



REVISTA INCLUSIONES

HOMENAJE A MARÍA NOEL MÍGUEZ

Revista de Humanidades y Ciencias Sociales

Volumen 7 . Número Especial

Abril / Junio

2020

ISSN 0719-4706

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**POLITICAL AND ECONOMIC VECTOR OF US AND RUSSIAN POLICIES IN THE MIDDLE EAST
IN THE CONTEXT OF THE KURDISH QUESTION TRANSFORMATION**

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Fecha de Recepción: 11 de enero de 2020 – **Fecha Revisión:** 29 de enero de 2020

Fecha de Aceptación: 23 de febrero de 2020 – **Fecha de Publicación:** 01 de abril de 2020

Abstract

The relevance of the research topic is due to the fact that the Middle East is a region where political, national, geopolitical, and economic interests of the world and regional powers collide. The Russian Federation, regaining its global actor status, is actively and effectively uses political and economic tools in Iraqi Kurdistan, establishing itself in this part of the world. The purpose of the study is to assess the foreign policy of the United States and the Russian Federation as the most important direction in the context of the Kurdish question transformation at the present stage. The objectives of the study are to analyze the policies of world and regional powers in the Middle East through the prism of attitudes toward the Kurdish question, as well as consider the political situation in Iraq in the early 1990s and assess its impact on the Kurdish question. The authors also aim to establish the qualitative role of the US in the region, analyze the specifics of Russia's attitude to military intervention in Iraq in 2003-2005, determine the alignment of forces in Iraq during the referendum on September 25, 2017 in Iraqi Kurdistan, and describe the political and economic situation in Syria at the present stage. The authors use the system, institutional, historical, comparative, and sociological approaches as a methodological basis when studying the formation and development of Russian policy in the Middle East concerning the Kurdish question.

Keywords

Middle East – Iraqi Kurdistan – Iraq – Syria – Kurds

Political and economic vector of US and Russian Policies in the Middle East in the context of the Kurdish question... pág. 418

Para Citar este Artículo:

Grishin, Oleg Evgenievich; Mustafa, dañar Abubakir; Popov, Sergey Ivanovich y Amiantova, Irina Sergeevna. Political and economic vector of US and Russian Policies in the Middle East in the context of the Kurdish question transformation. Revista Inclusiones Vol: 7 num Especial (2020): 417-426.

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Introduction

Currently, the study is very relevant, as it provides an opportunity to objectively analyze the policy of world powers, including Russia, in the Middle East with regard to the Kurdish question while considering the foreign policy activities of regional states in this region. An analysis of the problem stays relevant since the Kurdish question has been recognized by many foreign policy players as purely regional. However, a series of military conflicts initiated in Iraq and Syria have put this issue at the center of global foreign policy.

The Russian Federation, as a great power and as a member of the United Nations Security Council, cannot ignore changes in the settlement of the Kurdish question. The essential demands of the Kurdish people are just and determine their implementation in the medium term. It is impossible to achieve a stable state of affairs in the Middle East without reconsidering approaches to the Kurdish question, even with a positive agreement and arrangements to resolve the Palestinian-Israeli conflict.

The following issues are reflected in research: the political situation in the Middle East¹, Kurdish question transformation², and Russian-Kurdish relations³. Several English-language monographs are devoted to the analysis of the concepts of Kurdish state-building, Kurdish politics in the Middle East, and oil and gas wealth management⁴. Russia's policy in the Middle East is analyzed in the works of a number of researchers⁵. A number of publications are devoted to the specifics of US foreign policy in the Middle East⁶.

¹ J. M. Dorsey *China and the Middle East* (Berlin: Springer International Publishing, 2019). Available at: <https://www.springer.com/us/book/9783319643540>; M. Yeşiltaş y T. Kardaş. *Non-State Armed Actors in the Middle East* (Berlin: Springer International Publishing, 2018); V. Gervais y S. van Genugten, *Stabilising the Contemporary Middle East and North Africa* (Berlin: Springer International Publishing, 2020) y S. Bazoobandi, *The New Regional Order in the Middle East* (Berlin: Springer International Publishing, 2020).

² V. V. Naumkin, "Kurdskaya golovolomka Blizhnego Vostoka (na primere Iraka)", *Mirovaya ekonomika i mezhdunarodnye otnosheniya* Vol: 63 num 6 (2019): 76-87. Available at: <https://doi.org/10.20542/0131-2227-2019-63-5-76-87>

³ O. E. Grishin y D. A. Mustafa, "Rossiya na Blizhnem Vostoke: razvitie politiko-ekonomicheskikh otnoshenii s Irakskim Kurdistanom", *Voprosy politologii* num 1 Vol: 29 (2018): 96-104.

