Kurdistan Dispatch:

Bomb Shelter

Jun 17, 2002

Articles & Testimony

"At the very best, you might have met Jesse Jackson; more likely, you'd be in an unmarked grave," chided the Kurdish minister. He was not happy. It was the spring of 2001, and a friend and I had accidentally crossed from the Kurdish opposition-controlled portion of Iraq into government territory. The line of control had been easy to miss. The last checkpoint on the Kurdish side looked like any other -- two or three soldiers armed with Kalashnikovs politely checking passenger IDs and occasionally opening trunks to search for illegal weapons. The white Toyota Land Cruiser we were driving looked like those used by the United Nations, and the Kurds at the checkpoint simply waved us on. From there we expected to enter the one-to five-kilometer no-man's-land that normally separates Kurdish and government territory. We crossed a bridge over the Zab River, and 50 meters later came to another checkpoint. About a dozen soldiers lounged near a large howitzer emplacement. Then my friend pointed to the howitzer and asked with alarm, "Isn't that gun pointed the wrong way?" We slowly turned around, returning to the Kurdish safe haven before Saddam Hussein's soldiers were any the wiser.

Our memories were correct: The territory just beyond the Zab River had been no-man's-land. But roughly one year earlier, Iraqi troops had occupied it; and when the United States didn't respond, they dug in. "If the Americans would have reacted, they would have retreated," one Kurdish soldier explained.

For the Kurds, the remilitarization of no-man's-land is one more sign that when it comes to confronting Saddam, the United States can't be trusted. And that's a big problem, because without Kurdish help the Bush administration's on-again, off-again invasion plans may be off for good. The two primary Iraqi-Kurdish leaders, Massoud Barzani and Jalal Talabani -- who head the Kurdistan Democratic Party (KDP) and the Patriotic Union of Kurdistan (PUK), respectively -- administer a chunk of Iraq twice the size of New Jersey. They control 50,000 lightly armed peshmerga (literally, "those who face death") as well as a number of small airfields, many of which were cleared of debris in March ("to provide better picnic grounds," Kurdish officials told the populace). While the landing strips would need to be lengthened to accommodate jet fighters, basic infrastructure exists for helicopters and smaller planes and can be quickly upgraded for more sophisticated aircraft. (Indeed, the Turkish army occasionally uses the Bamerni Airfield near Sarsang.) In addition, scattered throughout the region are concrete fortresses built by Saddam and now used by refugees, the United Nations, or peshmerga -- fortresses that could be easily secured for use by American rear-guard troops as armor and ammunition depots. While the United States can oust Saddam without Kurdish assistance, a ready-made staging area in northern Iraq would lessen our dependence on unreliable Persian Gulf partners like Saudi Arabia -- which would make any military campaign a whole lot easier.

But right now the Kurds aren't keen to put their resources at America's disposal. In April, Barzani and Talabani refused permission for the CIA to renew a permanent American presence in the region. Efforts by American diplomats to convince the two Kurdish leaders to jointly sign a public document outlining a joint vision for a federal Iraq have come to naught. In February both KDP and PUK refused to allow an Iraqi National Congress (INC) radio transmitter on their territory, even though both parties are members of the INC. That same month Barzani declared

to The Wall Street Journal, "We will not be party to any project that will endanger what we have achieved." While most Iraqi Kurds despise Saddam as a mass murderer and would like nothing more than to see him deposed, they don't want to provoke him without guarantees that Washington is serious. And based on past U.S. behavior, they aren't convinced that if they rise up once again, Washington will finish the job.

The leaders of the Iraqi Kurds have long memories compounded by a sometimes self-defeating obsession with foreign betrayal. "How can we trust the United States?" Barzani asked me rhetorically in an interview last spring. "You only care about your own interests, not ours." He illustrated his contention with a narrative of U.S. abandonment centered around three key incidents. The first occurred in 1975 when Henry Kissinger brokered the Algiers agreement, suspending (temporarily, it turned out) the then-low-grade conflict between Iran and Iraq (full-scale war erupted five years later). As part of the deal, Kissinger effectively pulled the rug out from beneath the Iranian-supported Kurdish rebellion in Iraq, forcing tens of thousands of Iraqi Kurds into Iranian refugee camps. In a January 2000 interview, Deputy Kurdish Prime Minister Sami Abdul Rahman called Kissinger's actions "the most cruel betrayal in our history -- which is full of betrayals."

The second American betrayal came in 1987 and 1988, after up to 182,000 Kurds died in an ethnic-cleansing campaign that began when the Iraqi government bulldozed more than 4,000 of the 4,650 Kurdish villages in northern Iraq and culminated in Saddam's use of chemical weapons against civilian Kurds. While Saddam carried out the infamous Halabja attack allegedly in retaliation for Kurdish militia support for Iranian forces, most of the villages attacked and destroyed were civilian and far from the Iranian frontier. But in order not to antagonize Saddam, whom the United States was then seeking to engage, the United States denied knowledge of the ethnic cleansing. Three years later a map noting each destroyed village -- compiled using American satellite intelligence, printed by the Pentagon's Defense Mapping Agency, and declassified for use by U.S. troops at the start of the Gulf war -- proved America's duplicity.

