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Is Iraqi Kurdistan a Good Ally?

By Michael Rubin

On a strictly emotional level, U.S. support for Iraqi Kurdistan makes sense.[1] In the wake of World War I, the Kurds missed their opportunity for statehood when other peoples gained their independence. Today, they remain the largest ethnic group without a country. They have suffered greatly at the hands of others. But while Iraqi Kurdistan has come far, the unreliability of its leadership makes any long-term U.S.-Kurdish alliance unwise. Rather than become a beacon for democracy, the current Iraqi Kurdish leadership appears intent on replicating more autocratic models. Rather than become a regional Nelson Mandela, Iraqi Kurdish president Masud Barzani now charts a course to become a new Yasser Arafat. Despite lofty rhetoric about its suitability as an ally, Iraqi Kurdistan's actions suggest that it is far from trustworthy.

Iraqi Kurdistan has been, perhaps, the greatest beneficiary of Iraq's liberation. Today, Iraqi Kurds enjoy the country's highest living standard, level of foreign investment, and security. International isolation has ended. European air carriers bring travelers and even tourists from Munich and Vienna directly to Sulaymaniyah and Erbil. Multinational troops enjoy rest and relaxation in Duhok hotels and Dokan resorts. Oil executives from the United States and Europe jostle for Kurdish attention. Peter Galbraith, a Clinton-era ambassador retained by the Kurdistan Democratic Party (KDP) and the Patriotic Union of Kurdistan (PUK) to lobby on their behalf, even suggests constructing a U.S. military base in the region.[2]

Just five years ago, the situation was far different. While Iraqi Kurds have enjoyed de facto autonomy since 1991, uncertainty overshadowed their daily life. Among Iraqi Kurds, confidence was low that the United States or the United Nations (UN) would do more than condemn Baghdad or ratchet up sanctions should the Iraqi army move north. In 1975, Secretary of State Henry Kissinger sacrificed Iraqi Kurds to a realpolitik deal with Baghdad, already dominated by then–deputy president Saddam Hussein. The international community remained largely silent when the Iraqi government used chemical weapons to massacre Kurdish civilians in 1988. U.S. forces did little when Saddam ordered the Republican Guard to occupy Erbil in 1996. While the Clinton administration condemned the move, both allies and adversaries alike saw how muted the U.S. response was, even as the Guard detained, lined up, and summarily executed Iraqi oppositionists working with Washington. In 2000, Iraqi forces suffered little consequence when they crossed the thirty-sixth parallel to probe Kurdish defenses around the village of Baadre.[3]

Western states and international human rights organizations largely ignored the only relatively free area of Iraq as it suffered not only under UN sanctions but also under a separate embargo imposed by Saddam's regime in Baghdad, which UN Secretary General Boutros Boutros-Ghali empowered to allocate food and medicine to Iraqi Kurdistan under the UN Oil-for-Food Programme.[4] As late as 2001, the State Department maintained that it was illegal for U.S. citizens to travel to Iraqi Kurdistan on U.S. passports under terms of U.S. and UN sanctions.

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Iraqi Kurdistan's Opportunity

The March 1, 2003, Turkish decision not to participate in Operation Iraqi Freedom gave the Kurdistan Regional Government (KRG) an unexpected strategic boost. While U.S. Special Forces and intelligence had partnered with the Kurdish *peshmerga* militia and the Kurdish political leadership in the months prior to the outbreak of hostilities, U.S. military planners had envisioned a far more robust partnership with Turkey. In February 2003, U.S. and Turkish diplomats and military officials hammered out an extensive memorandum of understanding outlining U.S.-Turkish cooperation in Iraq. So convinced were Iraqi Kurdish officials that the Turkish relationship with Washington would take precedence over their own concerns that they scrambled not to prevent Turkish involvement but to win an agreement that, first, the Pentagon would limit the Turkish presence in Iraq to certain supply corridors in northern Iraq, and, second, that any more substantive Turkish contingent would operate only in areas south or east of Tikrit—areas of operation that Erbil deemed to limit Turkish influence in the disputed city of Kirkuk.

