Kurdish Agreement Signals New U.S. Commitment

by Alan Makovsky **(/experts/alan-makovsky)**

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ABOUT THE AUTHORS

Alan Makovsky (/experts/alan-makovsky)
Alan Makovsky is a senior fellow for national security and international policy at the Center for American Progress.

Brief Analysis

Turkey's weekend decision to boost diplomatic ties with Saddam Hussein to ambassadorial level highlights widespread regional opposition to an agreement between two long-feuding Iraqi Kurdish leaders signed in Washington earlier this month. The agreement affirms the Iraqi Kurds' desire to avoid further inter-factional fighting and to prevent Saddam's return to Kurdish-held areas. It is at best questionable, however, whether the accord will aid or undermine those goals and whether the increased U.S. verbal commitment to the Iraqi Kurds, which probably made the agreement possible, is sustainable.

Background. The Washington agreement is the latest in a series of agreements signed by the antagonistic Kurdish parties, Massoud Barzani's Kurdistan Democratic Party (KDP) and Jalal Talabani's Patriotic Union of Kurdistan (PUK), since inter-factional fighting broke out in 1994. Though more detailed than previous agreements, it is essentially a declaration of principles that will require considerably more negotiating. It contains the elements present in most previous pacts: revenue-sharing, power-sharing (including elections), and security arrangements (including a pledge to deny use of northern Iraq to the anti-Turkish PKK). It also offers a couple of new wrinkles: a firm, if ambitious, timetable for phasing in the agreement; a larger role for the international community in helping to stabilize the new regime; and an endorsement of "a federative basis" for a post-Saddam Iraq. A breakthrough is the KDP's stated willingness to share its fatter revenues with the PUK as the first step in the process of reconciliation.

Intended to bolster the agreement is another factor, extraneous to the agreement but crucial to its conclusion: U.S. declarations intended to dissuade Saddam Hussein from attacking Kurds. These U.S. pledges were the most important factor in convincing the Kurdish leaders to sign. Secretary of State Madeleine Albright publicly reaffirmed past U.S. support for UN Security Council Resolution 688; pledged no tolerance of further Iraqi crimes such as chemical warfare attacks on the Kurds in the late 1980s and the conventional warfare assault on them in 1991; and, in an ambiguous but nevertheless unprecedented warning, said the U.S. might respond if Saddam poses a "threat" to "the Iraqi people, including those in the north." Apparently her words were stronger in private. According to senior Kurdish officials who participated in the meetings, she told Kurdish leaders that the U.S. would "protect you as we protect Kuwait," provided Kurdish leaders hold to the new agreement, keep Saddam's troops out of areas the Kurds now hold, and do not provoke Saddam merely to invite U.S. retaliation. If this report is accurate, Albright's statement would reverse then-Assistant Secretary Robert Pelletreau's 1996 Congressional testimony that protection of the Iraqi

Kurdish enclave is "not the policy of this administration."

> Ironically, the agreement comes at a time of relative tranquility and prosperity for the Kurds. A cease-fire has been in place since November 1997 and implementation of UN Security Council Resolutions 986 and 1153 ("oil-for-food") has eased poverty, diminishing Talabani's resentment over Barzani's unwillingness to share the income from the lucrative customs assessments on Turkish truckers (who pass through Barzani's area, but not Talabani's). Although the Kurdish held area is divided into two distinct parts under the two leaders -- not united as it was in the days before inter-factional fighting began in May 1994 and as the Washington agreement envisions it should be again -- virtually all who have been to the region agree that it is better administered now. When united, each party had a share of each ministry and constantly check-mated one another. The current separation thus eliminated internal squabbling and even, according to some witnesses, established a healthy competition between the sides to demonstrate the greater administrative efficiency.

Potential benefits. The agreement, if implemented as envisioned, would boost the U.S.'s Iraq policy by fostering Kurdish unity against Saddam Hussein. Both factions have been maintaining separate dialogues with Baghdad until now, allowing Saddam to play one side off against the other. Intra-Kurdish cooperation also might create conditions of peace and stability in the region that might, in turn, lay the groundwork for an Iraqi opposition once again to base itself in Iraqi Kurdistan. That is not in the cards for now, however; both Kurdish factions want to avoid deep involvement with the Iraqi opposition, whose presence, they fear, would only provoke Saddam and increase prospects that he would again invade territory held by the Kurds or pressure them in other ways.

Pitfalls Regional reaction. Turkey's decision to boost diplomatic ties with Baghdad, almost certainly a protest response to the Kurdish agreement, illustrates the primary problem: Neighboring states in the region -- not only Turkey, but also Iran, Syria, and, of course, Iraq -- will object strenuously to the agreement and try to undermine it. All of these states prefer the status quo of the past year, i.e., the Kurds' being divided but pacific. Though the Kurds have a powerful patron in the United States, it is also a distant one. Washington lacks both the proximity and the sense of urgency of the neighboring states. For its part, Turkey worries deeply about the possible emergence of an independent or even autonomous Kurdish entity in Iraq, which Ankara believes would further fuel separatist sentiment among its own Kurds. Turkey thus objected strongly to references in the new agreement to a future federation in Iraq and to a high-profile role envisioned for the "international community, " which, in Ankara's estimation, would give the Kurdish entity an international standing of sorts. Turkey was also extremely displeased that it was not consulted about the terms of the agreement; it had previously been heavily involved in inter-Kurdish diplomacy.

Difficult implementation. The agreement contains a highly ambitious timetable: three months of preparation for joint government and six months of transitional government leading up to elections June 1. That would be a hopeful schedule even were all the details of revenue-sharing and power-sharing resolved, but they are not. For example, how much money will the KDP transfer to the PUK when it begins this process (scheduled to start later this week)? Which side will control which ministries? Moreover, these negotiations will take place against a background of considerable lingering distrust. If poisonous recrimination over missed deadlines is to be averted, each side will have to show considerable goodwill and willingness to embrace Yitzhak Rabin's Oslo-related dictum that "no deadlines are sacred."

Washington's commitment. The increased level of U.S. commitment is surprising, and possibly ill-advised, for several reasons. First, Kurds have always read more into U.S. commitments than the U.S. intended, setting them up for miscalculation and subsequent disappointment and bitterness. This past experience suggests U.S. diplomacy should be as realistic and minimalist as possible when making promises to the Kurds. Second, even were the U.S. to want to intervene in northern Iraq to protect the Kurds from an Iraqi assault, logistical, political, and diplomatic

difficulties would abound. Such an effort would require a sustained military campaign, perhaps requiring ground troops. It plausibly could only be staged from Turkey, whose government would oppose it. Virtually the whole world -- and certainly the "rehabilitate Saddam" crowd, France, Russia, and the Arab world -- would also oppose it, citing the fact that northern Iraq is legally under Baghdad's sovereignty. Except in the most egregious circumstances, such as another chemical warfare attack on the Kurds (and perhaps even then), these conditions would present almost insuperable obstacles to U.S. intervention on behalf of the Kurds.

If Washington's commitment is a bluff, intended merely to keep Saddam at bay, it may work for a while, but not indefinitely. If it is real, its implementation (at least, as understood by the Kurds) would require considerable diplomatic and possibly military costs, which, for the sake of long-term credibility, Washington would be obliged to bear. Whatever the case with the U.S. commitment, history suggests Saddam will soon want to test its limits.

Alan Makovsky is a senior fellow at The Washington Institute. ❖

Policy #341

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