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The United States and the Kurds: a brief history

To add to the tragic violence unleashed throughout Iraq as a result of the U.S. invasion of that country, the armed forces of Turkey have launched attacks into the Kurdish-populated region in northern Iraq to fight guerrillas of the Kurdish Workers Party (PKK). Taking advantage of the establishment of an autonomous Kurdistan Regional Government in Iraq, the PKK has been escalating their raids into Turkey, prompting the October 17 decision by the Turkish parliament to authorize military action within Iraq.

The Kurds are a nation of more than 30 million people divided among six countries, primarily in what is now northern Iraq and southeastern Turkey and with smaller numbers in northeastern Syria, northwestern Iran and the Caucasus. They are the world's largest nation without a state of their own. Their struggle for self-determination has been hampered by the sometime bitter rivalry between competing nationalist groups, some of which have been used as pawns by regional powers as well as by the United States.

The Beginnings

At the 1919 Versailles Conference, in which the victorious allies of World War I were carving up the remnants of the Ottoman Empire, President Woodrow Wilson unsuccessfully pushed for the establishment of an independent Kurdistan. Since that time, however, U.S. policy toward the Kurds has been far less supportive and often cynically opportunistic.

For example, in the mid-1970s, in conjunction with the dictatorial Shah of Iran, the United States goaded Iraqi Kurds into launching an armed uprising against the then left-leaning Iraqi government with the promise of continued military support. However, the United States abandoned them precipitously as part of an agreement with the Baghdad regime for a territorial compromise favorable to Iran regarding the Shatt al-Arab waterway. Suddenly without supply lines to obtain the necessary equipment to defend themselves, the Iraqi army marched into Kurdish areas and thousands were slaughtered. Then-Secretary of State Henry Kissinger dismissed concerns about the humanitarian consequences of this betrayal by saying that "Covert action should not be confused with missionary work."

The 1980s

The uprising by Iraqi Kurds against the central government in Baghdad resumed in the 1980s during the Iran-Iraq War, led by guerrillas of the Kurdish Democratic Party (KDP) and the Patriotic Union of Kurdistan (PUK.) Strong Iranian support for the PUK made virtually all Kurds potential traitors in the eyes of Saddam Hussein's regime, which responded with savage repression. In the latter part of the decade, in what became known as the Anfal campaign, as many as 4,000 Kurdish villages were destroyed, more than 100,000 Kurdish civilians were killed and more than one million Iraqi Kurds—nearly one-quarter of the Iraqi Kurdish population—were displaced.

Despite this, the United States increased its support for Saddam Hussein's regime during this period, providing agricultural subsidies and other economic aid as well as limited military assistance. American officials looked the other way as much of these funds were laundered by purchasing military equipment despite widespread knowledge that it was being deployed as part of Baghdad's genocidal war against the Kurds. The United States also sent an untold amount of indirect aid—largely through Kuwait and other Arab countries—which enabled Iraq to receive weapons and technology to increase its war-making capacity.

The March 1988 Iraqi attacks on the Kurdish town of Halabja—where Iraq government forces massacred upwards to 5,000 civilians by gassing them with chemical weapons—was downplayed by the Reagan administration, even to the point of leaking phony intelligence claiming that Iran, then the preferred American enemy, was actually responsible. The Halabja tragedy was not an isolated incident, as U.S. officials were well aware at the time. UN reports in 1986 and 1987 documented Iraq’s use of chemical weapons, which were confirmed both by investigations from the CIA and from U.S. embassy staff who visited Iraqi Kurdish refugees in Turkey. However, not only was the United States not particularly concerned about the ongoing repression and the use of chemical weapons, the United States actually was supporting the Iraqi government’s procurement efforts of materials necessary for the development of such an arsenal.

When a 1988 Senate Foreign Relations committee staff report brought to light Saddam Hussein’s policy of widespread killings of Kurdish civilians in northern Iraq, Senator Claiborne Pell introduced “The Prevention of Genocide Act” to put pressure on the Iraqi government. However, the Reagan administration—insisting on being able to continue its military and economic support of Saddam Hussein’s regime—successfully moved to have the measure killed.