The Turkish parliament's refusal to join the U.S.-led coalition certainly undercut Turkish strategic leverage and bolstered the strategic importance of Iraqi Kurdish forces to U.S. goals. Rather than transit Turkey, U.S. forces parachuted into the Harir airfield, north of Erbil. The *peshmerga* may have done more looting than fighting in the first weeks of the war, but, symbolically, their participation cemented an enhanced relationship with a skeptical U.S. Central Command, more accustomed to the worldview of Arab leaders and their relatives among the general staffs than to Kurdish concerns. Romanticism also bolstered the U.S.-Kurdish relationship. It was hard for many in the U.S. military not to be sympathetic to the Iraqi Kurds: many had their first experience with Iraqi Kurds in 1991 when they helped stem mass migration and mass starvation with Operation Provide Comfort. Returning twelve years later, they found the region transformed, despite many obstacles, because of Kurdish leadership.

Local Kurdish culture also facilitated a relationship with the United States. Both Turkish diplomats and military officers often stand on ceremony, and rigid adherence to protocol undercuts rather than facilitates their relations.[5] Few American diplomats like their Turkish interlocutors. The Iraqi Kurds, in contrast, shower visiting U.S. officials with hospitality, arranging lavish banquets and, in a few cases, even facilitating liaisons with women. The KDP puts U.S. officials in its own guesthouse and offers both military and State Department officials gifts ranging from silk carpets to gold jewelry. While most U.S. officials refuse to take such gifts, during the Coalition Provisional Authority period, some U.S. civilian officials and military officers accepted them.

Also enhancing Kurdish influence in Washington has been the KRG's hiring of former U.S. military and political officials to represent them. The Kurdish leadership, for example, engaged a lobbying firm run by Robert D. Blackwill, a former deputy national security adviser, to represent Kurdish interests in Washington and to arrange meetings with administration officials.[6] Harry Schute, former commander of the 404th Civil Affairs Battalion stationed in Erbil, resigned his military commission to become a paid consultant to Kurdistan prime minister Nechervan Barzani. Both General Jay Garner (Ret.) and Colonel Dick Naab (Ret.), who led the postwar civilian administrations in Baghdad and Erbil, respectively, have returned to Iraqi Kurdistan in pursuit of contracts. Qubad Talabani, the son of the PUK leader, asked Kurds and friends of Iraqi Kurds to donate to the election campaigns of U.S. congressmen sympathetic to Kurdish independence.

The Kurdish participation alongside U.S. troops in Iraq's liberation, especially in contrast to Turkish actions, has led the Iraqi Kurdish leadership to express a sense of entitlement. In response to a 2003 interview question about what rewards Iraqi Kurds expected from their support of U.S. aims, Masud Barzani said, "Our basic demand from the United States and Britain . . . is support for our struggle to achieve our national rights."[7] In a 2005 essay making the same argument, Barzani pointed out, "After the U.S. armed forces, our *peshmerga* was the second-largest member of the coalition."[8]

A Beacon for Democracy?

The Bush Doctrine makes an alliance with Iraqi Kurdistan seem natural. Transformative diplomacy and democratization have been at the forefront, at least rhetorically, of White House policy. Here, Iraqi Kurdistan might seem a model. Two years before Saddam's fall, Carole O'Leary, a scholar in residence at the American University Center for Global Peace, described Iraqi Kurdistan as a "crucible for democracy and a model for post-Saddam Iraq."[9] Sverker Oredsson and Olle Schmidt, respectively a Lund University historian and a Swedish politician, called the

Iraqi Kurdistan region "a Democratic beacon in the Middle East."[10] In 2006, the KRG-run Kurdistan Development Corporation aired television advertisements in the United States describing Iraqi Kurdistan as a "practicing democracy for over a decade."[11] While an exaggeration—neither the KDP nor the PUK allow any serious electoral challenge—relative to Saddam's rule in the rest of the country, the three provinces controlled by Masud Barzani and PUK leader Jalal Talabani were far freer.

