

The Kurds, Turkey and Iran after America's Iraq war: new possibilities?

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## **The Kurds, Turkey and Iran after America's Iraq war: new possibilities?**

For the past twelve years, the Iraqi Kurds have enjoyed self-government in at least part of their homelands; the Kurdish-administered enclave was to most purposes an independent state although it lacked all forms of international recognition. The Kurdish leaders never stopped proclaiming that they had no ambitions to separate from Iraq permanently; their stated political objectives could be summarized in the slogan "democracy for all of Iraq, and autonomy for Kurdistan." And there is much, indeed, that ties the Kurds to the rest of Iraq: a common history and common perceptions such as result from enculturation in the same educational system, listening to and watching the same media, and decades of taking part in the same political system. In their hearts, most Kurds dream of an independent Kurdish state, but all Kurdish leaders have been pragmatic and have accepted that the international community — the states in the region, the great powers, and the UN — will not tolerate the break-up of existing states.

Before the war, when my Kurdish friends appeared eager to see America engage Saddam Hussein, I warned them that as a result of the war they might well lose the little independence that they had. The Kurdish leaders' withdrawing their armed men from Kirkuk and Mosul after they had conquered these cities and their giving up speaking of a federal Iraq — both at the request of the Americans, who did not want Turkey to get nervous over Kirkuk and who appear determined that Iraq should be a unitary state — may confirm what I believed would be an inevitable outcome. However, nation building in Iraq may well prove to be a project for which the USA is not particularly well equipped and has insufficient legitimacy. The first weeks since the war give reason to wonder whether the American failure to establish a stable regime in Baghdad could not result in precisely what I had

believed impossible before, an independent Kurdish state.

## **National self-determination: three waves**

There were three waves of national self-determination resulting in the emergence of new states in the 20th century. The first wave occurred in the aftermath of the First World War, when the multi-ethnic Habsburg and Ottoman Empires were dismantled. Woodrow Wilson's proclaimed ideal of self-determination of peoples concerned mostly the Christian subject peoples of these two empires. The Kurds briefly appeared to have a chance — the possibility of a Kurdish state was mentioned in the Treaty of Sèvres, and some British policy makers thought of a Kurdish buffer state between the new Turkey and Mesopotamia — but lost it before there was a strong enough national movement.

The second wave is associated with the UN Charter and the demise of the British, French, Dutch and Portuguese colonial empires. The national self-determination enshrined in the UN Charter was taken to concern only the former colonies and to respect existing borders. The UN has always upheld the principle of territorial inviolability of its member states and has never endorsed separatist movements. The separation of Bangladesh from Pakistan and Eritrea from Ethiopia were recognized after the fact, but were not allowed to become precedents. The endorsement of Kurdish struggle for independence by the UN is inconceivable.

The third wave began with the break-up of the Soviet Union, the last colonial empire, and of Yugoslavia. To a large degree, the UN rules were followed: only existing Soviet and Yugoslav republics were granted independence (and recognized by the international community): Georgia became an independent state, but Chechnya remained in the Russian federation, etc. However, military interventions have created some new facts on the ground that do not correspond with previously existing boundaries. The US-led intervention in Kosovo has strengthened the ethnic Albanian character of the region and resulted in ethnic cleansing of Serbs. A reintegration in Serbia appears most unlikely. It is probably only a matter of time before Kosovo becomes an independent state.

Could the American intervention in Iraq perhaps unwittingly have a similar effect in Kurdistan? America's bypassing of the UN and the estrangement between the USA and Turkey, the two strongest advocates (for different reasons) of Iraq's territorial integrity, suggest that the rules of the international political game are no longer those of

the past fifty years. Although the US presently appears to desire a strong unitary Iraq, a break-up may no longer be as impossible as it used to be.

## Factors favouring a unitary Iraq

One reason why the US appear to favour a unitary over a federal Iraq and to oppose Kurdish autonomy, let alone independence, is that the remainder of Iraq will be strongly dominated by the Iraqi Shi`is. The Iranian revolution and its aftermath have made the Americans extremely wary of Shi`ism. It is true that the Iraqi Shi`is are much divided and that many of them are either secular-minded or are personally pious but reject political Islam. On the other hand, the Supreme Council of the Islamic Revolution in Iraq (SCIRI), which is close to the Iranian 'hard-liners' and opposed to the American presence, is probably the largest and best organized force among the Iraqi Shi`is. It appears that, in the American view, the Kurds are needed in Iraq to prevent Shi`i hegemony. (This is not unlike the reasons why the British deemed it necessary to attach the *Vilayet* (Ottoman province) of Mosul with its largely Kurdish population to Arab Mesopotamia). However, if the Americans might succeed in effecting — by whatever means — a regime change in Iran, the Iraqi Shi`is will also cease to be considered as a threat and the need for a unitary state become less pressing.