This history of appeasement raises serious questions regarding the sincerity of both the strategic and moral concerns subsequently raised by U.S. officials about both the nature of the Iraqi regime and the treatment of the Kurdish population.

Military intervention against Saddam’s regime could have arguably been considered legal during this period under provisions of the Genocide Treaty. It could not, however, justify such military intervention retroactively a full fifteen years later, as argued by the Bush administration and its supporters. It was therefore disingenuous in the extreme to justify the U.S. takeover of that oil-rich country in 2003 on the grounds that “Saddam used chemical weapons against his own people” when the United States did nothing to stop the slaughter when it was actually going on. The suffering of the Kurdish people under Saddam’s rule was shamelessly used as an excuse, but should under no circumstances be considered an actual motivation, for the American conquest.

Indeed, as a result of the destruction of most of the Iraqi air force in the 1991 Gulf War, the establishment of an international embargo prohibiting the import of needed spare parts and the lack of domestic sources effectively grounding what remained, the post-Gulf War autonomy exercised by the Kurdish population, and the strict enforcement of a “no-fly zone” covering most Kurdish-populated areas in northern Iraq, the regime in Baghdad no longer had the capacity to engage in such large-scale repression, even if Saddam Hussein had remained in power.

The 1991 Kurdish Uprising

At the end of the Gulf War in 1991, the Kurds launched a major popular rebellion against Saddam Hussein’s regime. With the Iraqi army already devastated from six weeks of massive assaults by the United States and allied forces and then forced to fight a simultaneous Shiite-led rebellion in southern Iraq, the Kurds initially made major advances, seizing a series of key towns. These gains were soon reversed by a brutal counter-attack by Iraqi government forces, however. Despite President George Bush calling on the people of Iraq to rise up against the dictatorship, U.S. forces—which at that time temporarily occupied a large strip of southern Iraq—did nothing to support the post-war rebellion and stood by while thousands of Iraqi Kurds, Shiites, and others were slaughtered.

In the cease-fire agreement following the expulsion of Iraqi occupation forces from Kuwait, the United States made a conscious decision to exclude Iraqi helicopter gunships from the ban on Iraqi military air traffic. These were the very weapons that proved so decisive in crushing the rebellions.

U.S. officials have claimed that they were tricked into thinking that Iraqi military helicopters would be used only for post-war humanitarian relief. Others suspect, however, that the Bush administration feared a victory by Iraqi Kurds might encourage the ongoing Kurdish uprising in Turkey, a NATO ally.

By the end of March 1991, as many one million Kurds had fled their homes to escape advancing Iraqi government forces. Most were able to flee to safety in Iran, but the U.S.-backed Turkish regime—while allowing some to seek temporary refuge—blocked more than 100,000 Kurds from entering their country, thereby trapping them in snowy mountains in violation of their obligations under international humanitarian law to allow the fleeing civilians sanctuary. Without food, water, or shelter, as many as 1,000 refugees reportedly died each day. With the humanitarian crisis growing, the United Nations Security Council passed resolution 688, demanding that the Iraqi government immediately end the repression and allow access for humanitarian organizations to provide relief and calling on member states to contribute to humanitarian operations. US. forces, operating out of its bases in Turkey and with the assistance of a dozen other countries, began air dropping emergency supplies, soon followed by the deployment of thousands of troops into northern Iraq to provide additional aid and to construct resettlement camps. By July, most U.S. troops were withdrawn to a forward operating base on the Turkish side of the border. At the request of Turkey, concerned about the detrimental impact on its relations with Iraq and Iran, U.S. ground operations were phased out by the end of 1996.

