

No Friends But the Mountains

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Kurdistan is the Other Iraq, the Iraq a surprising number of people in the West have not heard of and know almost nothing about. The media mostly ignore Kurdistan, for the same reason they ignore Kansas and Iowa: It is a sleepy and stable place where hardly anything of note happens.

Ethnic Kurds make up around 20 percent of Iraq's population. They, along with Persians, are indigenous to the upper Middle East, having lived there long before Arabs invaded from the south and Turks from the east. A few live in Baghdad and along the Iranian border east of the capital, and a larger number live in the provinces of Nineveh and Kirkuk. The majority, though, live in the northern mountains, high above the dusty plains of Mesopotamia, in the officially recognized and constitutionally sanctioned Kurdish Autonomous Region. There, the war is already over. In fact, the war was hardly fought there at all. The only Kurdish insurgency in Iraq was against Saddam Hussein, and the only Kurdish terrorists in Iraq were those of Ansar al-Islam—which has since changed its name to al-Qaida—who were driven from the border town of Biyara into Iran in 2003.

The Kurds have their own capital and parliament in the city of Erbil. They have their own army, the Peshmerga, which in Kurdish means “Those Who Face Death.” They have their own police, their own border patrols and checkpoints, and their own immigration and passport control. They have two international airports, with regular flights to and from Europe. They have their own flag, their own diplomats, and their own Department of Foreign Relations. The only things they don’t have are a currency of their own and a seat in the United Nations. In all but name, then, Iraqi Kurdistan is an independent nation.

Erbil, the largest city in Kurdistan, has suffered three terrorist attacks since coalition forces terminated the Baath regime in 2003. The second-largest city, Suleimaniah, was struck only once. The third-largest city, Dohuk, has never been hit at all. More people have been wounded or killed by terrorists in Spain than in Iraqi Kurdistan since 2003. No one has been kidnapped.

Arab nationalism, Islamic radicalism, religious sectarianism, and anti-Americanism are alien ideologies in Kurdistan, rejected root and branch by the Kurds. They have, in fact, forged one of the most aggressively anti-terrorist communities in the world—no small feat, given what is happening just a few miles to the south in Iraq. This conservative Muslim society secures its own cities and territories better than the United States military shores up the Green Zone in Baghdad.

Over the past few years, I have traveled and worked in Kurdistan frequently, often staying there for long periods of time, and have always moved about freely, without need of a gun, body armor, or bodyguards. Americans can go there on holiday, if they so desire, and feel just as relaxed as they would in Canada. Even more so, perhaps: The Kurds are friendlier, and more pro-American, than Canadians. Thomas Friedman wrote a few years ago that “after two years of traveling almost exclusively in Western Europe and the Middle East, Poland feels like a geopolitical spa. I visited here for just three days, and got two years of anti-American bruises massaged out of me.” I felt much the same in Iraqi Kurdistan.

Indeed, it is hard to overstate how pro-American the people of Kurdistan are. They are possibly more pro-American than Americans themselves. If Bill Clinton was America's first "black" president, people in at least one part of the world say Bush is the first "Muslim" one: He is sometimes referred to in Kurdistan as "Hajji Bush" (meaning that he made the Muslim pilgrimage, or Hajj, to Mecca), an undeniably high honor for a Republican Christian from Texas. No, Kurdistan is not a "red state," and Kurds are not Republicans. Nor does it occur to most of them to prefer America's conservatives over its liberals. Rather, their warm feelings of gratitude and friendship extend to all Americans and both political parties for having liberated them from the totalitarian dictatorship of Saddam Hussein.

If you ask them, it was a real liberation—but one need not ask. Any reference to the Iraq war as an invasion will be quickly corrected. The United States destroyed the Hussein tyranny in 2003, but the slow-motion liberation of Kurdistan in truth began a decade before. After the 1991 Gulf War, the United States, the United Kingdom, and France imposed no-fly zones over Iraq's Kurdish north and Shia south. American, British, and, initially, French pilots patrolled the skies and threatened to shoot down any Iraqi aircraft they encountered.

Massive uprisings began in the south and north. The Shia were beaten by the regime, as they had always been beaten. Horrible war crimes and atrocities followed. But the Kurds were a force to be reckoned with. They had mountains, disciplined organizations, and battle-hardened fighters with years of experience in guerilla warfare. Civilians fled en masse from the cities to the mountains, Turkey, and Iran, thus clearing the battlefield for the Kurds' final, epic battle against Saddam Hussein. The Peshmerga then descended from above and fought the Iraqi army in the streets. After bloody clashes, the Iraqi army finally withdrew in 1991. Kurdish villages, neighborhoods, and cities, and eventually all of Iraq's northernmost provinces were cleared of Baath soldiers and agents. The Kurds have been strictly autonomous ever since, and have lived, to one extent or another, under a protective Western umbrella the entire time.

The Kurds have “no friends but the mountains,” or so an old saying goes. It is hard for Westerners to grasp just how isolated the Kurds feel: They are hated by almost everyone in the region, and ignored by or unknown to almost everyone else in the world. That partly explains their fanatical pro-Americanism: *A friend, at last!* Israelis, perhaps, can relate.

Iraqi Kurds, though, are much more aggressively pro-American than Israelis. They arguably take their pro-Americanism to the point of absurdity. Fake McDonald’s restaurants with names like “MaDonal” pop up in Kurdistan nearly as fast as real McDonald’s chains devour the landscapes of Western cities. Teenagers wear United States Army uniforms, T-shirts, and pants as a fashion statement—and they do so without irony. Even some of the waiters in restaurants wear button-up shirts with the words US ARMY stitched above the breast pocket.

