

TOWARDS KURDISTAN: SOME POINTERS ON THE ROAD

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Unpublished Appendix to Johan Galtung and Carl G. Jacobsen, 2000
Searching for Peace: the Road to TRANSCEND. London: Pluto Press

Stockholm 15 March 1991; Bonn 27 September 1991

Permit me to greet my Kurdish friends with the only word I know in Kurdish: *sarbasti*, freedom. You are among the nations worst treated by history, perhaps particularly since the Persian and the Ottoman empires in their arrogance simply drew a line across your ancient territory, your mountains and your fields, in 1639, calling it a "border". And I greet the organizations that are hosts to your conferences, be that LO-skolan, the trade union school in Sweden, or the Government of Land Niedersachsen in Germany, with *Weitblick*, showing the human decency, compassion and solidarity their countries should have displayed but do not lest they should step on sensitivities of fellow governments. "The Kurds have no friends", they say. Permit me emphatically to deny this; moreover, the circle is widening, far beyond the cheap friendship of having a common enemy in Saddam Hussein.

As a peace researcher let me make ten points about peaceful approaches to peace in the wilderness of direct and structural violence under which the Kurds have been laboring for so long.

[1] I think the basic Kurdish three-step strategy is sound: first, basic human rights inside the five countries where 20-25 million Kurds are living; second, regional autonomy (possibly within federal constitutions), and third, once in the future, a united Kurdistan, one independent state among others. The goals are reasonable: why should the Kurds be denied what others enjoy? No borders have to be redrawn. But strategies must be spelt out.

[2] To do so, let us keep in mind whom the Kurds are up against. First, not less than four of the five big powers in the Islamic world: Damascus of Omayyad fame, Baghdad of Abbasid fame, and as mentioned above the Persian and Ottoman empires. Second, the two major Christian colonial powers, England and France of Sykes-Picot and Balfour fame. And finally the two superpowers of Cold War fame, the Soviet Union and the United States. True, the Kurds have never been colonized by the United States; only by the other seven. But the United States have betrayed the Kurds twice, in 1975 and now very recently, in 1991. Both times the Kurds were encouraged to struggle against Baghdad, to please Iran, or to destabilize Iraq. Both times they were let down.

I think we have to be somewhat empirical in these matters: no third experiment or third proof of the perfidy of the United States in these matters is needed. The Kurds are used to balance the accounts in the deadly games among the eight countries, or nine when we include Israel. But we also have to understand some reasons why the Kurds are let down by the U.S. Here are five:

Allies that are states count more than those that are not; today's game favors Turkey and Syria and disfavors Iraq and Iran,

tomorrow the constellation may be something else but not in favor of the Kurds. The Kurds are distrusted because they are seen as non-democratic. They are seen as violent. Their oil and water politics is not clear. And above all, they are a stateless nation like Palestinians and native Americans. Kurdish statehood looks threatening to both sides of the powerful U.S.-Israel alliance. Palestinians and native Americans may feel encouraged; there might be a precedent used in UN bodies; even export of statehood.

[3] I think these explicit or implicit U.S. arguments will have to be addressed since they are probably shared by many in the powerful Western world. Of course it is tempting to join the power game of shifting alliances. But this is also where the Kurds have made major political mistakes in the past, following the old "the enemy of my enemy is my friend" principle, finding themselves cooperating with the Ottomans and the U.S., with both Mossad and Savak. The Kurds should cooperate with themselves and with their true and numerous friends in their efforts to gain statehood, and refuse to be pawns in games of shifting alliances.

[4] Then, let us turn to the point about democracy. A small town was liberated from Baghdad last spring; a communist flag came up, and so did a shock wave throughout the U.S. for well known reasons. The Americans have something of an obsession about communism. But that flag does not stand for democracy. Nor do the weak points made by the left wing critics of the Kurds, pointing to the *agha* system, and to male dominance. I am not in a position to judge the validity of these and similar points but will suggest something positive Kurds might do and could do now: **establish a democratically elected Kurdish parliament in exile**, for instance with two representatives for each 100.000 Kurds. Of course the elections have to be made secretly, in some of the five regions more so than in others. But it is not impossible. Occupied nations during the Second world war developed numerous strategies for effective communication under repression. Nothing communicates a democratic sentiment better than democracy itself, a point Palestinians might also benefit from, as could native Americans. The argument should be met with facts, not with words.

