



The Kurds in a Post-Saddam Iraq: Opportunities, Constraints, and Risks

By Michiel Leezenberg

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The first thing to do when thinking about Iraqi society is to forget the cliché of an age-old and enduring divide between Kurds and Arabs, and between Sunnis and Shi'ites. The major social faultlines in contemporary Iraq do not coincide with any such ethnic boundaries. Over the past decade and a half, the country has undergone vast social changes, such as an economic shock therapy followed by the ruinous effects of the UN embargo, the emergence of new forms of political Islam, and a wholly novel tribalization of urban society; Iraq is now very much a decentralized state, with partly new local strongmen. Ethnicity is but one of the factors in explaining present and future constellations, and may not even be the most important one. Below, I will argue for this claim on the basis of the major long-term developments in the *de facto* autonomous part of Iraqi Kurdistan, and sketch some possible scenarios for developments following a by now virtually inevitable war.

The Iraqi Kurds do not trust American intentions; but they appear to want to make the most out of the situation. Moreover, they are not ideologically anti-American, despite what they (with some justification) see as American betrayal, or lack of support, especially regarding the 1975 collapse of Kurdish resistance, the 1988 Iraqi chemical attacks and the failed 1991 uprising. Indeed, many of them are surprisingly favorably disposed towards an American-led war against Saddam; surprisingly, as they are well aware of the huge risks of such an operation. A war may cause not only the disruption of the food distribution

system (on which the majority of the population depend), civilian exposure to military attacks (including the use of WMDs) from whatever direction, and a large-scale refugee crisis; but also the loss of the Kurdish political achievements of the past decade.

The crucial factor seems to be the course of the war. US military planning seems to assume a quick, clean surgical operation with few civilian casualties (some sources are quoted as speaking of a one-month operation), keeping Iraq's bureaucracy and distribution apparatus more or less in place. Such a scenario, unfortunately, seems extremely unlikely. It seems likely that a war will be fought primarily in the cities, thus exposing the urban population to a military onslaught and disrupting the UN food-for-oil program. No large-scale precautions against possible chemical attacks appear to have been taken, either in the Kurdish-held area or in government territory. Moreover, Baathi Iraq, unlike Taliban-held Afghanistan, has a solidly entrenched administration and is deeply rooted in Iraqi society and institutions. Not only does this make a quick victory less likely than in the case of Afghanistan; a total regime collapse would also be likely to involve a popular uprising against the widely despised regime, and thus to lead to an extremely dangerous social anarchy.

Two ethnopolitical scenarios following a collapse of the Baath regime, however, may safely be discarded straight away: that of a secession of an independent Kurdish state, and

by extension that of a breakup of Iraq along ethnic and sectarian lines. The Kurdish leaders have no ambitions for independence, partly out of concern over possible Turkish reactions, and partly because of their own internal political divisions. The chance of Iraq disintegrating into three ethnicity-based statelets is even more implausible, if only for the simple demographic reason that a very substantial part, if not a majority, of the population of Baghdad is of Shi'ite or Kurdish extraction. The Shi'ites have never considered themselves anything but Iraqis, and have never aspired to the creation of a sectarian state. Moreover, at the social level, there are no ethnic animosities or antagonisms between Kurds and Arabs or between Sunnis and Shi'ites even remotely resembling those between, for example, Serbs and Albanians in the former Yugoslavia.

In present-day Iraqi Kurdistan, Kurdish ethnic identity no longer plays the major role it had a decade ago. Culturally, some irreversible steps towards a greater Kurdish autonomy have clearly been taken. A whole generation of children have been educated in Kurdish, and are not even fluent in Arabic; the region also has relatively free and open media, in which the Kurdish diaspora and the internet play an important role. Politically, however, the present-day constellation is rather less stable. In 1992, a Kurdish regional parliament and government were installed, but these effectively ceased functioning during the years of infighting; instead, two distinct administrations have emerged, each dominated by one of the two major Kurdish parties, the KDP and the PUK. There has been a general depoliticization, in part due to the widespread disillusionment with the corruption and infighting of the Kurdish parties (and consequently with Kurdish nationalist aspirations), and to the rise of political islam as an ideological alternative among the urban population. Economically, Iraqi Kurdistan is more firmly integrated in Iraq than ever before, as it is wholly dependent on the food-for-oil program, which for the most part runs through Baghdad.

On an optimistic view, one may argue that Iraqi Kurdistan has developed a moderate political pluralism and a balance of forces that

may serve as a model for a future Iraq as a whole. On a more pessimistic view, one may argue that the Kurdish experience shows that the prospects for genuine democratization, and even stability, are limited. Effectively, two one-party statelets have been established, and ironically, it is the islamist organizations (together with small independent journals like *Hawlati*) that nowadays constitute the most important political opposition and the only independent voices of civil society (these islamist groups, incidentally, should not be confused with the small and radical groups like Jund/Ansar al-Islam, who have received far more media coverage, but have a negligible social influence).