⁴ K. A. Auzer, *Institutional Design and Capacity to Enhance Effective Governance of Oil and Gas Wealth: The Case of Kurdistan Region* (Berlin: Springer International Publishing, 2017); G. Gürbey; S. Hofmann y F. Ibrahim Seyder, *Between State and Non-State* (Berlin: Springer International Publishing, 2017); E. E. Tugdar y A. Serhun, *Comparative Kurdish politics in the Middle East: actors, ideas, and interests* (Berlin: Springer International Publishing, 2017); C. Gunes, *The Kurds in a New Middle East: The Changing Geopolitics of a Regional Conflict* (Berlin: Springer International Publishing, 2019); A. Danilovich, *Iraqi Kurdistan in middle eastern politics* (London: Taylor&Francis, 2018); S. Toperich; T. Ivanovic y N. Zagros. *Iraqi Kurdistan Region: A Path Forward* (London: Eurospan, 2017) y A. Anaid y E. E. Tugdar, *Iraqi Kurdistan's Statehood Aspirations* (Berlin: Springer International Publishing, 2019).

⁵ A. Grigas, *Empire by Other Means: Russia's Strategy for the 21st Century*. YaleGlobal Online. (February 2, 2017). Available at: <https://yaleglobal.yale.edu/content/empire-other-means-russias-strategy-21st-century> y J. Sladden; B. Wasser; B. Connable y S. Grand-Clement, "Russian Strategy in the Middle East. Perspective", *Expert insights on a timely policy issue* (2017): 4-14.

⁶ B. R. Gibson, *Sold Out? US Foreign Policy, Iraq, the Kurds, and the Cold War* (New York: Palgrave MacMillan, 2015) y B. Prifti, *US Foreign Policy in the Middle East* (Berlin: Springer International Publishing, 2017).

Hypothesis. We believe that the Kurdish question, despite all the features of its historical formation and development in modern geopolitical conditions, has a very real opportunity to be resolved. The Kurds of Iraqi Kurdistan are able to form a single state within the borders of the territory close enough to the settlement of the Kurdish ethnic group in Iraq at the present time.

Materials and methods

The research methodology was based on the system, structural-functional, and historical approaches to the study of the problem, as well as the use of factual data. The source base consisted of scientific works by experts in the Middle East, Russian foreign policy, Kurdish studies, legal acts, information materials of Russian and foreign media, documents of a political and strategic nature, reflecting the political aspects of the development of world powers in the Middle East from 2015 to 2019. The sources were selected based on the relevance, validity, and quality criteria of the examination. The analysis was carried out in line with the study of modern interpretations of the main issues of political science, in the form of real research activities, including the method of overt observation. System critical analysis, synthesis, and elements of scenario and forecast methods were applied.

Results

At the beginning of the 21st century, the Middle East is undergoing serious political, economic, and geopolitical transformations associated with the crisis of statehood in some countries, sharpening of hostility at the regional level, and growing interference of external forces. S.A. Bagdasarov argues that "too many contradictions have accumulated between different peoples and religious groups that have long divided the Middle East – this explosive region. It, a cradle of three world religions, is again ready to determine the agenda for the entire planet for many years"⁷. V.V. Naumkin notes that "one of the indisputable features of the dynamically changing situation in the Middle East today is the rapid growth of the national consciousness of the Kurds and the strengthening of their role in the economic and political life of the states where they traditionally live"⁸. President of Russia V.V. Putin said, "By the way, we historically had good relations with the Kurdish people. We have many Kurds living in Russia"⁹. Manifestations of general and multi-level instability included the unresolved Kurdish problem¹⁰.

The geopolitical interests of world powers (the US, Russia, China) in the Middle East currently being considered in the context of attempts to change their foreign policy and economic positions not only in the region but throughout the world and to regulate the position of the Kurds in the region. This requires more intensive Russian-American-

⁷ S. A. Bagdasarov, *Blizhnii Vostok. Vechnyi konflikt* (Moscow: Eksmo, 2016).

