

Toward a More Realistic Northern Iraq Policy

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Oct 24, 1996

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Brief Analysis

Seeking to achieve stability in northern Iraq as part of a longer-term effort to bring down Saddam Hussein, Assistant Secretary of State Robert Pelletreau this week completed a round of meetings in Turkey with feuding Iraqi Kurdish leaders. However, prospects for success of this effort are minimal, the durability of any Kurdish unity agreement at best questionable, and the potential damage to U.S. prestige--by dealing with a chieftain who openly scorned Washington and likely would do so again--considerable.

Policy goals. The U.S. needs a policy toward northern Iraq that 1) affirms U.S. commitments to the Kurdish people, while not over-promising; 2) rejects overly austere definitions of U.S. interests that disregard past U.S. commitments and erode U.S. credibility (e.g., the recent assertion that the U.S. has strategic interests only in southern Iraq); 3) is relatively impervious to the shifts in Kurdish infighting and, most important, 4) is part of an overall strategy for toppling Saddam. Such a policy would consist of the following elements:

1) Recognize that the status quo ante in the north cannot be re-established. There is no going back to the situation that existed before August 31, the day combined forces of Masud Barzani's Kurdistan Democratic Party (KDP) and Saddam Hussein moved into Erbil. First, Barzani has brought Saddam irrevocably into the northern Iraqi strategic equation; having broken the taboo on playing the Saddam card, Barzani could never be trusted not to do so again. Barzani is now dependent on Saddam; he needed Saddam to conquer Erbil, and he needs him to hold it. Second, opposition Iraqi National Congress (INC) forces in the north have now been decimated, some murdered by Saddam's troops, some transported to an unknown fate in Baghdad controlled Iraq, and most of the remainder now in Guam. Given that result, the pool of future INC recruits is likely to be small. Third, many of Iraqi Kurdistan's best and brightest, those associated with U.S. aid and military operations in northern Iraq, have already been evacuated to Guam en route to the U.S.

A secure and politically viable entity in northern Iraq can only be accomplished by means that are apparently politically unacceptable to the U.S.: sending ground troops or supporting a "liberated Iraq" zone in which UN sanctions are lifted or significantly eased. The former is politically unacceptable at home, the latter unacceptable to regional U.S. allies such as Turkey and Saudi Arabia. Under current conditions, even were stability temporarily re-established in the north, its duration would be doubtful, the U.S. commitment to protect it no greater than previously, and its utility for fighting Saddam highly suspect.

2) Stop courting Barzani. Less than three weeks after Barzani conquered Erbil and, temporarily, the rest of Iraqi Kurdistan, Washington surprisingly began courting the man who deceived it with his Saddam gambit. In a departure from its years-old policy of dealing with the Kurds at relatively low levels, the U.S. sent Assistant Secretary Pelletreau to Turkey to meet with Barzani September 18. Following further contacts with the KDP in London and Washington, Pelletreau returned to Ankara this week to meet with both Barzani and his rival Jalal Talabani, whose recent military gains have put him back in the political picture.

> Such U.S. courting of Barzani sends exactly the wrong message to the region. The active involvement of Assistant Secretary Pelletreau oddly suggests that Barzani has increased his standing in Washington by coarsely defying his U.S. benefactor, which had demanded that he not deal with Saddam.

3) Focus on Kurds, not Kurdish leaders. Iraqi Kurds, most of whom reportedly are alienated from both their warring leaders, continue to deserve U.S. and coalition protection, as possible, meaning mainly from the air. But the U.S. should be cautious not to over-promise. Unfortunately, the U.S. commitment to the Kurds has been both sweeping and vague; Kurds were led to expect much, but, in the crunch, received little. Initially, the commitment consisted of two elements: a small "security zone" hugging the western half of the Turkish-Iraqi border, off-limits to Iraqi troops, and a no-fly zone north of the 36th parallel, off limits to Iraqi aircraft. But "mission creep" immediately set in, and the U.S. let grow the perception that it was committed to defending all Kurdish-held territory, an area several times larger than the security zone. U.S. statements fed this perception. For example, in a 1993 letter to Congress, President Clinton pledged that the United States "will not turn its back on the Kurds." So unclear was the U.S. position that Talabani claims to have been confident of imminent U.S. intervention when Saddam invaded Erbil. Moreover, the U.S. Administration itself has barely disputed the widely held notion that it was obligated to defend all Kurdish-held territory.

> Washington need not discontinue its long-suffering Kurdish mediation. But until the Kurds scale back their demands and prove genuinely committed to re-forging their unity--a remote prospect--the U.S. should not stake much prestige or diplomatic effort on this long-shot effort.

4) Continue Operation Provide Comfort (OPC). The Iraqi invasion of Erbil in many ways exposed OPC, the Turkey-based coalition air operation that enforces the northern no-fly zone, as a flying paper tiger; U.S. jets neither bombed nor buzzed attacking Iraqi armor, and Saddam can draw the conclusion that, although his planes are prohibited from flying above the 36th parallel, pretty much "anything goes" on the ground.

> It would be a mistake, however, to conclude that OPC should be abandoned. OPC continues to serve at least three important purposes: First, OPC provides enforcement of the no-fly zone, which continues to contain and embarrass Saddam; withdrawal of OPC, and the consequent end to the no-fly zone, would gratuitously hand Saddam a great victory. Second, OPC provides reconnaissance, essentially unchallenged, of the entire area above the 36th parallel. And third, OPC provides protection, albeit imperfect, for the people of northern Iraq; OPC remains able to prevent air-based atrocities of the sort Saddam has inflicted in the past (chemical warfare, use of helicopter gunships), to monitor anti-civilian ground actions and, if the coalition chooses, to respond to those challenges with force. OPC is a relatively low-risk affirmation that Saddam should be fought from the north as well as the more strategically important south. It is also a reminder to others, including coalition partners, that U.S. opposition to Saddam is based on humanitarian as well as strategic concerns.

5) Toughen the security regime in the north. At the least, this means extending the no-fly zone southward--either to the 35th parallel, which would cover the largest Kurdish-held city Suleimaniyah, or to the 34th, which would cover the entire Kurdish populated area. More than half of Iraqi Kurds live between the 34th and 36th parallels, outside the current no-fly zone. With the extension of the southern no-fly zone northward last month, a mirror-image extension in the north would confine Saddam's air force virtually to the Baghdad area. At the same time, the U.S. should affirm

its determination to keep Iraqi troops out of the original (although now rarely mentioned) "security zone."

> Any changes in the northern security regime would have to be enforced by OPC and approved by OPC host Turkey. Although uncomfortable with OPC even in its current guise, Ankara could probably be persuaded to accept expansion of the no-fly zone, which would not fundamentally alter OPC's mission, probably would not require many more aircraft, would extend OPC protection to greater numbers of Iraqi Turcomans (co-ethnics of periodic concern to the Turkish government), and, based on experience, probably would not be seriously challenged by Saddam. U.S. assurances regarding implementation of U.N. Security Council Resolution 986 could serve as added inducement for the Turks, who are counting on the oil-for-food deal to boost their sanctions-strapped economy.

Conclusion: The approach outlined here is not a magic elixir that will create enduring peace in the north or bring about Saddam's swift demise. But it will clarify and restore credibility to the longstanding U.S. commitment to northern Iraq. Along the way, it also will strengthen our overall Iraq policy, further shrinking the size of the box in which the Administration says Saddam should be confined.

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