But neither Barzani nor Talabani are democrats. During the 1994–97 intra-Kurdish civil war, both Kurdish leaders grossly violated human rights: opponents disappeared and Barzani and Talabani ordered the summary execution of prisoners. Today, Iraqi Kurdish activists in territories controlled by both political leaders estimate that three thousand Kurdish prisoners remain unaccounted for,[12] but regional human rights organizations say that the political leadership bans any advocacy on behalf of the missing families. During Saddam's 2006 trial, many Kurdish intellectuals in the region's universities and cafes noted with irony that the Iraqi Kurdish leadership had committed many of the same crimes—albeit without the scale or the use of chemicals—for which Saddam was tried.

Iraq has changed, but Iraqi Kurdistan has not. After Saddam's fall, many Iraqi Kurds expected that their region would liberalize and democratize. Rather than reform, however, regional politics have ossified. Barzani retains dictatorial control over the Duhok and Erbil governorates, and Talabani likewise dominates Sulaymaniyah. While it is inaccurate to describe the Kurdish leadership—at least the PUK half—as tribal, both parties rely on family members for control. Barzani appointed his nephew prime minister and assigned his thirty-five-year-old son to run the local intelligence service. Other relatives control the regional telephone company, newspapers, and media.

Talabani's wife, Hero Khan, likewise, runs the local satellite station. One son manages the PUK's intelligence operation, while the other represents the KRG in Washington. When it came time to divvy up ministerial portfolios in Baghdad, both Kurdish leaders turned to their families: Barzani gave his uncle the Foreign Ministry portfolio, while Talabani gave one brother-in-law the Ministry of Water Resources and his wife's brother-in-law the ambassadorship to China. To Talabani's credit, both men are professionally qualified.

Both Barzani and Talabani control holding companies, some attached to relatives and others to their political parties. Talabani, in his capacity as PUK head, has transferred government land to relatives to develop at a profit. In one ongoing case, he has used Nokan, his party's business conglomerate, as the intermediary to evict refugees from land his party wishes to develop for the patronage of its members. Because both the KDP and the PUK control judicial appointments, refugees and ordinary citizens without high-level contacts lack any real recourse for appeal. During routine prison visits, independent human rights monitors have discovered businessmen imprisoned without charge who say they were imprisoned on the order of one of Barzani's sons after spurning silent partnerships with Barzani family businessmen.

Anti-Americanism has taken hold within Iraqi Kurdistan. Not recognizing it now and taking measures to correct it will negatively impact U.S. strategic opportunities down the line.

While in office, both Barzani and Talabani have amassed fortunes in excess of $2 billion and $400 million, respectively.[13] Whereas the Kurdish political leadership once squabbled over custom posts' revenue, today they conflate the regional treasury with party slush funds and personal pocketbooks. There is, in practice, little differentiation between the property of Barzani and Talabani as individuals and the holdings of their political parties and the KRG as a whole. Barzani transformed a public resort on Sari Rash into a personal compound, and his family members and ministers have built palatial houses on nearby public land.

Recent oil negotiations demonstrate the continued blurring of the Kurdish political and commercial spheres. To win oil exploration concessions and development contracts in Erbil and Duhok, companies must partner silently with a Barzani-appointed associate. Several officials close to various oil negotiations say Barzani's associates have requested that up to 10 percent of future revenue go to Barzani personally and an equal amount to Barzani's political party. The KRG's public treasury is a secondary concern, even if the oil, in theory, is a resource for the entire Kurdistan region, if not Iraq. Such conflicts of interest are not new. Documents seized after Saddam's fall discuss business dealings between Nechervan Barzani and Saddam's sons. Corruption increasingly filters

downward. According to a local nongovernmental organization (NGO) in Halabja, in 2006, a suspicious fire destroyed the archives of the PUK's teachers' union after an audit was ordered concerning embezzlement of union funds. However, many Iraqi Kurds say they had hoped the U.S. presence would catalyze reform, transparency, and accountability.

