

# Iraqi Regime Change and the Kurdistan Regional Government

Sep 17, 2002



## Brief Analysis

Since it became an autonomous region in 1991, Kurdistan has taken advantage of its relative freedom from the tyranny of Baghdad. As a result, Kurdish culture has blossomed, media outlets have boomed, and the number of schools, physicians, and universities in the region has increased dramatically. In comparison to its pre-1991 status, Kurdistan is doing very well. Nevertheless, it has reached a dead end. The Kurdish people realize that in order to ensure further cultural revival, better education, and additional healthcare, a regime change in Baghdad is necessary. At the same time, the Iraqi people look with pride at what has been achieved in Kurdistan and wait for the day in which they can emulate it. They, too, have reached the conclusion that regime change is necessary and that they must accept differences within their society and government, as expressed through the ballot box. Iraqis feel that the day of liberation is near, and they hope that the international community will soon perceive their readiness for change and their willingness to pay the price for such change.

### Federalist Democracy, Post-Saddam

Decentralization is crucial for the development of democracy in Iraq. Centralization of power through any one man in Baghdad, no matter how democratic his principles, will only corrupt him. Therefore, a post-Saddam government will need to institute numerous checks and balances. To ensure decentralization, this new government will need to divide Iraq into federations, which should be based on regional interests rather than ethnic differences. The central government would retain control over certain functions (e.g., the military and finances), but, for the most part, governance should be handled at the local level. If Iraq were transformed into this sort of federalist democracy, it could become a pillar of stability in the Middle East and a catalyst for major change in the region's balance of power. In the struggle to build a democratic Iraq, Kurdistan should be seen as a model for remaking the rest of the country, given the fact that it has already developed many of the civic and political structures that Iraq needs.

The only way for Iraqis to effect these changes, however, is by appealing to the United States, Europe, and Turkey for support and security. In the long term, these powers will find that a commitment to regime change will require far fewer resources and personnel than they currently spend on containing Saddam. Once Saddam is defeated, favorable regime change will take place quickly. Building a new, democratic government will not be as difficult as many experts claim; it will not take 30 years or 30,000 peacekeeping troops. Elections for a constituent assembly could occur within a year, and the international community could expect a stable Iraq to emerge within a short period of time. Yet, some level of American support and peacekeeping efforts would be critical to establishing such stability.

### Territorial Integrity

History has shown that the geopolitics of Iraq will keep the country intact following Saddam's ouster. Although the Kurds have had the opportunity to enjoy total independence, they could not secede from the rest of the country in the past, and they do not expect to be able to do so in the future, barring some fundamental change in the region. This is not to say that the Kurds do not want an independent state; like all other peoples, they do, but they have come

to realize that their only real option is to remain a part of Iraq. They have resigned themselves to the historical and geographical realities imposed on them. Moreover, they have come to realize that Kurdistan cannot be sustained without a democratic Iraq. Therefore, the Kurds are working toward regime change with the rest of the Iraqi opposition forces.

Turkey is particularly concerned about stability in a post-Saddam Iraq. Yet, Ankara need not worry about the country's territorial integrity following regime change. The only reason that the Kurds of Iraq enjoy de facto independence today is because the current Iraqi regime has forced this separation on them. Although Turkey often views the Kurds as the likely agents of Iraq's dismemberment, it is the Kurds who are calling for the unification of Iraq. Those who are genuinely concerned about Iraqi territorial integrity should support the people of Iraq in their attempt to rebuild their country into a state that can be at peace with itself and with its neighbors. It would be strategically advantageous for Turkey to have a secular, democratic neighbor. Ultimately, Ankara will realize that regime change in Baghdad would be to its own advantage, and that the Kurds of Iraq are willing and able to restore their country. Moreover, Turkey's experience and resources would be much appreciated as the Iraqi people work to develop a new society.

### The Role of Kurdish Forces in Regime Change

While Iraqi military morale has continued to deteriorate, the PUK and the Kurdistan Democratic Party have greatly improved their military command, training, and control capabilities over the course of the past year. Yet, the Iraqi forces still have superior firepower, which remains a major concern for the Kurds. Currently, Iraqi forces refrain from attacking Kurdish strongholds because they fear American military retaliation. If war in Iraq becomes imminent, however, Iraq might try to attack Kurdistan in advance of a U.S.-led invasion. Secretary of State Colin Powell has stated that the United States would respond to an attack on Kurdistan, but he was vague about the nature of this response, saying only that it would be at the place and time of Washington's choosing. Such a promise is too noncommittal to reassure the Kurds, who live next door to Saddam. The Kurds do not want to wait until thousands of people have been killed before Washington responds. The United States should make its position clear, ensuring that Baghdad understands its intentions and demonstrating to the Iraqi people that America is serious about saving them from the tyranny of Saddam Husayn.

The United States has not asked the Kurds to take part in a war against Saddam. If the Kurds are to have a role in such a war, it would not be as Kurds alone, but also as Iraqis fighting for an Iraqi formula. Although Kurdish forces may be able to take the city of Kirkuk on their own, this tactical victory would be a strategic mistake because it could create problems with Turkey and with other Iraqi ethnic groups. The people of Kurdistan, who have suffered for so long already, cannot afford to make this sort of mistake. The Kurdish people have no future alone; they must fight with the rest of the Iraqi people for a unified Iraq.

This Special Policy Forum Report was prepared by Shoshanah Haberman.

Policy #656

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