds played it up as Barzani's "first official visit" to Russia. Moscow called it a "working visit" but nonetheless embellished the official trappings - President Vladimir Putin received him at the Kremlin on Wednesday.

The historical poignancy is self-evident. According to folklore, 60 years ago Massoud's father and legendary Kurdish leader, Malla Mustafa Barzani stood outside the Kremlin's Spassky Tower, and knocked on the massive gates crying out, "This is the Kurdish people knocking." He had fled to Russia with thousands of Kurdish fighters following the collapse of the so-called Republic of Mahabad in 1947. Joseph Stalin decided to provide him asylum in Russia, where he lived for 12 years.

The son visited Mustafa's Moscow residence on Tuesday. True, Russia's dealings with the "mountain Kurds" of northern Iraq go back in time and 60 years ago it was already suffused with politics of the most intriguing kind. There, national interests intersected with regional politics, while the geopolitical maneuverings of great powers imparted much drama to the goings-on.

Massoud Barzani's visit signifies that Moscow is playing a high-stakes game. Aside, the great unresolved Kurdish national question, at least half a dozen templates overlap - Iraq and Syria's fragmentation, Turkey's "neo-Ottomanism", Iran's surge as regional power, the "Arab Spring", the United States' waning regional influence and of course post-Soviet Russia's "return" to the Middle East.

Barzani's arrival in Moscow coincides with a defining moment in Iraq's history. Kurdish nationalism is rising to a crescendo, drawing inspiration from the Arab Spring. The regional autonomy of Iraqi Kurdistan, which began in the early 1990s when the US-led "no-fly zone" was imposed on Iraq following the Gulf War, is leading to independence.

Waving the red flag

According to the Kurdistan version, Barzani proposed to discuss "a number of important issues concerning relations between Russia and the Kurdistan region and the political developments in Iraq and the region in general". Barzani's delegation included his son and key security adviser, Masrour Barzani, and top officials in charge of oil and gas, construction and housing.

Given the current state of US-Russia relations, it might be tempting to view Moscow's dealings with Barzani as an "anti-American" impulse. But Moscow and Washington are probably on the same side of history here. Neither wants Iraq's break-up. The recrudescence of the al-Qaeda groups in Iraq worries both.

Again, Iraq's known oil reserves are estimated to be 143.1 billion barrels with at least the same estimated to lie in unexplored regions of the country. Iraq may at some point outstrip Saudi Arabia, which has reserves of 296.5 billion barrels. Suffice to say, Iraq's stability impacts on the world oil market. Also, the tsunami of Shi'ite empowerment draws inspiration from Iraq.

But the Russian and American interests and priorities also diverge. Washington is obsessive about the Iraqi government's proximity with Tehran. Washington nurtured Barzani through the Saddam Hussein era but at the same time, has not reconciled with its current loss of influence in Baghdad, which is critical to its ability to influence a range of regional issues, especially in the Persian Gulf region.

The US ambassador Francis Ricciardone in Ankara recently waved the red flag at Turkey's dalliance with Kurdistan. He said:

Turkey and Iraq have no choice but to pursue strong ties if they want to optimize the use of Iraq's resources and export them via Turkey. If Turkey and Iraq fail to optimize their economic ties, the failure could be worse than that. There could be a more violent conflict in Iraq and [the chances of] disintegration of Iraq could be [strengthened]. And that would not be good for Turkey, the United States, or anybody in the region.

Same side of history

Indeed, if Iraq unravels, the debris is bound to fall far and wide. The US and Russia have a common interest in preventing the country's fragmentation. But in the prevailing power dynamic in the region, Moscow's capacity to do something about it is, arguably, better than Washington's.

Russia has developed warm ties with Prime Minister Nouri al-Maliki's government in Baghdad and hopes to steer through (despite robust US opposition) a US\$4 billion arms deal that the Iraqi leader negotiated during his visit to Moscow in October. Indeed, Lukoil of Russia is doing roaring business with Baghdad, having secured lucrative terms for developing the West Qurna 2 megafield in southern Iraq, where two-thirds of Iraq's known oil reserves lie.

After a meeting with Barzani in Moscow on Tuesday, Russia's energy leviathan Gazprom said, "The parties discussed the prospects for bilateral cooperation deepening in the oil and gas sector. In particular, the meeting addresses potential interaction between Gazprom and Kurdistan's oil and gas companies in geological exploration, development and operation of oil and gas fields."

Barzani was quoted as disclosing while in Moscow on Tuesday, "We are satisfied with Gazprom Neft's work in the [Kurdistan] region. New agreements have been reached with his Russian company in recent days."

However, playing Baghdad against Erbil or vice versa isn't in the Russian interest. Putin telephoned Maliki recently for a second time in the past two months and probably kept the latter informed Moscow's intentions in fostering ties with Barzani. Weaning Barzani away from Turkey's embrace will be one key Russian objective and Maliki would appreciate it.

Both Moscow and Baghdad would view with extreme disquiet Turkey's grandiose visions of offering itself as an "energy hub" connecting the Middle East with Europe, especially the recent reports that Turkey is planning to construct a new gas pipeline from Kurdistan for feeding the proposed Nabucco pipeline supplying gas to western Europe.

However, the bottom line is that Russia would be loathe to see the fragmentation of Iraq, as its implications could be very serious for the security of the Trans-Caucasus. Equally, Russia would restrain Barzani from getting involved with the Turkish shenanigans in Syria. Barzani told the Russian media that he would focus on possible ways to solve the Syrian conflict.

An untenable waltz

What works to Moscow's advantage is the great trust deficit between Barzani and Ankara, which is a legacy of the violent history of the region and cannot easily be wished away. On the contrary, only Turkey can offer a vital lifeline to Kurdistan, which is land-locked and whose economic viability as a separate entity independent of Baghdad's control depends solely on its access to the world energy market.

Besides, there is also a congruence of interests here between Ankara and Barzani. Ankara is in need of the relatively cheap oil supplies from Kurdistan to meet its growing requirements of energy. In 2011 Turkey met 60% of its gas requirements through imports from Iran and around 20% from Russia. In addition, the US Energy Information Administration estimates that Turkey has been importing about half of its crude oil from Iran.

But Turkey's relations with Russia and Iran have become problematic lately following its decision to deploy the US missile defense system. The Turkish strategy has all along been to cultivate Barzani and his family, which has vast business interests especially in exporting oil from Kurdistan, based on the calculus that incrementally Barzani would be work with Ankara on regional security issues.

On the contrary, Barzani's bonhomie with the Turks has never gone down well with the Kurdish "peshmerga". Also, Syrian Kurds resent his interference. The recent illness of Jalal Talabani

(Iraqi president and the leader of the rival People's Union of Kurdistan) has introduced new uncertainties. Tehran and Ankara may end up sponsoring the rival Kurdish groups and there is a strong possibility of intra-Kurdish violence erupting in the period ahead.

Barzani is skating on thin ice and he seems to realize that his Turkish waltz may soon become untenable. He has annoyed Tehran, Baghdad and Damascus. Meanwhile, while in Moscow, Barzani could witness that Russia has moved to the center stage on an intra-Syrian political dialogue. The meeting of the Russia-Arab Forum took place in Moscow on Wednesday.