Mechanisms of Control

Political control runs deep. In the case of a victim learning from his tormentor, both parties have replicated Baath Party mechanisms of control. Both the KDP and the PUK deputize representatives not only to college classes but also to high schools. In some cases, these student representatives who act as political commissars are fourteen- and fifteen-year-olds: they compile reports about both classroom and private discussions, which KDP and PUK intelligence collate. The intelligence apparatus runs deep, and torture is common.[14] Both Kurdish parties model themselves after the Baath Party. While neither party adheres to its founding ideologies (few PUK Politburo members, for example, take seriously the beliefs of the Socialist International, even though the PUK is a member organization), ambitious members still get ahead by informing on colleagues. Kurds treat foreigners well, but regard them with suspicion: taxi drivers stationed outside Sulaymaniyah hotels report to PUK intelligence. The KDP often houses foreigners in its Salahuddin guesthouse. While comfortable, the arrangement forces them to rely on party drivers (ordinary taxi drivers cannot approach the facility). KDP intelligence will often order taxi drivers not to transport Westerners who have not secured permission from the KDP intelligence chief to move between towns.

Staff in the leading Erbil, Duhok, and Sulaymaniyah hotels must be party members; many are affiliated with intelligence services and compile dossiers on guests and those with whom they meet. Duhok University has installed keystroke tracking software on computers used by foreign staff; it is likely that other regional colleges and universities do so as well.

The consequences of not towing the party line run deep: students who speak critically against either party or its leadership are blacklisted for employment and educational opportunities. At Salahuddin University, for example, students who have superior grades but are not affiliated with the KDP may see themselves disqualified from valedictorian status.

Barzani and Talabani enjoy other mechanisms of control. The *peshmerga*—literally, those who face death—serve less as an army for Iraqi Kurdistan than as a militia to enforce the wishes of the political party leaders. Tellingly, despite the nominal unification between the two Kurdish leaders' administrations, both parties' security services and militias remain distinct. Travelers arriving in Kuysanjaq, the first major town in PUK territory after leaving KDP territory, are questioned by PUK *peshmerga* and, on occasion, its intelligence service as well.

Peshmerga members are often above the law. In one recent case, a KDP *peshmerga* member shot a police officer during a routine traffic stop. The suspect's colleagues removed him from police custody in order to prevent the prosecutor's attempts to pursue charges against him.[15]

There are no checks and balances. Press freedom in Iraqi Kurdistan is in decline, even as it expands in non-Kurdish regions. Talabani's wife uses her control of both the local satellite station and a local magazine to target critics.

Although there are two independent newspapers in Iraqi Kurdistan—*Awene* and *Hawlati*—they are increasingly constrained. Both parties use their control over law courts to intimidate, bankrupt, and even imprison journalists who criticize ruling parties and officials. The PUK, for example, prosecuted *Hawlati* editors after the paper accused the PUK prime minister of abuse of power.[16] Nechervan Barzani's office has even threatened frivolous lawsuits against foreign writers and analysts who fail to adhere to his party's line.

Those who refuse to be co-opted or at least be silent face the Kurdish security services. In October 2006, the KDP's secret service abducted Austrian-Kurdish journalist Kamal Said Qadir after he wrote articles questioning corruption within the ruling Barzani clan and published documents demonstrating links between Mulla Mustafa Barzani—an important nationalist leader and Masud Barzani's father—and the Soviet KGB.[17] After a fifteen-minute trial, the KDP judge sentenced Kamal to thirty years in prison—a sentence commuted only after a campaign by international NGOs and condemnation from the State Department.[18]

The Kurdish administrations appear determined to retain tight political control over the press. Iraqi Kurdish law remains based on Iraqi law. Article 433 of the Iraqi Criminal Code—enacted by the Baath Party—equates almost all criticism with criminal defamation. Local journalist unions that have sought to change this artifact have faced Barzani's ire. On December 20, 2007, Barzani

told the Kurdistan parliament to reconsider legislation that would overturn the Baath-era press law and legalize criticism of his government.[19]

Nor are NGOs an independent check. Most Kurdish NGOs operate under the patronage of the Kurdish political leadership. Kurdistan Save the Children, for example, relies upon the patronage of Talabani's wife and largely operates to further party aims. Foreign aid workers say that both the KDP and the PUK have insisted that they hire party members if they wish to operate in coordination with the local government. When independent Kurdish employees operating with the U.S. Agency for International Development refused to obey PUK instructions, PUK security officials filed reports about them and alleged security concerns with agency administrators, who promptly fired the independents and hired PUK apparatchiks. With very few exceptions, local human rights organizations—and a government-controlled Ministry of Human Rights—focus on atrocities committed against Kurds by Saddam's regime, rather than abuses by the current political leadership.