Finally, the Kurds hold the United States largely responsible for the failure of their post-Gulf war uprising one decade ago. On February 15, 1991, President George H.W. Bush called on "the Iraqi military and the Iraqi people to take matters into their own hands, to force Saddam Hussein, the dictator, to step aside." And the Kurds, along with antigovernment Shia in Iraq's South, dutifully rose up -- only to have the U.S. military withhold air cover and let them be crushed. Many Kurds believe that the United States was not simply feckless, but that it wanted the rebellions defeated. "If the U.S. wanted us to oust Saddam, we could have," Mam Rustam, a PUK commander, explained. "But instead the Americans released the Republican Guard POWs, just in time for them to rearm, remobilize, and attack us."

And over the past two years the United States still hasn't won the Kurds' trust. In September 2000 Secretary of State Madeleine Albright outlined the Iraqi provocations that would result in the use of American forces: "We do not want to see [the Iraqi government] reconstitute their weapons of mass destruction, and we don't want them to take action against the Kurds, and we don't want them to threaten the neighborhood." And indeed, in December 2000, when Iraqi troops crossed the thirty-sixth parallel and surrounded Ba'adre, a town on the line of control, the United States responded, and Saddam's men quickly retreated. I visited Ba'adre soon after the incursion ended. Residents described how U.S. warplanes flew low over Iraqi lines and 138 Iraqi troops threw down their weapons and surrendered without a shot.

But the Bush administration, despite its tough talk, hasn't kept up the pressure. In May 2001, Iraqi forces probed Kurdish defenses near the dusty town of Kifri without any American response. Just last month U.S. intelligence reported increasing Iraqi MiG fighter activity inside the no-fly zones, a clear violation of the post-Gulf war arrangement. Around the same time, Iraq moved armored units and infantry to within artillery range of Irbil, the Kurdish regional capital. Kurds hoped the Bush administration would take the cue and respond to the provocations

militarily. But the Bush administration has done no such thing.

In fact, the rare moments of American toughness only underscore the Kurds' chronic disappointment. On February 16, 2001, U.S. jets pounded Iraqi radar installations outside Baghdad after Iraqi anti-aircraft batteries targeted no-fly-zone patrols. I was working out at the University of Dohuk's gymnasium when the news first came in. "Finally, the U.S. shows it is serious," a businessman remarked, a view repeated by others. But faced with State Department criticism, President George W. Bush never repeated the operation despite continued Iraqi noncompliance, in effect signaling to Saddam that the new administration was unwilling to consistently back up its bluster with action.

The Kurds have also lost faith because successive American administrations have hedged on commitments for the sake of legalism. In August 1996 (and on subsequent occasions as well) Washington refused to respond when Iraqi helicopters moved north of the thirty-sixth parallel -- since technically the no-fly zone applies only to fixed-wing aircraft. But that distinction makes little sense to the Kurds, who see little substantive difference in being strafed by Iraqi planes, shot by Iraqi helicopters, or machine-gunned by Iraqi armor. The Kurds are also frustrated by Washington's inconsistent interpretation of the boundaries of the Kurdish safe haven. Initially it was 36 square miles and centered on the town of Zakho -- though it later expanded to include Dohuk as well, bringing the total area to a much larger 3,600 square miles. In October 1991 Saddam withdrew his administration from huge swaths of territory in an attempt to starve the recalcitrant Kurds into submission; his food and fuel blockade failed, and the Kurds filled the vacuum, expanding their control to nearly 15,500 square miles. If Saddam orders his forces to attack that expanded territory, the Kurds worry that the United States might say it has no obligation to protect anything beyond Dohuk and Zakho, putting more than three million Iraqi Kurds outside those two cities at risk. Successive U.S. administrations have failed to clarify their position on how exactly they define the safe haven, leaving Iraqi Kurds confused about and unimpressed by Washington's so-called red lines.

If Bush is serious about finishing Saddam, he needs to do more than opine about the "axis of evil." He must give clear guarantees of military support and protection to the Iraqis on the ground who will bear the brunt of the fighting, whether as combatants or bystanders. Bush must also let Saddam know that use of chemical weapons against Iraqi civilians (i.e., the Kurds) will draw the same massive retaliation as the use of chemical weapons against American forces. Only then will he have a chance of convincing Kurdish leaders to assist U.S. regime-change plans in Iraq. As Talabani told me over breakfast in his Sulaymaniyah office last year, "The United States . . . has a role, and will have a role if -- and put two lines under that 'if' -- if the United States is serious." So far the Bush administration hasn't even put one line. ❖

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