

Iraqi Kurdistan and Its Neighbors: A Trip Report

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Brief Analysis

On June 14, 2011, Michael Eisenstadt, David Pollock, and Michael Knights addressed a Policy Forum at The Washington Institute to discuss their May 17-24 research trip to Iraqi Kurdistan. Mr. Eisenstadt, the director of the Institute's Military and Security Studies Program, served with the U.S. Army during Operation Provide Comfort, the 1991 humanitarian assistance mission to the Kurds of northern Iraq. Mr. Pollock is a senior fellow at the Institute and led its 2008 study tour of Iraqi Kurdistan. Dr. Knights is a Lafer fellow with the Institute and author of [The Iraqi Security Forces: Local Context and U.S. Assistance \(/templateC04.php?CID=344\)](#). The following is a rapporteur's summary of their remarks.

MICHAEL EISENSTADT

Comparing the Kurds encountered during Operation Provide Comfort to those living in areas controlled by the Kurdistan Regional Government (KRG) today provides several important insights. First, the KRG now enjoys vastly different relations with its neighbors. The formerly contentious relationship with Turkey has evolved into something more normal -- Ankara has extensive trade ties to the KRG and has become perhaps the most important outside actor there. And although the Kurds praised Iran in 1991 for sheltering large numbers of refugees, they now

distrust the Islamic Republic and view it as a decisive behind-the-scenes player (though they produce little if any evidence to support this impression). In fact, Kurdish parties often accuse their rivals of ties to Iran as a means of discrediting them -- at least in front of American visitors. More broadly, many residents of largely Sunni Iraqi Kurdistan suspect the intentions of a Shiite Iranian regime that persecutes its own Kurdish population.

Support for the United States appears to be widespread in the KRG. In 1991, nearly all Kurds encountered were grateful for American assistance even if they had unrealistic expectations regarding the kind of relationship the United States would establish with them going forward (e.g., some hoped for the equivalent of a Marshall Plan for Kurdistan). That sense of gratitude remains today, though many KRG officials are disappointed that Washington is not forging stronger ties with them or developing KRG-specific policies independent of U.S. relations with Baghdad. Meanwhile, many Kurdish citizens are disappointed that Washington is not doing more to push the KRG toward reform.

The vast majority of Kurds also believe that if the U.S. military presence is not extended beyond this year, a major Kurdish-Arab conflict will be inevitable. Although many residents fear that Baghdad will not be willing or able to ask Washington for such an extension, most senior KRG officials believe that a deal will ultimately be hammered out and that some U.S. troops will remain.

On the cultural level, while traditional Kurdish dress was widespread in 1991 and nearly all residents spoke some dialect of Kurdish, many also spoke Arabic. Today, traditional dress is less prevalent (especially among young people), but few young Kurds speak Arabic; Kurdish identity has grown stronger, and the cultural distance from the rest of Iraq has widened. Social relations between Kurds, Arabs, and other Iraqis defy easy categorization, however, and intermarriage is not uncommon.

DAVID POLLOCK

The KRG is marked by several notable paradoxes. The region has registered impressive economic and infrastructural achievements over the years, with reliable electricity and spectacular hotels. And recent polls show that Kurds are reasonably satisfied with their economic situation.

Yet the KRG economy continues to suffer from serious weaknesses, including a less-than-robust work ethic, high unemployment, and an overdeveloped public sector -- the latter attributable, in part, to overreliance on oil revenue. In fact, the government employs more than one million Kurds out of a population of five million. To promote further economic development, the KRG will need to address the entrenched culture of dependence on government employment, as well as the fact that private firms in the region employ substantial numbers of foreign workers despite the high unemployment rate.

In the political sphere, the creation of the Gorran Party has been a positive development. Gorran won 25 of 111 seats in the 2009 Kurdish parliamentary elections and is a legitimate challenger and political force outside the traditional duopoly of the Kurdistan Democratic Party and Patriotic Union of Kurdistan. Significantly, opposition politics has moved into the streets, where several thousand young people protested for change between February and April of this year, expressing dissatisfaction with unemployment and corruption. Most Kurds want reform without overthrowing the system, however, so the chances of the short-lived "Kurdish Spring" turning into something more profound are slim.

For its part, the Islamist opposition -- largely represented by the Kurdistan Islamic Group and Kurdistan Islamic Union -- has joined with Gorran to participate in popular protests and advance a common political platform. Islamist parties appear to be adopting moderation as a tactic while retaining their ideology and hoping to consolidate power and guide society in an Islamic direction.

Reacting to the current uprising in Syria, many Kurdish officials have expressed hope regarding the potential fall of

"another Baathist regime." Their relationship with the rest of Iraq seems to be one of fatalistic resignation, however, as key issues remain locked in stalemate. Still, the Kurds have carved out a distinct cultural identity and political life -- a tribute to their sense of pragmatism and, hopefully, a lasting positive legacy of American involvement in Iraq.

MICHAEL KNIGHTS

U.S. interests are served by continued stability in areas presently under Iraqi Kurdish control. Northern Iraq is a key operating environment for terrorists moving between Afghanistan and Europe, and the KRG security services are important allies in the struggle against violent extremism. Moreover, the United States stands to gain from potential expansion of Turkish influence in the KRG at Iran's expense.

Relations between Baghdad and the KRG could determine the ultimate success or failure of the U.S. mission in Iraq. If these relations falter, Iraq may devolve into another Arab state at war with its ethnic minorities. But if the KRG is integrated into Iraq as a willing partner, the country could emerge as a true model for the region: a multiethnic, cross-sectarian, bilingual, federal democracy at the heart of the Middle East.

The United States faces a number of challenges as it seeks to cement the gains it has won at such high cost in Iraq. Electricity and oil infrastructure in the federal areas and KRG are developing in parallel rather than integrated fashion. On the security front, KRG forces and their federal counterparts engage in very little intelligence sharing despite the significant threat posed by al-Qaeda in Iraq and other actors. Since 2008, Baghdad has deliberately slowed the integration of Kurdish *peshmerga* militiamen into the newly formed 15th and 16th Divisions of the Iraqi army in order to pressure the KRG and reduce its access to U.S. training and equipment. Moreover, neither Kurds nor Arabs are fully in charge along the disputed internal boundary between the KRG and federally controlled areas, creating fertile ground for clashes and creating safe havens for insurgent groups.

Although the KRG has long supported U.S. policy in Iraq, Washington has directed its security assistance toward Baghdad since 2003. In the future, the United States should support KRG security forces on contentious issues such as Iraqi federal funding for the Regional Guard Brigades (Kurdish units in the Iraqi Security Forces, consisting of former *peshmerga*), U.S. procurement support for KRG security forces, low-cost training support for the Asayesh (an FBI-type security force), and further integration of *peshmerga* into the federal army.

In return, the United States should encourage Kurdish concessions on several issues, including joint training, "dual-key" control of Kurdish security forces by both Baghdad and Irbil, improved federal-KRG intelligence sharing, Arabic-language instruction for the security forces, and depoliticization of *peshmerga* and Asayesh forces. A U.S.-convened conference on the future of the federal-KRG security relationship -- similar to that attended by senior decisionmakers from both sides in October 2006 -- could advance these goals. And continuing some form of U.S. military observation mission, potentially based out of the U.S. diplomatic offices in Irbil and Kirkuk, could further facilitate and monitor federal-Kurdish security coordination.

This rapporteur's summary was prepared by Maya Gebeily. ❖

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