As the distance between the Kurdish leadership and the people they claim to represent grows deeper, antagonism grows. Many Kurds feel helpless. There is no accountability, even when the government makes such arrogant decisions as to provide twenty-four-hour electricity to light up the grave of Ibrahim Ahmad, Talabani's father-in-law, while cutting electricity to Kurdish refugees. The PUK and the KDP's decision to run on the same election list in public and divvy up positions in private has effectively disenfranchised the local population. When the Kurdistan Islamic Union—the nonviolent Muslim Brotherhood affiliate—began to make inroads, KDP-sponsored youth mobs set party headquarters on fire in several towns and murdered the party chief in Duhok.[20]

Even after they arranged to avoid competition, both U.S. diplomats and the Independent Election Commission of Iraq fingered the KDP as committing the most flagrant election fraud in the entire country, using the *peshmerga* to block voters and party supervisors to stuff ballot boxes. The fraud was pointless, given that without it the party machinery and resources were such to guarantee victory, even if not on the scale of regional dictators like Hosni Mubarak or Bashar al-Assad.

Rationalizing Kurdish Behavior

Iraqi Kurdistan may not be the beacon for democracy that its representatives claim, but realists within the U.S. foreign policy establishment may argue that its practices toward its population are immaterial to U.S. interests, especially given the Kurdistan region's continued pro-Americanism.

Such a calculation is shortsighted. Because the U.S. government has subsidized both Kurdish leaders, Kurds generally associate their leaders' misbehavior with U.S. policy. Murmurs of discontent grow when Kurds attribute the abuses by their leaders to U.S. interests: in 2006, for example, when the U.S. government requested space for offices in Sulaymaniyah, Talabani evicted a technical college without advance notice, let alone due process, angering a broad swath of the population. Kurds also accuse U.S. officials of complicity in torture at what they suspect is a center for rendition at a Saddam-era facility between Tasluja and Paramagrun. While Kurdish officials trumpet their public's pro-American outlook, such an orientation is fading fast. Anti-Americanism has taken hold within Iraqi Kurdistan. Not recognizing it now and taking measures to correct it will negatively impact U.S. strategic opportunities down the line.

Perhaps U.S. strategists might forgive this if the Iraqi Kurds demonstrated that they would advance U.S. regional interests. Unfortunately, they have not. While Iraqi Kurdistan did allow U.S. forces to assemble and joined the drive southward in April 2003, filling the vacuum left by the collapsing Iraqi army, subsequent Kurdish behavior leaves large questions about the reliability of Iraqi Kurdistan as a U.S. ally.

During the first week in July 2003, an American military unit patrolling the mountains of northeastern Iraq approximately thirty miles from the Iranian border came across an unauthorized KDP checkpoint from which they confiscated a cache of Iranian passports and money. KDP officials had used the checkpoint to facilitate Iranian infiltration—allowing Iranian operatives to swap Iranian passports for local Kurdish identity papers—in exchange for cash. Kurdish officials privately acknowledge that this case was not unique. At the beginning of the Iraqi insurgency in April 2004, Iraqi Kurdistan became a transit point for Ansar al-Sunna: its members entered Iraqi Kurdistan from Iran and received safe passage to Mosul in exchange for an agreement not to conduct operations in the three northern governorates—and perhaps payment as well.

Kurdish double dealing with Iran continues to the present. On January 11, 2007, and on September 20, 2007, U.S. forces raided facilities in Erbil and Sulaymaniyah, detaining six Iranian intelligence operatives.

