

The Kurdish Question

Can Turkey learn to live with an increasingly powerful Iraqi Kurdistan across the border?

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Madeleine Elfenbein | July 16, 2007 | The American Prospect

About 200 Turks gathered near the U. S. embassy in Ankara to protest against the United States for not cracking down on Turkish Kurdish rebels based in Iraq. (AP Photo/Burhan Ozbilici)

The phantom nation of **Kurdistan** has as long and bloody and proud a history as any Middle Eastern nation -- longer, bloodier, and even prouder, one might say, for it has never had the chance to fail its citizens. It has led its existence as a shadow country hovering over the mountainous region now occupied by Turkey, Syria, Iraq, Iran, and Armenia. It has had leaders who fought for it, and enemies who tried to destroy it, and millions of would-be citizens, but it has never appeared on official maps of the region.

Instead, throughout the twentieth century the idea of Kurdistan has been used as both a carrot and a stick to manipulate the balance of power in the Middle East, leading to developments that rarely benefited the Kurds themselves. "No friends but the mountains," the Kurdish saying goes.

Soon the landscape may change. A Kurdish state is now emerging in northern Iraq, and the status of the Kurds as a landless, stateless people appears about to shift, perhaps dramatically. For some Kurds, that is. The Kurdistan Regional Government, as it is still somewhat modestly known, controls what are now the only safe parts of Iraq, and more than a third of its oil. Its enthusiasts include not just the roughly four million Kurds living in the region, and the tens of millions of Kurds living outside it, but an increasing number of American politicians and pundits who see Kurdistan's success as the only way left to justify the war in Iraq. The pro-war Thomas Friedman of the *New York Times* said as much in his **recent column** on the subject, arguing that a U.S.-supported Kurdish state would at least provide "a decent democratizing example" for the rest of the region.

In return, Iraqi Kurds, to show their gratitude for the U.S. invasion and the realization of their longstanding dream, are offering Americans a fantasy of their own. "**Kurdistan -- The Other Iraq**," a website and multimedia ad campaign sponsored by the Kurdistan Development Corporation, is designed to attract supporters and investors with promises of a business environment that's "peaceful," "joyful," and has "fewer than 200 U.S. troops." As Jason Motlagh **recently reported** for *TAP Online*, the streets are safe and construction is booming. If only Kurdistan *were* Iraq, the United States could simply declare

victory and head home.

And if only the borders of the Kurdish homeland matched those of Iraqi Kurdistan, the entire region could heave a sigh of relief and move on. But Kurdistan isn't Iraq, nor is it the greater Kurdistan so longed for and dreaded. The longing and the fears remain. As Iraqi Kurds prepare to make their new state official and Americans urge them on, Turkey is massing troops along the border, staging threatening "maneuvers," and angrily demanding clarity from the United States about its position on "greater Kurdistan" -- a phrase that hardly ever escapes Turkish lips, although it looms large in the national consciousness.

Turkey is home to some 15 to 20 million people of Kurdish origin, or roughly a quarter of its 70 million citizens. The numbers are hotly disputed, as is the question of how "Kurdish" they are. Although the Kurds were present at the nation's founding 80 years ago and have risen individually to all levels of Turkish society, "the Kurds" as a distinct ethnic group are anathema to Turkey's sense of itself, and the prospect of their political unification is a recurring specter. A Turkish official near the border put it bluntly when he told the *New York Times* last month, "Now the U.S. has to choose, Turkish people or Kurdish people."

As any honest Anatolian will tell you, Turks and Kurds were once friends -- or, if not friends, neighbors living side by side for centuries under Ottoman rule. In the first decades of the 20th century, they teamed up with the Turks to fight the Russians to the north, and to rid Anatolia of the Armenians. When the Ottoman Empire collapsed in the wake of the First World War, the British drew up the Treaty of Sevres to include plans for a Kurdish state, hoping to win their support for the partitioning of the rest of the empire. But in a triumphal show of pan-Ottoman spirit, General Mustafa Kemal rallied Turks and Kurds alike to fight off the European invaders. A new treaty was drawn up at Lausanne to replace the one made at Sevres and establish the boundaries of a Turkish republic, with Turkish leaders there claiming to represent both Kurds and Turks equally.

No sooner had the British Royal Navy pulled away from Anatolian shores in defeat than Mustafa Kemal (later Atatürk) began the stern work of building a modern, secular and unified nation, with a national identity to match. "Nationalism is our only factor of cohesion," as Prime Minister Ismet Inönü explained in 1925. "At any price, we must Turkify the inhabitants of our land." This involved purging the existing language and culture of Arab, Persian, and Islamic elements, and absorbing or eliminating all trace of a distinct Kurdish identity. To replace what was lost, he offered all his newly minted citizens "Turkishness," an all-encompassing identity that gave the bearer claim to a common history, bloodline and set of enemies.

