

Iraqi Kurdistan and the Transition, Post–Coalition Provisional Authority

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Brief Analysis

The current situation in Iraq constitutes a unique moment in the history of the Islamic Middle East. For the first time, Arabs, Kurds, Turkmens, and Assyrians of the same nation have an opportunity to cooperatively evaluate the task of shaping their shared future. The challenge between now and June 30, 2004 -- when the Coalition Provisional Authority in Iraq is scheduled to hand over power to the local authorities -- is to articulate a transitional law through which a sovereign provisional government can be elected. Naturally, there is significant debate as to how this goal can be achieved. Although significant challenges lie ahead, the progress made following the liberation of Iraq has been incredible, particularly in light of the country's numerous complicating factors. Iraq's leaders now have the opportunity to build on this unique situation by creating a viable state.

Future of the Iraqi Nation

Nature of the Iraqi government. All parties understand that the current debate is not a zero-sum game, and they are making efforts to arbitrate their differences of opinion. Such dialogue is new in the Islamic world, and its success has been illustrated most visibly by the use of street demonstrations rather than violence as a mode of resolving differences.

Notably, all of the major parties have endorsed federal democracy as a basis for the future political system of Iraq. Iraqi Kurds envision this system as a balance of power between the regions and the center. Accordingly, any transitional law must permit all regions to establish governing institutions that will eventually have a place in the permanent constitution of Iraq.

Holding direct elections would be extremely challenging in the current environment. The eventual solution to the challenge of achieving a full transition of power must be reached through debate between Iraqis and with help from the United States and the UN. Additionally, all parties must recognize the legitimate Shi'i grievance over having been unjustly barred from power for so long. At the same time, they must ensure that Iraqis of different backgrounds understand the political process and perceive the new provisional government as representative and legitimate.

Religious influence. A democracy must reflect the values of its constituents. Rather than allowing groups such as the wahhabis or other radical elements to build mosques in Iraq, the government should take responsibility for this effort. At the same time, however, clergy should not be given a role in day-to-day politics. Islamic parties can be part of the political process, but religion and politics should be kept as far apart as possible. The reality of religious parties can be countered only by contending secular parties that do a more effective job of meeting the needs of their constituents.

UN participation. Iraqis are apprehensive about the UN. They have had an unfortunate experience with UN bureaucracy, and many have criticized its management of the oil-for-food program. They are also disappointed that the UN and other international organizations did not do much to save the people of Iraq from the previous regime's atrocities. Nevertheless, it is imperative to involve the international community in the transition. Although

international organizations and foreign ministries are accustomed to dealing with the status quo and with accepted norms of politics, all parties must avoid arrangements that salvage the old political systems of Iraq. A fundamentally different system is necessary to achieve lasting success.

Security. Those responsible for continuing terrorist activities in Iraq consist of Islamic fundamentalists, domestic wahhabis, Ba'ath remnants, and operatives from al-Qaeda and Ansar al-Islam. Kurdish intelligence shows that terrorist attacks involving tactical weapons (e.g., rocket-propelled grenades) were carried out primarily by former regime loyalists; such attacks have declined since the capture of Saddam Husayn. Large car bombs and similar attacks have been perpetrated by al-Qaeda and Salafi fundamentalist elements.

Future of the Kurdish North

Although the Kurdish community has been in a state of conflict with Iraq for decades, it has come to accept that it is part of Iraq. Indeed, Iraqi Kurds seek a unified, Iraqi solution to the current quandaries. At the same time, Iraqi Kurdish leaders must reassure their constituents that they are not returning to the tyranny of the past. Some Kurds argue that they should worry about Kurdistan alone, disregarding Baghdad and the Iraqi nation. Ultimately, however, the dominant view among Kurds is that they must be represented in Baghdad if they are to avoid the genocidal horrors of the past. Any new arrangement must give the Kurds and other peoples of Iraq tangible assurances that recentralization will satisfy the security and political requirements of all involved. In any case, Iraqi Kurds regard Baghdad as their capital, and they will be working with other Iraqis to create a system that will ensure safety, security, and prosperity for all.

Kurdish regional governments in Iraq. Past divisions within the Kurdish community in northern Iraq resulted from the conflict between the PUK and the Kurdistan Democratic Party (KDP). In light of improving relations between these organizations, many hope that region-wide elections will be held in March 2005. Whoever wins those elections should be given the responsibility of forming the region's next government. A unified Iraqi Kurdish region could provide an element of stability for other regions of the country to emulate. Moreover, a unified regional government would facilitate the reintegration of Iraq's Kurdish region back into the Iraqi state, as part of a new federal arrangement. It is important to note, however, that no Iraqi governmental institution should be based on ethnicity or religion. In fact, this principle should be integrated into the new Iraqi constitution, and the Kurdish region of Iraq should not be excepted from it. In addition to Kurds, this region is home to Turkmens, Arabs, and Assyrians. Accordingly, members of these ethnic groups would have to be given equal opportunity to vie for leadership positions in the regional government alongside Kurds.

Kirkuk. There will not be a Kurdish claim on Kirkuk to the neglect of other claims. One Kurdish demand is nonnegotiable, however: the eradication of the area's ethnic cleansing and forced Arabization policies. The effects of such activity must be reversed through a legal and political process, after which the people can then decide the fate of Kirkuk. Moreover, the area's oil revenues must never again come under the control of the central government, which has historically used them as a pillar of tyranny. A revenue-sharing scheme will need to be devised in order to resolve the oil issue.

Turkish concerns. In conversations with Iraqi Kurdish officials, Turkey has stressed that Iraq's future is something for the people of Iraq to decide. Iraqi Kurds value that view and are urging neighboring countries to refrain from any interference in Iraqi domestic politics. The Kurdish region of Iraq has been a valued partner of Turkey over the past twelve years, particularly on security issues. Moreover, Turkish companies are performing significant amounts of work in northern Iraq, soon to reach \$60 million worth in the Sulaymaniyah region alone. As for the Kurdistan Workers Party (PKK), that is a matter for the state of Iraq and the state of Turkey to decide. Iraq cannot be a safe haven or launching pad for military organizations that are hostile to neighboring countries. By the same token, Iraq expects its neighbors to respect its own territorial integrity and security.

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