In each case, Kurdish officials protested the arrests. After the first episode, Barzani's office released a statement saying, "It is better to inform the Kurdistan government before taking actions against anybody;"[21] in the later case, the KRG called the arrest "illegitimate" and said that "actions like these serve no one."[22] The decision not to warn the Kurdish authorities was not diplomatic ineptitude but was the result of experience—U.S. policymakers no longer trust Iraqi Kurdish authorities not to reveal sensitive, operational information. Whether the Kurdish leadership or their subordinates in the *peshmerga* and security services do this to ingratiate themselves to regional powers or for reasons of personal enrichment is immaterial. The Kurdish authorities' subsequent refusal—both on the part of the KRG and Hoshyar Zebari, Iraq's foreign minister and both Barzani's uncle and appointee—to supply U.S. officials with a diplomatic list undercut the Multinational Forces' confidence in the Kurdish leadership. Such a list, over which there is no reason for secrecy, would enable U.S. authorities to determine diplomatic status prior to operations. The Kurdish refusal demonstrates unwillingness to assist U.S. efforts to counter Iranian Revolutionary Guard Corps infiltration.

Playing the Terror Card

Barzani's antagonism to Turkey also undercuts any possibility of a U.S. alliance. Many Kurdish officials look at U.S.-Turkish relations as a zero-sum game: either Washington pursues friendship with Erbil or allies itself with Ankara. Most Kurdish officials do not understand that the two relationships need not be mutually exclusive. Too often, Kurdish authorities tell visiting American officials that Iraqi Kurdistan would be a much better ally than Turkey. They understand neither the breadth of the U.S.-Turkish relationship nor how poorly received are Kurdish demands that Washington filter its alliances through the interests of any other state. Both Saudi Arabia and Israel, for example, may wish that Washington would scale back its relations with the other, but both accept that this will not happen. Barzani has no such sophistication and appears intent on forcing the White House to choose between Ankara and Erbil. Should it do so, the Iraqi Kurdish leadership will be disappointed.

There is absolutely no reason why Barzani should not advocate for Iraqi Kurdish interests, but his rhetoric often devolves into threats. In December 2005, for example, he declared that if the oil-rich city of Kirkuk did not join his administration by December 2007, he might spark civil war throughout Iraq.[23] Then, in April 2007, he threatened to sponsor insurgency in Turkey if Ankara did not comply with his demands over Kirkuk.[24] Media controlled by his party engages in the same types of incitement against Turkey that Palestinian media does against Israel. Maps sold in the shadow of the KRG parliament show a greater Kurdistan region stretching well into Turkey. Kurdish newspapers refer to Iraqi Kurdistan as South Kurdistan, implicitly laying claim to southeastern Turkey as North Kurdistan. Much as occurred with the Palestinian Authority, it is this tendency to exert populist claims across borders that makes Iraqi Kurdistan a force for instability, not an anchor for security.

Barzani has, in effect, replicated the late Palestinian chairman Yasser Arafat's strategy: he denies complicity in terrorism but nevertheless seeks to leverage it into diplomatic gain.

It is in this context that Barzani's relations with the Kurdistan Workers Party (PKK) become so problematic. Barzani may be a nationalist, but he is also a realist. He dislikes a powerful PKK, not because its terrorism sullies the Kurdish nationalist cause but because it provides an alternative. Abdullah Öcalan, the group's leader, sought primacy over his Iraqi Kurdish competitors. "Barzani and Talabani are like feet or arms, but I am the main head or mind," Öcalan explained in a 1998 interview.[25] During the 1990s, both Barzani and Talabani ordered their respective *peshmerga* units to fight the PKK whenever they tried to establish a toehold in their territories. At the time, Barzani asked the Turkish government to subsidize his *peshmerga* and its fight against the terrorist group according to several Turkish diplomatic and intelligence officials. Barzani recognized that any PKK safe haven would be anathema to his interests and moved to prevent it. But with Öcalan in prison and the PKK no threat to his political supremacy, Barzani adopted the group to use as a lever against Turkey.

