

The Situation in Northern Iraq:

Problems and Prospects

Feb 8, 1995



Brief Analysis

On February 8, 1995, David Litt, country director for Northern Gulf Affairs at the State Department, addressed a session of The Washington Institute's Policy Forum concerning the situation in northern Iraq and the prospects for peace and cooperation among the Kurdish factions there. The following is a rapporteur's summary of his remarks.

After Saddam Hussein's brutal suppression of the Kurdish resistance in northern Iraq, "Operation Provide Comfort" was established by Gulf War coalition states to accomplish two goals: to allow the international community to carry out its humanitarian relief efforts unimpeded and to deter renewed repression of northern Iraqis by Saddam Hussein's regime. The success of humanitarian efforts to aid Kurds and other citizens in northern Iraq has depended on the cooperation of the two dominant Kurdish parties, the Kurdistan Democratic Party (KDP) and the Patriotic Union of Kurdistan (PUK).

In late 1993, growing tensions between the PUK and the KDP erupted in violence. Since both parties are founding members of the Iraqi National Congress (INC) -- an umbrella organization composed of Iraqis from all religious and ethnic backgrounds united in opposition to Saddam's regime -- their infighting posed a severe threat to relief programs, the economy, and, most importantly, the opposition effort against Saddam Hussein's regime.

This fighting continued throughout 1994, prompting the U.S. State Department to send numerous messages urging a peaceful resolution of their differences. Frustrated, Washington decided to make one "last effort" at intervening diplomatically to calm the situation.

The Aims and Goals of U.S. Intervention

The U.S. negotiator, David Litt, visited northern Iraq from January 24-27, accompanied by a member of the Turkish Foreign Ministry. He emphasized three points to the leadership of the warring parties: first, the parties need to establish a ceasefire and maintain it. In fact, the establishment of a ceasefire was a precondition for Litt's visit.

Second, both sides had to accept the mediation of the INC as a "neutral force" to resolve issues peacefully and they had to disengage from areas where conflicts are most likely. Furthermore, both were cautioned to reject the assistance of the Iranian government, as it is "not a disinterested or neutral observer . . . and its objectives are not at all consonant with those of the Iraqis or the U.S. government." Further, all parties were told "to reject the PKK as a legitimate player -- for it is not. The PKK is a terrorist organization, and it must be repudiated and dealt with as such."

Third, both parties were warned not to resume "warfare." Resumption of factional fighting "would create doubts in the eyes of the American public, echoed in the American media, and brought to the attention of the U.S. Congress, as to our ability to carry out our relief and security programs." Thus, continued Kurdish infighting would jeopardize U.S. and international humanitarian aid efforts.

The U.S. intervention specified five goals aimed at eliminating the need for future intervention and reducing the chance of any reversion to fighting:

- 1.) promote goodwill among the competing factions to ensure that violence would not be renewed;
- 2.) achieve a demilitarization of the city of Irbil, a scene of particularly intense fighting;
- 3.) distribute revenues in a way agreeable to both parties;
- 4.) resolve other remaining issues that resulted from the fighting of the last year; and
- 5.) create a mechanism to deal with future disputes in a peaceful way.

Throughout the negotiations, it was clear that the differences between the two parties were not substantive or irreconcilable. The most difficult problem to overcome was mistrust between the parties. Each supported the INC's efforts at mediation, but was not confident that the other side would abide by it. Each supported the idea of a ceasefire, but believed that the other would violate it unless "compelled" to go along. This role of "guarantor" fell to the INC and the United States. The INC is to monitor the behavior of the two parties; no additional U.S. personnel will be required. Currently, there are 70 U.S. citizens in northern Iraq. As long as both sides make a serious effort at resolving their differences, the United States offers its full support to the INC's efforts.

The Economic and Political Situation in Northern Iraq

The people of northern Iraq have suffered greatly from Saddam's economic embargo. However, desperately-needed humanitarian aid continues to flow into the region under the auspices of the United Nations, the Gulf War coalition, and private relief organizations. There are some 400 aid workers in northern Iraq.

Economic development thus far has not flourished in the region, hindered by the limitations of UN-imposed sanctions and Kurdish infighting. The United States supports the establishment of economic projects that are consonant with existing sanctions. Fighting between the PUK and the KDP threatens these projects, as well as the ability of the INC to receive and distribute revenue to improve the lives of the people who live in northern Iraq.

The Future of Northern Iraq

Until the day Iraq becomes a stable democracy that recognizes the rights of its people and respects the territorial integrity of its neighbors, the INC can serve as a way to organize opposition to Baghdad and as a model for Iraqis of what their country could be without the oppressive Hussein regime. While the United States does not necessarily advocate the INC's evolution into the post-Saddam Iraqi regime, the United States does support the ideas the INC espouses and views it as a "magnet" for anti-Saddam opposition. The health and longevity of the INC and the Iraqi opposition depend on the willingness of the KDP and the PUK to put aside their differences and work toward a common goal: a new Iraq. The KDP and PUK must realize that the alternative to working together within the framework of the INC is chaos. With the help of the INC, the United States, and the international community, the Kurdish parties are now cooperating, and the ceasefire is holding despite sporadic incidents.

This Special Policy Forum Report was prepared by Daniel Seligson. ❖

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