Thus the Kurds themselves became known as "mountain Turks," and quickly gained a reputation as the most recalcitrant sort of Turk: the sort who refused to call himself one. Turkey's Kurds went underground, but they would not disappear. In its frenzied attempt to create a nation united against all enemies,

Turkey created its own worst foe: an impoverished, resentful and alien nation within its own borders.

In every nation in which they found themselves stranded, the Kurds, to varying degrees, looked outside their national borders for solidarity and protection. The treaties of Sevres and Lausanne had taught them the dangers of turning up their noses at imperial collaboration. Instead, Kurdish groups in Turkey, Iraq and elsewhere actively solicited the aid of foreign powers in Europe and the Middle East, as well as the Americans and the Soviets. Mullah Mustafa Barzani, the mid-century Iraqi Kurdish leader and father of Iraqi Kurdistan's current president, Massoud Barzani, eagerly sought an alliance with the United States. In 1973, he famously proposed to make Iraqi Kurdistan a "51st state," an offer President Richard Nixon declined.

Instead, in a well-documented but now forgotten episode from Kissinger's storied years as secretary of state, the Shah of Iran persuaded the United States to support a rebellion of Iraqi Kurds with over a million dollars' worth of arms to destabilize his rival. The U.S. did so, only to abruptly withdraw its support when Iran and Iraq reached a *détente*. Iraq then launched a vicious campaign of retribution, and the Kurds' pleas for help went ignored. As an anonymous U.S. official told a Congressional committee investigating the incident, "covert action should not be confused with missionary work."

The scenario repeated itself in 1991 when the first President Bush, at war with Iraq, issued a ringing statement calling on Iraqis to "take matters into their own hands" and rise up against Saddam Hussein. The nation's oppressed Shiites and Kurds promptly did so, only to fail once again without support from U.S. troops. The United States finally got around to creating "no-fly zones" in Iraq's north and south, meant to protect the Shiites and Kurds against aerial bombardment and chemical weapons, and established a "green line" demarcating the Kurdish region of Iraq under U.S. protection. The Iraqi Kurds were able to build a *de facto* state of their own, with a separate elected government, a standing army and even informal embassies in foreign capitals, including Turkey's.

Now, at last, Hussein's defeat and the disintegration of Iraq have opened up the real possibility of a formally autonomous Kurdish nation. Although Iraqi Kurdistan is still not officially independent, plenty of people already behave as if it is. Turkish companies have been eagerly trading with the region for years, and, as Jason Motlagh notes, business over the border has picked up since Hussein's defeat. Even short of formal autonomy, Iraqi Kurdistan's achievements thus far are, in the words of the Kurdish activist Kani Xulam, "monumental." He adds that they cannot help but influence the ambitions of Turkey's Kurds.

Born just outside Diyarbakir, one of the largest cities in southeastern Turkey and a Kurdish capital of sorts, Xulam became an activist on learning that his village had been destroyed in a Turkish military operation. He now heads the D.C.-based American Kurdish Information Network, which seeks to "foster Kurdish-

American understanding and friendship." Others in his situation have taken a more militant route, joining up with the separatist Kurdistan Workers Party (PKK), which the United States has deemed a "foreign terrorist organization" and supports Turkey's efforts to root out. For his part, Xulam sees the future of the Kurdish people continuing to depend on the good will of foreign powers, including the United States.

"They call us 'collaborator Kurds,' lackeys of imperialism," Xulam told me. "The so-called progressives in Istanbul, in Cairo, in Beirut who vehemently oppose this idea." He added, "They are clueless. They don't even know what's happened to the Kurds in their name." His experience has taught him not to believe in "some ephemeral solidarity among the peoples of the Middle East against imperialism." As far as he's concerned, only when the Kurds have a strong state of their own can they be friends with their neighbors.

Xulam is one of many Kurds both inside and outside Iraq who cheered the fall of Saddam Hussein in 2003, even as he regrets the misery that has followed, because, as he says, "no one wants to be dominated." Yet he will not be sad to see Iraq itself dissolve. At a recent televised roundtable on Iraq hosted by Dan Rather, Xulam described it as a country that was "put together by Winston Churchill on March 12, 1921 in Cairo" and has always lacked legitimacy. It is a "diplomatic construct" whose death will not be mourned, in the north, at least.