The No-Fly Zone

Meanwhile, the United States—along with Great Britain and France—unilaterally banned the Iraqi government from deploying any of its aircraft in northern Iraq above the 36th parallel with the stated goal of enforcing UN Security Council resolution 688. The UN resolution did not authorize such enforcement mechanisms, however, and there was no precedence in international law allowing foreign countries to indefinitely prevent the deployment of a sovereign government's armed forces within its internationally-recognized territory. Despite its dubious legality, the establishment of the no-fly zone initially received widespread bipartisan support in Washington and even among human rights advocates as an appropriate means of preventing a renewal of the Iraqi government's savage repression of the Kurdish people. (A second no-fly zone was later unilaterally established for much of southern Iraq.)

According to two State Department reports in 1994 and 1996, the creation and military enforcement of the “no-fly zone” in fact did not protect the Iraqi Kurdish populations from potential assaults by Iraqi forces, which—after crushing the March 1991 rebellion—had pulled back and were focused on post-war reconstruction and protecting the regime in Baghdad. In addition, the straight latitudinal demarcations of the no-fly zone did not correspond with the areas of predominant Kurdish populations, excluding large Kurdish-populated areas which had previously been subjected to air attacks (such as Hallabja) and including predominantly Arab areas which had not been a target of Iraqi government forces. Seeing what had began as an apparent humanitarian effort evolve into an excuse for continuing a low-level war against Iraq, France soon dropped out of the enforcement efforts.

At the end of August 1996, factional fighting broke out between the PUK and the KDP in Iraqi Kurdistan. Concerned about possible advances by the Iranian-backed PUK, tens of thousands of Iraqi forces headed north in an effort to force PUK militiamen out of the key northern city of Irbil. In response, President Bill Clinton ordered a series of major bombing raids and missile attacks against Iraq. Despite concerns over the illegality of this unilateral intervention and the possibility of becoming embroiled in an inter-Kurdish conflict, the American air and missile strikes received widespread bipartisan support in Washington. This supposed rush to the defense of the Kurds may have been just a pretext, however: while the incursion by Iraqi government forces took place

in the north, most of the U.S. strikes took place in the central and southern part of Iraq—hundreds of miles from the Iraqi advance.

In what became a prime example of “mission creep,” U.S. forces patrolling the no-fly zone gradually escalated its rules of engagement. The use of force was initially justified as a means to challenge Iraqi encroachments into the proscribed airspace. Later, it was escalated to include assaults on anti-aircraft batteries that fired at allied aircraft enforcing the zone. It escalated still further when anti-aircraft batteries were attacked simply for locking on their radar toward allied aircraft, even without firing. By the end of the decade, President Clinton began ordering attacks on additional radar installations and other military targets within the no-fly zone, even when they were unrelated to an alleged Iraqi threat against a particular U.S. aircraft. When the Bush administration came to office, the targeting was expanded still further, with the U.S. attacking radar and command-and-control installations well beyond the no-fly zones. By 2002, U.S. air strikes against Iraq were taking place almost daily.

Authorizing the U.S. invasion of Iraq in October 2002, Congress justified the war in part because “the current Iraqi regime has demonstrated its continuing hostility toward, and willingness to attack, the United States ... by ... firing on many thousands of occasions on United States and Coalition Armed Forces engaged in enforcing the resolutions of the United Nations Security Council.” In reality, however, there was no such UN Security Council resolution authorizing a no-fly zone or the penetration of Iraqi airspace by U.S. forces (beyond providing direct humanitarian relief or direct support for weapons inspections teams.) Indeed, during the debate leading to the adoption of UN Security Council resolution 688 in 1991, there was absolutely no mention of no-fly zones. Indeed, UN Secretary General Boutros Boutros-Ghali flatly declared the U.S. attacks “illegal.”

In short, rather than an expression of humanitarian concern for Iraq’s Kurdish population, the no-fly zones became instruments to legitimize U.S. attacks against Iraq. Indeed, in the dozen years the no-fly zone was in effect for northern Iraq, far more Kurds were killed by U.S. air strikes than by Saddam Hussein’s regime.

Supporting anti-Kurdish Repression from Turkey

The insincerity of U.S. support for the Kurdish people during this period could not have been more apparent than through the strong U.S. support for the Turkish government in its repression of its own Kurdish population.