The important fact is that these one-party statelets function on the basis of clientelization rather than ethnic loyalty. In fact, over the past decade, attempts to mobilize people on an ethnic basis have been conspicuous for their failure: Turkish circles have encouraged Turcoman political demands (backed by the preposterous claim that Iraq counts 2 to 2,5 million Turcomans, and by supplying humanitarian aid to individuals on condition that they declare themselves Turcoman rather than Kurdish), in an obvious attempt to counter Kurdish aspirations; but the regional Turcoman parties have little durable support. Likewise, in the mid-1990s, some Kurdish sources attempted to depict the military clash between KDP and PUK as an ethnic conflict between the 'tribal' Northern and the 'urban' southern Iraqi Kurds, but they failed to convince, let alone mobilize, the local population.

Developments of the past decade also give the lie to the naive moral perception that the genocidal Anfal operations and the chemical attack on Halabja have, once and for all, discredited the Baath regime in the eyes of the Kurds and their leaders. Especially during the infights, between 1993 and 1997, the Kurdish parties have been quite willing to accept Baghdad as a mediator in peace negotiations, and even to enlist the support of the Iraqi army against their rivals. Moreover, both KDP and PUK have repeatedly tolerated, if not actively solicited, Turkish and Iranian military intervention in the region. Their behavior has not been determined by ethnic factors, but

rather by purely pragmatic considerations of political and economic self-interest. More importantly, neither Barzani nor Talabani has ever displayed the attitude of the head of an aspiring independent state; both have always defined their ambitions within, and even subordinate to, Iraq as it is. Nor has either of them displayed any serious ambition in the direction of Baghdad, even though the key to an enduring solution of the Kurdish question can only come from, or with, the central government.

But even the prospects for a Kurdish-Arab federal state are less than secure. True, with their present control over substantial parts of Iraqi territory, the Kurds have a strong starting position in negotiating or a federal solution, but only as long as they can maintain unity. Unity between the two parties has only been achieved under strong external pressure, and may not be likely to last for any prolonged period of time. The reconvening of the two-party assembly in October 2002 seems to have been a one-off event rather than a step in an ongoing process of reunification. In the long run, the existing subdivision of the Kurdish region into KDP- and PUK-dominated territories may well solidify, and lead to a cantonal rather than a federal structure. Such a constellation would ironically and unintentionally resemble Kanan Makiya's vision of a non-ethnic decentralized Iraq, where territoriality rather than ethnicity is the decisive factor.

Does Kurdish ethnicity, then, form no potential risk or liability at all? That would be the wrong conclusion. The major risks, however, lie not at the domestic or popular level, but rather come from the neighbouring states, who have been eyeing developments with suspicion. The gravest risk factor is the oil-rich and ethnically mixed city of Kirkuk. A rush for Kirkuk may trigger off a new armed confrontation between the two Kurdish parties, or more importantly, a confrontation with Turkey. In their draft constitution, the Iraqi Kurds have claimed Kirkuk as the capital of a future federal Kurdish region, but Turkey has already indicated that it will consider any Kurdish move on Kirkuk as a *casus belli*. Worse, Iran has stated that it will not tolerate

any Turkish military intervention on Iraqi soil,- and vice versa.

This course of events may not be the most likely. Turkey and Iran may prefer not to put their relations with America, Europe, and the Arab world at risk; and the Kurdish leaders may prefer consolidating their earlier gains than jeopardizing them in the pursuit of greater game. But the possibility is certainly real. In private, the Kurdish leadership is extremely pessimistic about the prospect of a possible Turkish invasion and occupation all the way to Kirkuk. Indeed in the past, Turkey has shown itself willing to intervene militarily, witness the March 1995 invasion in the wake of a half-hearted PUK-INC assault on Kirkuk, an invasion which, significantly, at first drew no protests from Baghdad. This time, however, any substantial Turkish invasion will have a seriously destabilizing effect, and may well lead to a violent and wholly unpredictable escalation.

It is impossible to predict which of these scenarios will materialize, but one thing seems certain: in the case of Iraq, the apparent optimism about a Kosovo- or Afghanistan-style walkover seems rather misplaced. Any deviation from this implicitly assumed best-case scenario is likely to have grave consequences for the local population, regardless of political loyalty or ethnic background, and to lead to further instability even beyond the Iraqi borders.

Michiel Leezenberg is an assistant professor of philosophy at the University of Amsterdam. His main research interests are the foundations of the social sciences, Islamic philosophy, and the Kurdish question. His recent book, *Islamic Philosophy: A History*, was awarded the prize for the best Dutch-language philosophy book of the year. Mr. Leezenberg has spent considerable time doing field research in Iraqi Kurdistan, and he has published numerous articles on ethnic identity and on religious and economic developments in the region. In 1992, he was a monitor for the regional elections; he also was a coorganizer of several conferences on the reconstruction of Iraqi Kurdistan.