Similarly, Xulam told me that "the country that Ataturk put together doesn't jive with the country on the ground," leading to many of the same problems. Yet American sympathy for Turkey's national ambitions has always been pronounced, and its sympathy for Turkey's Kurds more limited, in stark contrast to its often oppositional relationship with Iraq and intermittent support for Kurds there. The PKK has alienated potential Western sympathizers by resorting to violence against civilians, not to mention communist rhetoric, making them appear more like the Tamil Tigers of Sri Lanka than the Minutemen of Massachusetts. From a practical standpoint, the region inhabited by Turkey's Kurds is lamentably oil-free and minimally developed, in contrast to the far richer land of Iraqi Kurdistan.

Yet the past decade has seen what Xulam describes as "a rising tide of Kurdish nationalism" seeking to overcome existing national boundaries and reshape the Middle East. "In the dominant narrative, the Kurds are hapless, they don't know what they want," he said. But increasingly, they do: "Mind you, there's a difference between a villager and an activist. But it's absurd to say of the villager that he's not interested in his language and is happy to be a Turk. If people in Iraqi Kurdistan can have a semblance of self-government, Turkish Kurds will be jealous, they will be curious, and they will want to emulate" their cousins to the south, he said. "They will want the same for themselves."

Yet given the many differences between Kurds in Turkey and those in Iraq, not everyone expects the triumphs of Iraq's Kurds to change the situation of Kurds

elsewhere. "The Kurds are tribal and don't move as a unit," said George Harris, a former State Department official in Turkey and a scholar of the region. In his view, a Kurd living in Turkey is still far more likely to migrate to Istanbul or another city in western Turkey than across the border to Iraqi Kurdistan. He added, "The Iraqi Kurds have limited resources, and they're now enjoying unprecedented prosperity. Why would they want to share that with the Turkish Kurds?"

For the most part, the leaders of Iraqi Kurdistan have displayed a studied silence on the subject. "Iraqi Kurdish leaders are very savvy people," Harris explained. "They've been very careful not to encourage any sort of separatism" in Turkey or anywhere else. President Barzani did recently threaten to "interfere in Diyarbakir's issues" if Turkey did not stop meddling with the Kurds' consolidation of territory in Iraq, particularly the city of Kirkuk, where a sizable Turkoman minority still lives. But Iraqi Kurdistan's website studiously avoids any mention of Kurds living outside its borders. The only map on the site is an extremely vague image of Iraq, indicating the general location of the Kurdish region without defining its borders. So long as Iraqi Kurdistan depends for protection on the United States, which in turn depends on Turkey as one of its "valued allies and friends" in the region, this isn't likely to change.

In light of the unique situation faced by Turkey's ethnic Kurds, and their lack of strategic allies and their greater diffusion within the country itself, their best hope may lie with Turkish leaders themselves. The political calculus that for so long drove them to oppose Kurdish political and cultural representation is shifting fast under their feet, offering ample reason to rethink their approach. In his 1997 essay, "Whither the Kurds?," Harris observed that "some Turkish politicians recognize that a measure of political accommodation with their Kurdish population is desirable" -- to avoid both the complications of a messy domestic situation and the international stigma it carries. Ten years later, their incentive for smoothing things over has only increased. Besides, as Harris notes, and as Turkey's own history suggests, "a purely military response to Kurdish dissidence is bound to fail." After eighty years of struggle and tens of thousands of deaths, Turkey knows it.

The demands of the PKK notwithstanding, what most Turkish Kurds -- or Kurdish Turks -- want most is the right to live free from harassment, to speak, write and broadcast in their native language, and to organize politically as Kurds in order to reap the benefits of Turkish citizenship. Eighty years of living in a democratic state with a fierce nationalist ethos has shaped their loyalties and expectations differently than those of Iraqi Kurds, who by most reports feel little kinship with other Iraqis. Turkish leaders should take advantage of this difference while it lasts. "Pan-Kurdish sentiment is on the rise," Kani Xulam told me, adding, "Our adversaries may not want to admit to this, but they are responsible." In southeastern Turkey, the military checkpoints target Kurds, while in Iraqi Kurdistan, they target Arabs.

Turkey's first priority, understandably, is to "contain" Kurdistan and keep separatism from seeping across its borders. But in Xulam's words, the "revolution of rising expectations" is already underway, and Turkey would be foolish not to try and meet them. Whether they like it or not, geography has thrown Turks and Kurds together for the long haul. It's time for them to start using the same map.

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