[5] And the same applies to the argument about violence: **rejection of violence is best communicated through nonviolence.** Far from being an idealistic, even pious dream this is a major force of the twentieth century. Gandhi's nonviolence was necessary for the fall of the British *raj* in India which led to the general collapse of British colonialism, in turn leading to the collapse of Western colonialism since Britain, seen as the most civilized among countries, had been the great legitimizing power. Martin Luther King's nonviolence led to the downfall of the fascist racism of the U.S. South. The nonviolence of the Buddhists in Vietnam and of the anti-Vietnam war movement in the U.S. and elsewhere contributed to the end of the Vietnam war. And without the nonviolence of the peace and the dissident movements the Cold War might still not have come to an end: one single bomb under a police car would have given the Stasis in East Germany the pretext they wanted. Today we know from the Stasi protocols that in their view the major challenge to the system were some

priests and greens and conscientious objectors, and the Women for Peace. A nonviolent march of hundreds of thousands, even millions of Kurds on the capitals of the oppressors is not unproblematic. But it might bring more *sarbasti* than violence or flight, among other reasons because of the tremendous world-wide support it would engender, "stirring sluggish consciences" as Gandhi said. There is also much in the Islamic tradition to support this form of action. That the British used gas in their brutal killing of 9.000 Kurds and Iraqis summer 1920, and the Iraqis killed 5.000 Kurds in Halabja 1988 does not mean that the Kurds should do the same. Also, remember: the others killed. But they did not win.

[6] Very important in this connection, but also very difficult, is to abstain from revenge. It is worth remembering that after a brutal act of oppression two parties, not only one is traumatized: both the victims and the violent oppressor. The victim side is obvious. But the oppressor also emerges from the act of murder with one basic fear: one day they may come back and treat us the same way as we treated them. The fear of the night of the long knives is not unfounded, as history informs us. I can take my own country, Norway, as an example. The Vikings behaved atrociously in Russia in the tenth century, and, partly as a result, we seem to be very afraid of them. I know no other case where such a small country bordering on such a big one has remained untouched for thousand years. But conventional wisdom in Norway tends to see this as a Russian ploy to lull us into a false sense of security. And then they will strike. Paranoid.

A declaration of non-retaliation may be helpful. The oppressors of the Kurds have god reasons to fear the Kurds; that fear may in itself block for a peaceful solution along the three-step road. That obstacle can and should be removed.

[7] The Arab world depends on water, and the Western world on oil; the Kurds sit on top of both and in large quantities. In fact, near 200 million Arabs depend on water from three river systems, one controlled by Ethiopia and Southern Sudan, one by the Jews, and one by the Kurds. Any use of this as a lever to force autonomy will trigger off heavy violence beating the Kurds. Develop a positive water policy promising to share the basic source of life with your fellow Muslims/human beings and you will get very far, if not immediately, at least in the longer run.

And the same applies to oil. Show your willingness to share, under reasonable conditions, and those now controlling the Mosul *vilayat*, and I am not only thinking of Baghdad, will have no uncertainty and anxiety that might lead them into very violent reactions. There is much beauty to old Bedouin norms of sharing the oasis, and the water; and this can be generalized to the source, and the oil. The Kurds should not do what the British did, erecting fences around an oil oasis called Kuwait, unwilling to share the riches that would derive from it except on their own very special terms. Much dialogue is needed, in and outside OPEC.

[8] Most important is the last point on the list of anti-Kurdish arguments: the similarity with other stateless nations.

The argument must be rejected; self-determination is indivisible. Far from being a liability this is a major strength. There may be as many as 1300 stateless nations in the world, many of them inside the classical superpowers. The Kurdish nation may well be the largest of the stateless, not merely a repressed nation. This is where you belong, in solidarity with the others, not necessarily arguing statehood for all, but freedom for all, whatever that might mean in the complexity of the concrete case.

In solidarity with Palestinians, Tibetans, Eritreans, Kashmiris, Tamils, East Timoreans, Sami/Inuits, Amerindians, Basques and Catalans and the countless "minorities" in Eastern Europe and the Soviet Union to mention a few. Like the Kurds they are facing **the second generation of decolonization**. The first generation we know: decolonization from the classical Western colonial powers, eight of the members of the European Community: England and France, Belgium and the Netherlands, Germany and Italy, Spain and Portugal. Their colonialism was certainly in contradiction with the democratic and human rights values these countries espouse, so often and so loudly. But the decolonization from these powers, dismantling their empires, was by and large successful. However, psycho-politically this had the strange effect of blinding people to other colonialisms; that entire discourse was hitched onto the West, making others look better. In fact, had the Kurds been colonialized after the fall of the Ottoman empire by England-France in any combination the Kurds would probably have a Kurdistan today. But they are not, and the idea that countries that had suffered Western colonialism could do exactly the same to people within their borders did not easily get rooted. A good example was and is the Soviet Union, obviously an empire but contiguous, not looking like the Western colonial "overseas" construction. And the same applies to the former colonies: there is a long step from the self-righteousness of a victim to seeing oneself as the problem (watch out, Kurdish friends!) As two Australian peace researchers, Herb Feith and Alan Smith have suggested: a new UN machinery is needed. One problem is that the Third World majority may exercise a veto. Thus, Bangladesh had to be created out of East Pakistan through a war; the decolonization machinery being largely irrelevant.