The Kurds of Turkey number well over 15 million, the largest of any country. Yet there have been periods in recent history when simply speaking the Kurdish language or celebrating Kurdish festivals has been severely repressed. In addition to being denied basic cultural and political rights, Kurdish civilians for years suffered from the counter-insurgency campaign by Turkish armed forces ostensibly targeting the Kurdish Workers Party (PKK), a Marxist-led guerrilla group fighting for greater autonomy. The Turkish regime capitalized on the PKK’s use of terrorism as an excuse to crush even nonviolent expressions of Kurdish nationalism. During the height of the repression during the 1990s, the United States—while condemning the PKK—was largely silent regarding the Turkish government’s repression.

The Clinton administration justified its eleven-week bombing campaign of Yugoslavia in 1999 on the grounds that atrocities such as the Serbian repression of the Kosovar Albanians must not take place “on NATO’s doorstep.” Ironically, similar ethnic-based repression on an even greater scale had been already taking place for a number of years within a NATO country without U.S. objections.

During the 1980s and 1990s, the United States supplied Turkey with \$15 billion worth of armaments as the Turkish military carried out widespread attacks against civilian populations in the largest use of American weapons by non-U.S. forces since Israel’s 1982 invasion of Lebanon. Most of this took place during President Clinton’s first term. Over 3,000 Kurdish villages were destroyed and over two million Kurds became refugees in an operation where more than three-quarters of the weapons were of U.S. origin. Human Rights Watch,

which also criticized the PKK rebels for serious human rights violations, documented how the U.S.-supplied Turkish army was “responsible for the majority of forced evacuations and destruction of villages.” The fifteen-year war cost over 40,000 lives.

In addition, despite justifying air strikes against Iraq in the name of enforcing the Kurdish “safe haven” and the no-fly zone in the northern part of that country, the Clinton administration defended periodic incursions into the safe haven by thousands of Turkish troops as well as air strikes by the Turkish military inside Iraqi territory which resulted in the deaths of large numbers of PKK guerrillas and Iraqi Kurdish civilians. These attacks were widely condemned by the international community, but defended by the U.S. government, with President Clinton standing out as the only international leader to openly support the Turkish regime’s military interventions in Iraq. According to Clinton State Department spokesman Nicholas Burns, “Turkey’s an ally. And we have no reason to question the need for an incursion across the border.”

The United States provided a major boost for Turkey’s fight against the Kurds in 1998, when the Clinton administration successfully pressured Syria to expel PKK leader Abdullah Ocalan. In February the following year, the United States assisted Turkish intelligence agents in locating Ocalan in Kenya, where he was kidnapped, brought to Turkey and initially sentenced to death, though this was later commuted to life in prison. Despite what most observers saw as prejudicial treatment, the Clinton State Department refused to question the fairness of the proceedings.

The following year, the PKK declared a unilateral cease fire. Subsequently, with a respite from the violence and under pressure from European governments and human rights groups, the government of Turkey granted greater cultural rights and political freedom for its Kurdish minority. Despite hundreds of nonviolent Kurdish dissidents remaining in Turkish jails, the emergence of a more moderate PKK leadership and a lessening of Turkish repression gave some hope for a peaceful settlement to the conflict.

Emboldened by the establishment of the Kurdish Regional Government in Iraq resulting from the 2003 U.S. invasion, however, the PKK resumed its armed struggle in 2004.

Iraqi Kurdistan

Though effectively autonomous since the establishment of the safe haven in the spring of 1991, Iraqi Kurds formally gained unprecedented rights as a result of the U.S. overthrow of Saddam Hussein’s regime in 2003. The Democratic Patriot Alliance of Kurdistan—an alliance of the KDP and the PUK and some minor parties—constitutes the second largest bloc in the Iraqi parliament, holding 54 seats. PUK leader Jalal Talabani has held the position of Iraqi president—a largely-ceremonial post—since 2005. Other Kurdish parties hold an additional 14 seats. Collectively, these Kurdish nationalists constitute the strongest pro-American bloc in the Iraqi parliament

As a result of U.S. pressure, the Iraqi constitution requires super-majorities for key pieces of legislation, giving the Kurdish nationalists effective veto power against legislation deemed harmful to U.S. interests.