⁸ V. V. Naumkin, "Kurdskaia golovolomka Blizhnego Vostoka (na primere Iraka)", *Mirovaya ekonomika i mezhdunarodnye otnosheniya* Vol: 63 num 6 (2019): 76-87. Available at: <https://doi.org/10.20542/0131-2227-2019-63-5-76-87>

⁹ Vladimir Putin held a meeting of the Council on Interethnic Relations in Nalchik (November 29, 2019). Available at: http://kremlin.ru/events/president/news/62160?fbclid=IwAR2oMIWpXJx8FAZqx1KDzHqwoZUVa7rgB5M47G11kaMbBP_5-40sh5-9Zdk

¹⁰ V. G. Baranovskii y V. V. Naumkin, "Blizhnii Vostok v menyayushchemsya global'nom kontekste: klyuchevye trendy stoletnego razvitiya", *Mezhdunarodnaya ekonomika i mezhdunarodnye otnosheniya* Vol: 62 num 3 (2018): 5-19.

Kurdish interaction. The fight against terrorism and participation in the global energy sector is a key area of possible cooperation between the parties in the global energy market, which poses a threat to the security and geoeconomics of Russia, as well as the US and the EU. Economic development and infrastructure rehabilitation in Iraqi Kurdistan have progressed at an accelerating pace over the past decade. We believe that Russia is ready to expand cooperation with Iraqi Kurdistan. This is evidenced by the visit of Minister of Foreign Affairs of the Russian Federation S.V. Lavrov to Erbil in October 2019.

Oil became part of Turkey's foreign policy decisions in the context of energy security and other strategic issues when the Soviet Union collapsed and new states emerged in the Eurasian region. As a result, a political proposal was put forward to include the Caspian Pipeline in the framework of Turkey's foreign policy and energy security. The energy security policy of world powers will have significant consequences if it is fully implemented in reality; it may change the geopolitical position of regional powers such as Turkey. Its status as a significant transit country may give it more power in the international arena and it may also mean that the country is more interested in geopolitical, regional changes, such as a future independent Kurdistan. Therefore, Turkey believes that it needs to play a role in ensuring future oil supplies to the EU and the international market. For example, the Blue Stream gas pipeline that runs from Russia to Turkey has identified potential political opportunities, including as a factor of geopolitical blackmail, while Turkey has focused on two main security policy instruments that are central to any state: political and economic benefits¹¹.

The wars in Afghanistan and Iraq have strategically "tied the hands" of the US, probably for many years, minimizing the American foreign policy potential. There is reason to believe that the final impact of these wars will still affect the role and position of the US in the world, but there is no doubt that American policy has led to an unprecedented drop in the prestige of the American superpower and has strained relations with its traditional allies. The competition with China and Russia provoked an unprecedented increase in anti-American sentiment in the world and ultimately led to the loss of what J. Nye¹² describes as "soft power". It is the ability to influence the behavior of others to accomplish the outcomes one wants. Thus, the consequences of the war in Iraq and Afghanistan can be fatal for the US position in the world, while it must be borne in mind that one of the most important reasons for the invasion of March 20, 2003, was the desire to strengthen this position.

Thus, S. Hussein remained in power after the 1991 Gulf War with a sense of complete impunity, as evidenced by the brutal suppression of Shiite and Kurdish uprisings. It is very likely that these uprisings broke out because the US encouraged them (President George W. Bush urged Iraqis to "take matters into their own hands" and remove S. Hussein publicly) and indirectly gave hope for potential armed intervention to support Shiites and Kurds.

Russia's cooperation with the Kurds of Iraq and Syria in the fight against ISIS has been widely publicized in the Western media. At the time, the Soviet Union played a vital role in preserving Kurdish culture. In pursuit of mass literacy, Kurds and Yazidi studied their language using three alphabets – first Armenian, then Latin, and finally Cyrillic. For

¹¹ The Blue Stream. Gazprom. Available at: <https://www.gazprom.ru/projects/blue-stream/>

¹² J. Nye, *Soft Power: The Means to Success in World Politics* (New York: Public Affairs Group, 2004): 208.

example, Armenia has become a major center of Kurdish publications, including the RIA Taza (New Way) newspaper and several children's books. The first Kurdish novel written by Soviet Yazid E. Shamilov was published in Yerevan in 1935. Broadcasting in the Kurdish language on Yerevan radio began in 1955 and had a great influence on Kurds outside the USSR. Kurds in neighboring countries, especially in Turkey, listened to Soviet broadcasts and were happy to hear their native language, which was heavily suppressed in other countries. Broadcasts were crucial to the development of the Kurdish ethnic identity and the Soviet Union's socialist message resonated strongly among many Kurds¹³.