After the Turkish parliament's March 1, 2003, decision not to join the U.S.-led coalition against Saddam, Barzani grew overconfident in his assessment of Washington's friendship and took a hard line against Ankara. He welcomed PKK leaders to his territory—especially in the "triangle border" region of Iran, Iraq, and Turkey.

While Barzani and KRG spokesmen have repeatedly promised to crack down, Barzani has, in effect, replicated the late Palestinian chairman Yasser Arafat's strategy: he denies complicity in terrorism but nevertheless seeks to leverage it into diplomatic gain.

He tells U.S. diplomats that the PKK threat would disappear if only Ankara offered greater concessions in terms of amnesty, broadcasting, and constitutional reforms, while at the same time encouraging PKK leaders to continue their attacks and, indeed, facilitating their terrorism.

Turkish authorities say they have photographs of senior PKK commanders receiving medical treatment in Erbil hospitals and meeting with Barzani allies in nearby restaurants. By selling food and supplies, Barzani turned a handsome profit, one to which family members involved in the trade have become addicted. Turkish officials suspect Barzani's son of selling weapons to the PKK. It is this knowledge that has forced Ankara to take such a hard line against Kurdistan and has convinced U.S. officials to support Ankara, even as Turkish warplanes bomb Iraqi Kurdish targets.

The Future of U.S.-Kurdish Relations

Iraqi Kurdistan is living in the past, coasting on a false reputation and insulated from reality by the praise of lobbyists and consultants. Both Talabani and Barzani have reason to be proud: throughout the late 1990s and prior to Saddam's overthrow, Iraqi Kurdistan was a success story, relatively democratic and thriving even under sanctions. Kurds might excuse their leaders' faults because of the larger crisis, but they had hope for the future.

Freed from the shadow of Saddam, however, Iraqi Kurdistan has slid backward. With the lifting of sanctions, corruption has grown rife. The history of the Barzani family's relationship to the population it seeks to lead parallels the generational evolution of Saud rule in Saudi Arabia: both Mullah Mustafa Barzani (1903–79) and King Abdul Aziz bin Saud (1876–1953) remained close to the tribal values of their society and were genuinely revered. Every generation, however, grew more isolated and corrupt.

While Barzani tells investors of his plans to transform the region into a new Dubai, he does not understand that his administration's corruption will retard such success. As the gap between the rich and poor increases, and as Barzani and Talabani use mechanisms of control to stifle dissent, Islamist parties will grow more popular—they have already made inroads, if not because of their religious views then because Kurds consider them the only "clean" alternative to the KDP and PUK's corruption. Many Kurds shy away from the Kurdistan Islamic Union's religious conservatism, but as the party becomes more popular, its heavy criticism of U.S. policy and its conspiracy theories about U.S. intentions will take deeper root.

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Many Iraqi Kurdish officials and some U.S. commentators suggest that Iraqi Kurdistan could host a long-term U.S. military presence, which would enable U.S. forces to withdraw from the rest of Iraq, where they are less welcome. This may have once been an option, but Barzani's behavior has made it unwise. While a base in Iraqi Kurdistan might, on paper, appear to be a strategic asset for the Pentagon, in reality it would be a liability. Because Barzani enables—if not sponsors—PKK terrorism against Turkey, any U.S. presence would shield Iraqi Kurdistan from accountability. Barzani wants a U.S. base in his territory because it would immunize him from Turkish retaliation. Indeed, the establishment of any U.S. base in Iraqi Kurdistan, so long as Barzani remains in power, may lead to greater conflict. Barzani is not altruistic: hiding behind a permanent phalanx of U.S. troops would, in effect, grant him the immunity he wants. If the Pentagon were to establish a base in Iraqi Kurdistan, it must expect both the PKK problem and Barzani's provocation of neighboring states to increase. Barzani wants American forces stationed in his territory for the same reason Hamas and Fatah demand European monitors along Gaza's frontier with Israel, and Hezbollah embraces a UN Interim Force in Lebanon presence in southern Lebanon. Far from enabling a U.S. withdrawal, any base in Iraqi Kurdistan in the present circumstances guarantees an expansion of conflict. Regional dictators—especially those who refuse to divorce themselves from terrorism—make poor allies.