Of course there are also possibilities within the old machinery, such as the Human Rights Commission with subgroups and the Working Group on Indigenous Populations. And then there is the new (1991) Unrepresented Nations and Peoples Organization (UNPO) with secretariats in The Hague and Geneva training members in international law, negotiation and diplomacy in general.

[9] **There are many roads to Kurdistan, and there are many steps on the roads.** It is important to spell out a number of possibilities, or "plausibilities", short of a state for all Kurds. Moreover, in a modern world of increasing interdependence it is not obvious that the classical unitary state is always the best solution, especially when judged on its bad track record of belligerence. Consider these possibilities:

- internal autonomy in the five countries, possibly within the

framework of federal constitutions for these countries giving the Kurds in all five veto in internal affairs, including over the use of their own resources;

- Kurdish as administrative language in all five "autonomies",
- the four freedoms of the European Common Market among the five, with improved means of transportation/communication in difficult terrain, facilitating peaceful intra-Kurdish activities;
- the democratically elected all-Kurdish parliament referred to under [4] above as an umbrella for articulation of common concerns, possibly to be recognized in some way by important international organizations.

The sum total of all of this is **Kurdistan as a confederation or association of regions within federations**. This may also be advantageous to the non-Kurds in all five countries. Moreover, all these are steps on the way and can be realized independently of each other, taking some of the threatening absolutism out of the struggle. At the same time each step is compatible with the first two goals of the Kurdish movement, human rights and autonomy. On the other hand, work on items such as those mentioned can go ahead without waiting for their implementation.

And to go ahead is urgent. Most people would agree today that there can be no peace in the world without peace in the Middle East, densely coupled as the Middle East situation is to the rest of the world, and not only through oil economics but to the complex entanglements of peoples seeing themselves as anointed by the Almighty for key regional and even global roles and of suppressed nations, the Palestinians the Kurds being the most important. So, there can be no peace in the Middle East without a reasonable settlement of the Kurdish issue.

There can be no doubt that the Kurds will prevail. Experience shows that four conditions are important for a political movement to succeed:

- the movement has to be against an undisputed ill, such as denial of self-determination and other human rights;
- the movement has to be in favor an undisputed good, and the effort above is designed to show that the five countries where Kurds live today have nothing to fear and much to gain from a dynamic settlement;
- the movement has to be broadly based, not only among Kurds but also among others and the sympathy for the Kurdish cause, as opposed to the anti-Saddam Hussein cause is increasing rapidly as seen by the may committees and journals and meetings and by the amount of knowledge found in the population at large; and
- the movement has to endure, over a long time. This condition has certainly been fulfilled, even over-fulfilled to the point that the issue often has been seen as unsolvable and people get

tired. When that has been the case I suggest it is because the other conditions have not been adequately met.

We are talking about one of the oldest cultures in the world, from the early Mesopotamia records onwards. There was a glimpse of hope in the Treaty of Sevres in 1920, to be crushed in the Treaty of Lausanne 1923, probably because the unity of Turkey was seen as essential by the Western powers to contain the threat of bolshevism. Not strange that the Kurds got not only impatient but desperate, sometimes engaging in a violence bordering on the suicidal and in a politics pitting them against such natural allies, other stateless nations, as the Armenians.

But throughout all of this Kurdish culture has survived. This is why it is so important not to organize any political conference without the cultural element. People in the world have to learn to see the Kurds as carriers of a rich culture in the Family of Man independent of whether they enjoy political unity or not. There has been much too much identification of culture with political statehood, because of the ideology of the nation-state. And the implication, in the mind of many, has been that a people without a state cannot be a real nation, meaning carrier of a culture; and consequently inferior.

This is a vicious circle from which the Kurds have to be liberated. Let one thousand conferences such as these grow and blossom, giving testimony to the urgent and just demands of the Kurdish people. But in so doing never forget that there is always the other side; and particularly the five countries. The Kurds are in the middle, demanding recognition. Maybe the Kurds should also see themselves as a unifying element, as a bridge between countries and cultures, as a cement of the Middle East.

And in so doing be a factor of peace, not only a beneficiary.