The Kurds of Iraq held a referendum on political independence from Baghdad on September 25, 2017, which was supported by 92.3% of the population. The result provoked an angry response from the Central government of Iraq, supported by Turkey and Iran. The culmination of tension was the seizure of the oil-rich city of Kirkuk by Baghdad. Russia reacted to the referendum with restraint. The Russian party noted respect for the national aspirations of the Kurds and, at the same time, encouraged dialogue between Erbil and Baghdad. It is noteworthy that Russia was the only major power that did not call on the Iraqi Kurds to cancel the referendum. It is the main sponsor of Iraqi Kurdish gas and oil deals. Russia stressed that cooperation in the energy sector remains unaffected by the referendum. Russian energy giant Rosneft signed an energy agreement with Iraqi Kurdistan on October 18, confirming its commitment to the region¹⁴. E. Arzhantsev, the deputy consul-general of the Russian Federation in the Kurdistan Region said Russia would respect the decision of the people of Kurdistan on independence. Arzhantsev noted that Russia has good relations with the Kurdistan Region, wants to have "good and permanent political relationship with the leadership of Kurdistan," and "is working to improve its military relations with the Kurdistan Region"¹⁵.

Discussion

The countries of the Middle East are strategically important in terms of oil and natural gas supplies, especially from the Persian Gulf countries via the Mediterranean Sea and Turkey to Europe. Moreover, the importance of some countries with access to the Mediterranean Sea (Israel, Palestine, Cyprus, Turkey, Egypt, Syria, Lebanon) has recently increased. In this context, the importance of Iraq and Iraqi Kurdistan, which have access to the Mediterranean Sea through Turkey and Syria, has also increased. Today, oil reserves in the Mediterranean Sea are estimated at 1.7 billion barrels and natural gas reserves are estimated at 122 trillion m³. If the share of Syria ranges from 123 to 567 billion dollars, according to a 2012 estimate, then the Iraqi Kurdistan region has huge oil reserves (45 billion barrels of oil and about 6 trillion m³ of natural gas)¹⁶, which is about 1/3 of Iraq's reserves. In fact, the above-mentioned factors can have a serious impact on the existing world order. According to most experts, whoever controls Syria and has influence over Iraqi Kurdistan controls the Middle East and most of Asia and Great Silk Way. It is important that control over Syria, especially the Kurdish part (Rojava), makes it possible to exercise control over almost the entire world, which, as we know, depends on the supply

¹³ ORIGINS: Current Events in Historical Perspective. Available at: <http://origins.osu.edu/>

¹⁴ A. Filipenok, Rosneft reported on the situation with the debts of Venezuela and Iraqi Kurdistan. Available at: <https://www.rbc.ru/business/06/11/2019/5dc2c69a9a79474e0c1b9f09>

¹⁵ Russia respects the decision of the people of Kurdistan to become independent. Available at: <https://riataza.com/2016/08/25/rossiya-uvazhaet-reshenie-naroda-kurdistana-stat-nezavisimyim/>

¹⁶ G. Hazan, Ocean stocks pending. Available at: https://kurdistan.ru/2012/12/11/articles-17716_Okean_zapasov_v_ozhidanii.html

of natural gas supplied through Syrian territory. According to the former US Secretary of State H. Kissinger, Syria is a very important strategic component for world domination¹⁷. According to the Nabucco project developed by the Americans, it was supposed to deliver gas from the Middle East and the Caspian Sea through Turkey to Europe. European gas consumers were very interested in the project. It was assumed that Nabucco would become an alternative to Russian gas. At the same time, the Russian project "Turkish stream" was launched in southern and southeastern Europe. An agreement was signed in Ankara between the EU and the Republic of Turkey on July 13, 2009, with the participation of the US. However, the problem is that no specific decision has yet been made on the Nabucco gas pipeline issue. Azerbaijan, Turkmenistan, Iraq, the Kurdistan region, Syria, Egypt, and Qatar were considered likely gas suppliers for the Nabucco project. The US opposed Iran's participation in the project because of the contradictions that existed at that time on the Iranian nuclear program between the Iranian leadership and the international community. It was announced more than a month after the signing of the agreement in Ankara in September 2009 that Turkey and Qatar had agreed to build a \$ 10 billion gas pipeline that would pass through the territories of such countries as Qatar, Saudi Arabia, Jordan, Syria, and Turkey. In contrast to the Turkish-Qatari gas pipeline project, Syria gave its preference to the "Islamic gas pipeline" project (Iran-Iraq-Syria) in 2010, which was estimated at \$ 10 billion. Despite the fact that Syria had already been plunged into civil war, in July 2011, it was officially announced that agreements had been reached on the "Islamic gas pipeline". A memorandum was signed between Iran and Syria in 2012.