Also as a result of the U.S.-backed constitutional structure and in return for providing a working parliamentary majority for the Shiite-dominated United Iraqi Alliance, most of the predominantly Kurdish-populated areas of Iraq have come under the control of the KDP/PUK-dominated Kurdish Regional Government. The former KDP guerrilla leader Nechirvan Barzani serves as prime minister.

Baghdad has virtually no jurisdiction in the northern part of their country and Iraqi Kurdistan has evolved into a de facto independent state. Foreigners entering northern Iraq now have their passports stamped not with the official Iraqi insignia, but with one for “Iraqi Kurdistan.” Though the Kurdish flag is omnipresent, any display

of the Iraqi national flag is effectively forbidden. Signs are in Kurdish, virtually none are in Arabic. Iraqi government troops are forbidden from entering the region without expressed approval of the Kurdish parliament.

Government corruption is widespread in Iraqi Kurdistan and opposition activists are routinely beaten, tortured, and killed. Kurdish-born Austrian lawyer and professor Kamal Sayid Qadir reported how “the Kurdish parties transformed Iraqi Kurdistan into a fortress for oppression, theft of public funds, and serious abuses of human rights like murder, torture, amputation of ears and noses, and rape.” He added that these “privileges and gains achieved since 1991 by the Kurdish parties were impossible without direct American backing and support.” For his efforts to alert the international community about such abuses by the U.S.-backed Kurdish authorities, he was sentenced to thirty years in prison, though international pressure led to his release several months later.

Despite the corruption and repression—and occasional incidents of terrorism, bombings and ethnic strife—Iraqi Kurdistan has become the most stable and prosperous part of Iraq. The region hosts thousands of American troops, diplomats and businesspeople.

In early October 2007, the Kurdistan Regional Government signed an oil exploration agreement with Hunt Oil Company, a Texas-based operation with close ties to the Bush administration. The Iraqi government in Baghdad, which was completely bypassed in the deal, has declared the action illegal, but it appears that they will be unable to stop it.

U.S. military policy in Iraq has strained relations between Kurds and other Iraqis still further. With American troops already stretched thin and U.S. military leaders not trusting most Arab-dominated units of the Iraqi armed forces, the United States has relied extensively on Kurdish forces for counter-insurgency operations throughout Iraq, further inflaming ethnic tensions, particularly in Kirkuk, Mosul, and other areas with mixed Kurdish and Arab populations.

A Guerrilla Base

In terms of regional security, the most dangerous policy of the U.S.-backed Kurdish Regional Government has been its decision to allow its territory to become a base for separatist guerrillas to launch attacks against neighboring countries.

Iraqi Kurdistan has become the base of an Iranian Kurdish group known as PEJAK, which has launched frequent cross-border raids into Iran, resulting in the deaths of hundreds of Iranians. Unlike the more conciliatory line taken by the traditional Iranian Kurdish opposition groups, PEJAK has been inspired by the quasi-independent status provided their brethren in Iraq to take a much harder line toward the Teheran government. There have been numerous reports that the U.S. government has provided equipment, training, and targeting information for PEJAK guerrillas. In retaliation, Iran has shelled and launched small-scale incursions into Iraqi territory against suspected guerrillas, actions strongly condemned by the United States.

Kurdish autonomy in Iraq has also led to increased nationalist activity among Syria's 300,000 Kurds, who constitute 10% of that country's population, including scattered acts of nationalist violence. The Syrian government has responded with increased repression, which has also led to strong condemnation by Washington.

By far the biggest concern, however, is that the Turkish military response to attacks by the Iraq-based PKK against its territory could escalate dramatically, dwarfing the incursions of the 1990s.

