

Iraq and Counterterrorism: The Role of the Kurdistan Regional Government

Oct 18, 2001



Brief Analysis

Ten years after the Gulf War, much of Iraqi Kurdistan is free from Baghdad's control and is busy trying to build a civil society in a very difficult region. Out of the ashes of tyranny, the Iraqi Kurds have built something tangible: a free, liberal society by Middle Eastern standards, if not by higher standards. Basic human rights are assured: for example, in Sulaymania there are some fifty-five newspapers, many of which are very critical of the government and the PUK. And much has been done to develop the local economy through governmental and tax reforms, and the UN Oil-for-Food program.

There have been setbacks, especially regarding the eruption of violence between the two major Kurdish organizations, the PUK and the Kurdish Democratic Party (KDP), six years ago. However, relations have stabilized and the two have learned to coexist -- even work together -- on a variety of regional and international issues, such as Oil-for-Food and U.S. relations.

Ten years into self-governance, Iraqi Kurds understand the limitations of nationalism. Iraqi Kurdistan will have no future unless it becomes part of a wider Iraqi framework to bring about fundamental political reform in Baghdad. Iraqi Kurds want to be seen as Iraqis, not defined and limited by their Kurdishness. Democratic, liberal minded Kurds and Arabs have a lot in common. Iraqi Kurdistan is an Iraqi issue, not a Kurdish nationalist project. That message should reassure those in Turkey who have some fundamental anxieties about Iraqi territorial integrity.

Iraqi Kurds can be good partners with the United States in bringing about a better Iraq -- one that is an ally of the democratic powers of the West, not a source of instability. The Kurdish Regional government in Sulaymania is committed to bringing about an Iraq that is at peace with its people and at peace with the world at large.

The Kurdish regional government in Sulaymania has no evidence linking Iraq to the September 11 events. However, even if one decides to ignore the Iraqi problem, it will come back: Saddam Husayn will not let the international community alone. On that count, it was appalling to see Osama bin Laden cite the suffering of Iraqi children as a cause for justifying the heinous crime in New York. Iraqi children have nothing to do with this crime. They are not dying because of sanctions, they are suffering because of Saddam's policies. The option to save the children of Iraq is open. Iraqi citizens have an opportunity to maintain a very good quality of life, through the Oil-for-Food program. It assures Iraqi citizens resources that were never available to them before because it compels the Iraqi government to spend the money on them.

The Islamic Threat to Iraqi Kurdistan

In the past few months, we have been plagued by a terrorist threat ourselves. Around September 1, a group by the name of Jund al-Islam was established, a group that we have verified to be part of the Al Qaeda network. According to our information, this organization was formed around June of this year by the unification of two groups, Hamas and Tawhid, under the auspices of bin Laden's leadership in Afghanistan. They returned to our region, set up bases, and joined forces with one of the military wings of the Islamic Union (the main Islamic organization operating in Iraqi

Kurdistan, which is also a member of our coalition government), creating Jund al-Islam.

In their declaration, they cite two reasons for setting up this organization and for choosing Iraqi Kurdistan as a site for jihad. First, the terrain of Iraqi Kurdistan is conducive to jihad. Second, the "seculars," referring to the mainstream Iraqi Kurdish leadership, have turned Iraqi Kurdistan into a haven for Jews, Christians, and American influence. We have verified that thirty-four Iraqi Kurdish people have received training at Al Qaeda bases in Afghanistan, and four of the senior leadership of Jund al-Islam are Afghani Arabs. One of the members, Abu Abed-a-Rahman, was said to be a personal envoy of bin Laden. According to our reports, he was killed three days ago in a battle with PUK forces. Another point of interest is the group of the Iraqi Sunni Arabs who are affiliated with Jund al-Islam and are working with them primarily from the area of Mosul.

The PUK has tried, by various political means, to dislodge this group which was based in an area near the Iranian border. But they ambushed a PUK "pesh merga" contingent, slaughtering forty-two of men ritualistically. In February, they assassinated a senior KDP leader, Francois Hariri, in Arbil. The PUK therefore had no choice but to confront them militarily by taking the town of Halabja. Fortunately, both parties, the PUK and the KDP, cooperated closely in finding and apprehending the people responsible. The departure of Afghani Arabs from Kurdish territory is a top priority.

U.S. Policy

With the inauguration of the Bush administration, PUK leader Jalal Talabani and KDP leader Masud Barazani wrote a joint letter to President George W. Bush explaining the concerns of the Kurdish people, and Secretary of State Colin Powell was gracious enough to respond with some very specific language on Kurdish security and economic concerns. In addition, the U.S. mission to the UN sent the Iraqi government a warning about taking advantage of U.S. involvement in Afghanistan and causing trouble. To build on these important initiatives, the United States could work to improve the implementation of the Oil-for-Food program. Baghdad has been interfering with the implementation of the program; after all, Saddam has a vested interest in seeing the program fail.

◆ This Special Policy Forum Report was prepared by Natan Sachs.

Policy #575

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