Syria plays a strategic role in the entire world in terms of the fight for natural gas¹⁸. On the other hand, the activation of Russia in the Mediterranean, which has been absent for a long time, has become a real shock for the regional and international community. The relevant agreements were signed between the Syrian leadership and Soyuzneftegaz in order to explore oil fields on the Syrian coast. It is important to note that according to the "Islamic gas pipeline" project, Iranian gas was supposed to pass through the territory of Iraq, be stored on the territory of Syria, and then distributed to other countries. All this was very disturbing, first of all, for the Turkish leadership and, in fact, called into question the implementation of the Nabucco project, which the US, EU, and Turkey sought. This shows that Turkey had every reason to enlist the support of Western countries and the Gulf monarchies to exert pressure on Syria. The process of overthrowing the ally of Russia, Iran, and China, Bashar al-Assad, was launched according to the Libyan scenario within the framework of the so-called developing "Arab spring", which also reached Syria. At the same time, it should be emphasized that the US, after curtailing its counter-terrorism operation against ISIS, remained near Syrian oil production sites.

Russia's policy in the Middle East requires systematic political analysis. This is determined by significant changes in the quality of international relations at the beginning of the third millennium. The processes of dismantling the previously existing system of world order, its transition to multipolar principles of existence, global expansion, increasing the number of regional conflicts, and speeding up the functioning of interrelated elements of supranational interactions are obvious.

¹⁷ A. Nesmiyan, Syria goes according to Kissinger's plan. Available at: <https://www.fontanka.ru/2016/03/04/111/>

¹⁸ The State Department talked about oil production in US-controlled areas of Syria. Rossiiskaya gazeta (November 7, 2019). Available at: <https://rg.ru/2019/11/07/v-gosdepe-rasskazali-o-dobyche-nefti-v-podkontrolnyh-ssha-rajonah-sirii.html>

Conclusions

Numerous conflicts in the Middle East between individual states or, increasingly, within states have a serious negative impact on the parties involved. The weakening of state control, the destruction of modern institutions during the civil wars, the conflicting interests of the internal and external players have resulted in processes of de-sovereignization and the weakening of the state. The Kurdish people have struggled for independence for decades, but the result has usually been tragic, especially in Iraq and Turkey between the end of World War I and till present. In our view, the US is not interested in resolving the Kurdish issue in Turkey. The current US policy on the Kurdish question is to permanently postpone Erbil's demands for independence and statehood for an indefinite period. Kurdistan, trying to conduct an independent foreign policy, may revise some of its agreements with the US and may find other foreign policy partners and expand its vision of strategic cooperation. New political alliances in the global political system are already being formed. They, in turn, should bring a significant element of stabilization to the Middle East, removing radical and extremist forces, while the rivalry between the US and Russia will not stop and will continue with a wave-like behavior. Russia's policy in the Middle East is currently taking on a logical and pragmatic character. The Russian Federation has been making not insignificant efforts for a considerable number of years to strengthen its reputation and political and economic ties in the context of global and regional rivalry with other international actors. Currently, Iraqi Kurdistan plays an important role in the competition in the global energy market. The positions of the Kurdish elites in Iraqi Kurdistan and Russia are the closest in the fight against ISIS, as well as in the production and development of oil and gas. The Kurdistan region in Iraq is the most stable territory in this country. The situation may worsen in the absence of international support. Measures must be taken to improve the economic security and development of the region. Kurdistan is trying to strengthen ties with the world market and the economies of other countries. Thus, we came to the conclusion, partially confirming the hypothesis that the Kurdish question in the changing international political system is modified and adapted to changes in the political environment, acquiring unique and original forms of self-preservation and remaining one of the main factors of stability in the Middle East. Moreover, assuming that the international political actors in the Middle East regarding Kurdish question in terms of the multipolarity of the modern world is very popular, particularly for identifying characteristics of the foreign policy of Russia in the region under investigation within the framework of the further development of Iraqi Kurdistan. A constructive solution to the Kurdish question becomes one of the conditions for the formation of a new political system in the Middle East, which has a significant impact on global political processes and affects the relationships of leading foreign policy actors, which once again emphasizes the practical significance of this study.

Acknowledgments

The authors express their gratitude to the Foundation for the Support and Development of Russian-Kurdish Cultural and Public Relations for ideological assistance in the process of writing the article.

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