This ongoing escalation along the Iraqi-Turkish border and the prospects of a greater conflict is not surprising. Indeed, prior to the 2003 U.S. invasion of Iraq, one of the major arguments by opponents of the war was that it

could lead to the effective establishment of a Kurdish state led by nationalist guerrillas that would then destabilized the region, including reigniting a Turko-Kurdish war. Like the warnings about prospects of sectarian conflict, a rise of terrorism and Islamist extremism, and the prospects of U.S. forces becoming bogged down in a bloody urban counter-insurgency war, the Bush administration—with the support of a large bipartisan majority in Congress—went ahead with the invasion anyway.

Solutions to the Crisis

As with the other tragic results from the U.S. invasion, a solution to the crisis in Kurdistan is not easy. Given the close U.S. relations with both the Turkish government and the Kurdish Regional Government, however, as well as U.S. culpability in creating the current crisis in the first place, greater American leadership is critical.

On the Iraqi Kurdish side, the United States must insist that the Kurdish Regional Government crack down on PKK military activities inside their territory. Though the Turkish Kurds have many legitimate grievances against the government in Ankara, the PKK's reliance on armed struggle—particularly their propensity to engage in acts of terrorism—has actually hurt the Kurdish cause, serving to legitimize the Turkish government's repression. Allowing the PKK to continue to operate out of Iraqi territory puts Iraqi Kurds at risk as well. The Bush administration needs to make it clear that failure by the Kurdish Regional Government to rein in the PKK will mean an end to U.S. financial and strategic assistance.

Unfortunately, as long as the United States continues to support PEJAK military activities inside Iraqi Kurdish territory, including this PKK-allied group's attacks into Iran, such demands will not be taken seriously. As a result, the U.S. must sever its ties to the PEJAK and insist that the regional government crack down on all such guerrilla activity.

On the Turkish side of the conflict, the United States should pressure the Turks—save for the right of hot pursuit—to honor Iraqi sovereignty and cease their attacks against suspected PKK targets inside Iraqi territory. Following the October 21 cross-border raid by PKK guerrillas, resulting in the deaths of 12 Turkish soldiers and the kidnapping of eight others, the United States condemned the attack but also called on Turkey to show restraint. However, given the strong bipartisan support given to Israel for its massive military onslaught against Lebanon following a cross-border raid by Hezbollah guerrillas which resulted in the deaths of three Israeli soldiers and the kidnapping of two others, Turkey may have little reason to take Washington's pleas seriously. Any pressure on the Turkish government, which is dependent on the United States for much of its arms imports and foreign military training, to refrain from attacking neighboring countries must therefore be part of a broader critical re-evaluation of U.S. support for comparable actions by Israel and other allies.

The United States should also pressure Turkey to more carefully calibrate its counter-insurgency operations inside their country (and anywhere else) so to minimize civilian casualties. Indeed, such "collateral damage" has proven to be one of greatest recruitment tools for insurgencies. The United States should also encourage the Turkish government to offer amnesty to Kurdish nationalists willing to put down their arms, more fully recognize Kurdish civil and cultural rights, and allow the country's Kurdish minority to advance their concerns nonviolently without fear of repression. Given the widespread civilian casualties resulting from U.S. counter-insurgency operations in Iraq and U.S. rejections of amnesty and other political compromises with Iraqi insurgents, the Turks may again have reason to reject such advice. As a result, these needed efforts to alter Turkish policies must be concomitant with a critical re-evaluation of U.S. counter-insurgency policy in Iraq and elsewhere.

In short, though the struggle by the Kurdish people and the governments which seek to control them pre-dates large-scale U.S. intervention in the region, it is American policy which has brought the situation to its current critical juncture and makes prospects for a just and peaceful solution so challenging. Perhaps, though, the current crisis will force the United States to re-think not just its disastrous policies in Iraq, but to also consider more seriously the need to more fully respect national sovereignty, support the right of self-determination and consider non-military alternatives to conflict.

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