

**THE TRANSCRIBED SPEECH OF VALI KOUZEGAR KALEJI
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I would like to thank all my colleagues and friends in Eurasia Partnership Foundation (EPF) for organizing this interesting meeting dedicated to security dynamics in the region. I hope that our conversations can led to better understanding from our mutual relations and current complicated situation in the region. As you know very well, we are now in a crucial, sensitive and historical situation and the Middle East current situation is comparable with European countries after First World War that political and geographical borders changed. The Middle Eastern regional system is in a permanent state of flux. As a region given to domestic unrest, intra- regional conflict, and superpower competition, it has never been marked by stability, peace and security. In recent years, we had seen security interactions between the Middle East and Caucasus in context of Iraq and Syria crisis.

Both regions can define as “Security Complex” using Barry Buzan's conceptualization. In this conceptual framework, the Middle East and Caucasus involve a set of units whose major processes of securitization, de-securitization, or both so interlinked that their security problems cannot reasonably be analyzed or resolved apart from one another. Iran is one of important members of these aforementioned security complexes. Iran has a special and different role and place in the South Caucasus and among the three neighbors of South Caucasus, including Russia, Turkey and Iran; the latter (Iran) only has relations with all the Caucasian states. Turkish-Armenian and Russian-Georgian relations suspended in 1992 and 2008 respectively. With many ups and downs, Iran has maintained its relations with Armenia, Georgia, and Azerbaijan. Therefore, it is considered as one of valuable and worthy capacity of Iran's foreign policy in the South Caucasus that regional and the international players including EU and

United States should pay attention to this unique role and place. According to aforementioned points, in my presentation, I would like to three important issues: first, Fundamentalism and Terrorism, second, Separatism and Ethnic Conflicts, and third, Multilateral Mechanisms in Regional Cooperation.

1. Fundamentalism and Terrorism

As a matter of fact, Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant – Caucasus Province (Wilayah al-Qawqaz) is a serious threat for peace and stability of the region. Experts believe that some 8,000 men are from the Russian Caucasus (North Caucasus) in Iraq and Syria. Some 2,000 men are from Azerbaijan and Georgia. So, we have a total of 10,000 Caucasians fighting in the Middle East. Recently, ISIL has suffered serious defeats of late and they have lost Mosul and Aleppo in Iraq and Syria. It looks like the end of the “Caliphate” is near. So, the question is what the thousands of ISIL fighters from Russia, Azerbaijan, and Georgia will do once that end comes?

It seems that most of those who have fled Syria and Iraq may go to Russia, Central Asia, and the South Caucasus. It is not a big wave but this is a matter of time. Therefore, return of ISIL Caucasian members to the region is a potential threat for Armenia, Azerbaijan, Georgia as well as Iran, Turkey and Russia as neighbors of the South Caucasus. Terrorist and fundamentalist groups would be a serious threat for economic infrastructures especially transit networks and energy pipelines and facilities. Indeed, they can transform current "ethnic- territorial conflicts" in the region such as Abkhazia, South Ossetia and Karabakh to "Religious Conflicts" (Islam and Christian) that can led to more complexity of frozen conflict in the South Caucasus. Therefore, Iran, Turkey and Russia in collaboration with Caucasian countries can define a common framework against threat of terrorism and fundamentalism in the South Caucasus and enhance their security and intelligence cooperation in this field.

2. Separatism and Ethnic Conflicts

The overall tenets of Iran's foreign policy towards the Caucasian states are to respect their independence and sovereignty, maintain their

territorial integrity, peace, stability and security, preserve the current territorial borders without their consents, expand regional cooperation and oppose negative intervention of foreign Powers, to the detriment of regional order, stability and security. With respect to these principles, in the past two and half decades, Iran attempted to adopt a balanced approach to the South Caucasian states. In that regard, since early 1990s, Iran has actively mediated in Nagorno-Karabakh conflict and never recognized the independence of Abkhazia and South Ossetia.

You can see this position friendly about Iraqi Kurdistan referendum recently. Iran's position about separatism and conflicts is very clear. About Iraqi Kurdistan referendum, in my view, we consider some points and considerations. First, from historical background of bad behavior of the Iraqi government especially during Saddam Hussein has effected on mentality of Kurdish people in Iraqi Kurdistan. Second issue is personal motivations and goals of Masoud Barzani. You know that Barzani and Talabani are two Kurdish famous families that have struggled for Iraqi Kurdistan independence in recent century. Therefore, in current situation of the region and Iraq, Masoud Barzani thinks that this is the best time and opportunity for independence of Kurdistan. Although Kurdistan independence is not really operational at this time and I believe that Masoud Barzani knows this point very well, but he tries to record independence of Kurdistan in the history by the name of Barzani family. Third issue is provoke of external players especially Israel in the dynamic of separatism in Iraqi Kurdistan that rebuilt the vacuum of geopolitics in the region. Generally, according to current complicated crises in the region and opposite position of Iran, Iraq, Russia, United States, Union European and other countries, I hope personally that these crises can solve peacefully and our region will not witness a new war.

3. Multilateral Mechanisms in Regional Cooperation

For enhancing regional cooperation, we need a comprehensive and realistic strategy. There are several regional organizations such as Collective Security Treaty Organization (CSTO), Shanghai Cooperation

Organization (SCO), Eurasian Economic Union (EEU), Economic Cooperation Organization (ECO) and so on. But unfortunately Iran, Georgia, Russia and Armenia are not member of these regional organizations at the same time. For example, Iran and Armenia have close relations but we are not in any regional organization.

Therefore, I think that establishment of three- or four-lateral mechanisms with definite agendas, can remove a great share of the efficiencies within the regional organizations and overcome the limitations of two-lateral diplomacy. At present, a number of multilateral mechanisms have been established between Iran and its surrounding countries including Iran, Turkmenistan and Kazakhstan, Iran-Afghanistan-India, Azerbaijan and Iran, Azerbaijan and Iran-Russia-Azerbaijan. For complement of this process and creating of balance of power in the region, we need to other trilateral mechanisms between Iran-Armenia-Russia as well as Iran-Armenia-Georgia in the South Caucasus. As you know, Armenia is the only Caucasian country which is member of Eurasian Economic Union and can play a significant role in connection of Iran and the Union in framework of multilateral mechanisms.

Generally, it is crucial to discuss these subjects and their instances at expert level within the framework of a Joint Working Group by academicians and scholars of research and study centers (think tanks) in member states in order to reach a comprehensive approaches and then, proposals offered by foreign ministries and economic, judicial, security and defense representatives are put together to reach a final conclusion and after adoption by the officials.

At the end, I thank you Ladies and Gentlemen for your patience and I hope we all could witness more tranquility, peace, security, and stability throughout the region.