If Iraqi Kurdistan is to be a good ally, a force for stability, and a hedge against the corrosive ideologies of both Arab nationalism and Islamism, U.S. strategy must

focus on long-term interests. Iraqi Kurdistan is strategically important. Federalism is the future of Iraq. While many pundits and, indeed, many Iraqis say they long for the return of the strongman, centralized model of government for Iraq, such a system never worked: Iraq was in a state of near-constant civil war between 1961 and 2003, as Iraqis resisted Baghdad's attempts to impose its dictatorial will. Strong leadership sounds good, but Iraq remains a country with one hundred prospective generals to each private.

Washington should take a zero tolerance approach to terrorism. Iraqi Kurdistan has made great strides—but Barzani risks everything Iraqi Kurds have gained by involving himself with the PKK. Both the KDP and the PUK have betrayed Washington's confidence in their dealings with Iran. While it is natural that both parties would have relations with their neighbors, selling information or facilitating infiltration is an unacceptable means of ingratiating themselves to a neighbor.

The responsibility of leadership is not optional. A responsible Iraqi Kurdish leadership would end incitement. Demagoguery may make good politics and may distract from issues of corruption and accountability that Barzani wishes to avoid, but incitement backfires. The Kurdish language broadcasts that the ruling parties control often inflame nationalist sentiment. By dedicating twenty-five minutes of a thirty-minute newscast to popular demands for independence—for example, interviewing school children and having them recite nationalist demands—Barzani brings himself and his region closer to conflict with his neighbors. The State Department ignored similar incitement in the early years of the Palestinian Authority only to have that entity disintegrate into chaos; it should not make the same mistake with what, for all practical purposes, is the Kurdistan Authority.

As Turkish warplanes bomb terrorist bases in Iraqi Kurdistan, it is time for both Washington and Erbil to reassess their policies. Washington has many cards to play. Sympathy to Kurdistan is understandable but is increasingly based on a myth. U.S. good will should never be an entitlement; Barzani may remain an ally, but he has disqualified himself from any substantive partnership. It is time to take a tough love approach to Iraqi Kurdistan. There should be no aid and no diplomatic legitimacy so long as Iraqi Kurdistan remains a PKK safe haven, sells U.S. security to the highest bidder, and leaves democratic reform stagnant.

AEI editorial assistant Christy Hall Robinson worked with Mr. Rubin to edit and produce this Middle Eastern Outlook.

Notes

1. For the best example of this argument, see Michael J. Totten, "No Friends But the Mountains," *Azure* 5768, no. 30 (Autumn 2007), available at www.azure.org.il/magazine/magazine.asp?id-407 (accessed January 2, 2008).

2. Peter W. Galbraith, "Iraq: The Way to Go," *The New York Review of Books* 54, no. 13 (August 16, 2007), available at www.nybooks.com/articles/20470 (accessed January 2, 2008); and Al Kamen, "Kurdish Connection?" *Washington Post*, January 15, 2007.

3. David Nissman, "Iraqi Troops Cross 36th Parallel," *Iraq Report* 3, no. 41 (December 8, 2000), Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty, available at www.rferl.org/reports/iraq-report/2000/12/41-081200.asp (accessed January 2, 2008).

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6. U.S. Department of Justice, *Report of the Attorney General to the Congress of the United States on the Administration of the Foreign Agents Registration Act of 1938, as Amended, for the Six Months Ending June 30, 2006*, June 6, 2007, 101, available at www.usdoj.gov/criminal/fara/reports/June30-2006.pdf (accessed January 2, 2008).

7. "Barzani: Mosul and Kirkuk Are Kurdish Lands," *Asharq Al-Awsat* (London), April 7, 2003.

8. Masud Barzani, "A Kurdish Vision of Iraq," *Gulf News* (Dubai), October 30, 2005.

9. Carole O'Leary (presentation, Kuwait Information Office, July 6, 2001).

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