Before the war, Turkey proclaimed that it would consider not only Kurdish independence but also a federal set-up in Iraq with considerable devolution of powers to the Kurds as a threat to its own security and a *casus belli*. It is likely that Iran and Syria have similar views on the potential impact of a lasting and internationally recognized form of self-rule for the Kurds. In spite of the estrangement between the US and Turkey, US policy makers will avoid frustrating Turkey as long as this is possible.

The Kurdish leaders have thus far not given indications of strong resistance against the project of a unitary Iraq. In contrast to their earlier vocal statements on the future Iraq being federal, they have since the war remained silent on the issue. Barzani appeared to be acquiescing in the suggestion that his *peshmerga* forces be dissolved and integrated in the future Iraqi armed forces. Both leaders immediately withdrew their forces from the newly conquered cities of Kirkuk and Mosul when the Americans told them to do so, thereby showing that they were not trying to create facts on the ground in the form of an enlarged autonomous Kurdistan. However, the Kurdish

leaders' apparent concessions on these important issues appear to have caused some uneasiness among the rank and file of the Kurds.

## **Factors that militate against the unitary state**

The Kurds' experience with their integration in Iraq has not been a very happy one. When the British decided to incorporate the *Vilayet* of Mosul into the new Iraq, they stipulated that the Kurds should have guarantees for their cultural rights and representation in the state organs. They always had more rights than in Turkey, Iran or Syria, but not all they believed themselves entitled to, which was the reason for many minor uprisings and a major guerrilla war that resulted in 1970 in a treaty granting them autonomy. The full terms of the agreement were never implemented: large numbers of Kurdish families were deported from Kirkuk and other strategically important district, so that these would not be included in the autonomous region. In spite of formal autonomy, the Iraqi authorities destroyed during the 1980s some three quarters of all Kurdish villages. This was topped with the genocidal massacre of at least 50,000 Kurdish men (and possibly several times that number) in 1988. If anything, this experience showed the Kurds that legal rules and formal niceties, and even autonomy, are not sufficient to guarantee their physical security.

In the perception of many Kurds, only full independence backed up by a Kurdish army will take proper care of their security. The alternative would be iron-clad guarantees from the Americans that their political, economic and cultural rights will continue to be respected in the future Iraq (where the Kurds constitute less than a quarter of the population). The reason for the consistently pro-American attitude of the Iraqi Kurds (in spite of having been betrayed twice, in 1975 and 1991) is of course that the USA is the only power capable of providing the Kurds with the security guarantees they need. American guarantees of the Kurds' rights constitute, of course, a lasting infringement on Iraq's sovereignty.

Whereas none of Iraq's neighbours favours the country's dismemberment, they have in the past honoured the principle of non-interference in the breach. All of these governments have in the past used the Kurds of at least one of their neighbours to destabilize that neighbour. Kurdish political movements have commonly had dealings with the government or at least the secret services of one or more neighbour countries. The Kurdish parties of Iraq have in this respect developed more lasting, more stable and more formal relations than those of other parts of Kurdistan. Both parties have had their offices in

Damascus, Tehran and even Ankara, and Turkey has in fact enabled the international protection for the Kurdish region through the 1990s. Although it never recognized the Kurdish regional government, the Turkish government maintained official and high-level contact with the Iraqi Kurdish parties and their leaders. It is not inconceivable that Turkey may in due time be persuaded that a Kurdish authority in northern Iraq may constitute a more attractive neighbour than a strong centralist government in Baghdad.

Turkey has never entirely lost its interest in the former *Vilayet* of Mosul. There are those who believe that the entire *Vilayet* rightly belongs to Turkey — the previous Minister of Foreign Affairs, Ya•ar Yaki•, suggested that Turkey might wish to lay claims to this territory. The late Turgut Özal, Turkey's former Prime Minister and President, flirted with the idea of re-integration of this region with Turkey. He appeared to believe that a form of federation between Turkey and the Kurdish part of Iraq would be mutually beneficial and could potentially solve Turkey's Kurdish problems. This shows at the very least that Turkey's commitment to Iraq's territorial integrity has been less than consistent and wholehearted.

## **Turkey and Iran and their Kurds**

The secular republic of Turkey and the Islamic republic of Iran are mirror images of one another, also with respect to their attitudes towards their Kurdish citizens. Turkey does not recognize ethnicity in the name of civic nationalism, Iran in the name of Islam. Neither has the same reserve where the Kurds of Iraq are concerned. Historically, the struggle of the Kurds in Iraq has often served to keep the Kurds of Iran and Turkey quiet (on a variant of the 'socialism in one country' principle).

The armed movements of Kurds of these two countries have failed, and the remnant of their leadership lives as refugees in Iraqi Kurdistan or Western Europe. The present struggles of the Iranian and Turkish Kurds are primarily for recognition and cultural rights. A success in Iraq may give this cultural struggle a boost but will not necessarily transform it in a political or military struggle.

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