

Catalonia: Implications for EU policy towards the Kurds.

Current events unfolding in Catalonia have important implications for the political future and the stability of the European Union (EU). It could be argued that similarities between what is happening in Spain's North-East region and in Iraqi Kurdistan are likely to trigger, in one way or another, a hostile foreign policy response from the EU with regard to the independence aspirations of the Kurds in Iraq. Iraq is a key country for the stability and foreign policy interests of the members of the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) and the wider Middle East and North Africa (MENA). Despite a lack of support from the EU towards the Catalan cause nothing stops EU countries, jointly or individually, from supporting independence aspiration outside of Europe.

Unable to dissuade Catalonia's regional authorities from carrying out the independence vote, the Spanish central government resorted to the application of Article 155 that suspended the autonomy of the region by re-establishing direct rule from Madrid. Deposed Catalan President, Carles Puigdemont, argued that the referendum was inevitable following the decision by Spain's Constitutional Court to abolish the 2006 statute, which enhanced the autonomy of Catalonia, and the refusal of current Spanish Prime Minister, Mariano Rajoy, to negotiate an alternative status for Barcelona's region. The conflict between Spain's central government and the Kingdom's economically most important region is a strong cause of instability-generated by economic struggles and the emergence of far right movements across Europe top the main concerns for the European Union. The support that Spain's central government always had from both the EU and the US arguably benefited Rajoy's efforts to contain Catalan-generated instability.

In contrast, Iraq's central government did not enjoy any EU declaration of support in its efforts to contain Kurdish claims and an ambiguous silence has characterised the position of the EU with regard to Baghdad's military that retook control of areas, outside of Iraqi Kurdistan, occupied by Kurdish Peshmerga forces since 2014. Catalonia's independence declaration showed the very little appetite of the EU for supporting independence causes elsewhere in the world. However, most European countries entered into coalition with the Kurds against Daesh and provided a considerable amount of weapons to Kurdish Peshmerga fighters, and an outspoken few members of the EU Parliament have unambiguously supported initiatives for Kurdish independence.

The role of the EU with regard to the independence aspirations of Iraqi Kurdistan is likely to grow more important. An autonomous region aspiring to become an independent state has to be accepted in the international community by other states. The outright refusal of any EU member state, or indeed the US, to endorse the Kurdish quest for independence renders the Kurdish bid to carry-out their statehood project impossible. International backing for such a Kurdish state appeared to have increased due to key Peshmerga and YPG roles in pushing back Daesh in both Iraq and Syria. Nevertheless, to date, no European leader has shown a clear intention to compromise relations with Iraq's central government. Key EU companies have important energy interests in Iraq and are developing closer business connections with Iran as well, especially after the easing of international sanctions. Crucially Tehran is also strongly opposed to Kurdish independence, but so are some of Iran's staunchest antagonists, such as the US and some GCC countries. It would seem that for the EU countries, aligning with the Kurdish cause, does not bring as many dividends as prioritising business with Baghdad and Teheran. However, it is difficult to envision long term regional stability without addressing the grievances of the Kurdish people: Kurdish fighters already resorted to terrorism and guerrilla tactics in the past, when facing existential threats to their statehood dream. Furthermore, the impact of the Kurdish diasporas communities active in Europe is rapidly increasing and the appeal of Kurdish leaders to the democratic values of the EU is ever more attractive for European policymakers.

Both the cases of Catalonia and the one of Iraq's Kurdish autonomous region have deep implications for the examination of the political elements needed in order for secession to be successful. It would be misleading to relate secession only to religious, linguistic and ethnic identities and to the presence of a committed political leadership backed by widespread domestic support. The main rule for successful secessions, ultimately, is that they have more to do with what the powerful want, (Bridget L. Coggins). Today the Catalans have little international support and face heavy opposition, as do Iraq's Kurds, setting both on a collision course with the main regional actors looking for stability in order to recover from a severe economic crisis, in the European case, or from Daesh-provoked chaos, in the MENA region. As such, the Kurds are increasingly likely to seek external support from outside their region to achieve their independence goal. Their struggle carries on.

By Antonino Occhiuto

Date: 28 November 2017