However, strident Kurdish pro-Americanism is older than the no-fly zones and the liberation from Iraq. As the Peshmerga’s famous guerilla leader Mullah Mustafa Barzani once told Jim Hoagland of the *Washington Post*, “We can become your fifty-first state and provide you with oil.” That was in 1973.

“Saddam Hussein intended to be the leader of the Arab nation, the whole Arab world,” said Peshmerga general and member of parliament Mam Rostam when I visited him recently in the terror-wracked city of Kirkuk, in Iraq’s Red Zone. “He didn’t want anyone other than Arabs to exist around him. That was his policy.” Saddam said to the Kurds, *You are Arabs*. The Kurds said, *No, we are Kurds*.

So Saddam launched the genocidal Anfal Campaign in 1986 to ethnically cleanse the Kurds from his country. “They wanted to remove all the Kurds from everywhere in Iraq,” Rostam said. “They just destroyed whole villages and provinces and moved people into collective towns and concentration camps. Some of the Turkmen villages around here were demolished for the same reason. The point was to make it an Arab area, and no other.”

Iraq's Kurdish cities were devastated by air strikes, artillery, and chemical weapons. Forests were clear-cut. Concrete was poured into wells. Between 100,000 and 200,000 people were murdered in massacres, and 85 percent of Kurdish villages were destroyed. Tens of thousands, including children, were tortured to death in prison blocks. "All of Iraq suffered terribly during those years," wrote Christopher Hitchens in *Vanity Fair* of his first trip to Iraqi Kurdistan after the 1991 Gulf War. "But its Kurdish provinces were among the worst places in the entire world—a howling emptiness of misery where I could catch, for the first time in my life, the actual scent of evil as a real force on earth."

Since that era of horror, however, Kurdistan has seen nothing less than a renaissance. It is now the safest, freest, and richest place in Iraq, and for the very same reason it once suffered the most: Because the people who live there are Kurds. The mayor of Halabja, the now-infamous city where Saddam once used chemical weapons to kill five thousand people in a single day, wanted to make sure I understood what that means. "We never terrorized anyone in any country," he said. "We occupied no one's land. We defended ourselves with humble military force against a powerful enemy. We consider our nation a protector of human rights."

The president of Dohuk University, Asmat M. Khalid, whose office is in that city's old Baath Party headquarters, told me that the Kurds intend to build a new country with this idea as its foundation: "We have a different way of thinking here. We believe the key is to be civilized. We don't want our new generation to be aggressive. We don't want them to have to fight. It is not our habit to kill." President Masoud Barzani, speaking on the al-Arabiya news channel, put it bluntly: "We devoted our greatest efforts to expanding the Kurdistan experience to the rest of Iraq. But the brothers in the other region, I'm sad to say, did not benefit from our experience. We adopted a culture of forgiveness, whereas they adopted a culture of vindictiveness."

It is obvious why the Kurds reject what passes for politics in Baghdad: Iraq's Baath Party was the most brutal and thoroughly oppressive Arab

Nationalist party in history, and no one suffered at its practitioners' hands more than the Kurds. Their rejection of Arabism does not stop at politics, though. Most reject the prevailing interpretation of Islam as well. "I speak and read Arabic fluently," one Kurd told me. "I have read the Koran in its original language. I know it's more flexible than most Arab imams admit." Note to Westerners: Many blame religion itself for what ails the Iraqis, but the Kurds are as Muslim as anyone else. And the Baath Party—whose remnants make up some part of the insurgency—is brutally secular.

True, religion is an important part of the texture of every society, but religion alone doesn't determine a society's course. Ethnic traditions matter too, which is what the Kurds mean when they say *We are Kurds*. Abdullah Mohtadi, secretary general of Iranian Kurdistan's Komala Party, puts Kurdish exceptionalism into historical context: "Kurds were one of those rare nations which resisted to the end the Arab and Islamic invasion," he told me. "They defended their land, and they also defended their own religion. Our loyalty to our Kurdishness is much more important than our loyalty to Islam. In official national anthems we say we are Kurds before we are Muslims. It's a general belief. The Kurds—and also the Persians, but especially the Kurds—are the only nation [in the region] apart from Israel where Islamic fundamentalism has no real roots. Kurds are not fanatic in their religion. When I was a child before the Islamic Revolution in Iran, most of the people, the young generation, they didn't pray. They didn't fast during Ramadan. People made jokes about religion, about God, about everything. They were so relaxed. They were not bigots about religion. I don't know why, but that was the case. And that still is the case."

Even so, most Iraqi Kurds are conservative Muslims. Theirs is undoubtedly a man's world, and on average less than a quarter of the people out in public are women. Even in Suleimaniah, Iraqi Kurdistan's most liberal city, around half the women wear the headscarf. Boys and girls are schooled separately, nightclubs are taboo, and while alcohol is available, outside of Suleimaniah most of its vendors are Christians. At the same time, though, the

Iraqi Kurds aren't as culturally foreign to the West as they first appear. Political extremism of every conceivable variety is discouraged. Even a self-described Islamist said in an interview, "Extremes are bad, the middle is better."

"Kurds don't get upset about religion," English teacher Birzo Abdulkadir told me. "We believe in arguments based on reason, not emotion. If people don't agree with me about something, I'm not going to get mad at them. We will just have different opinions."

Sadly, the two major Kurdish political parties, the Patriotic Union of Kurdistan and the Kurdistan Democratic Party, are corrupt machines that skim money from almost every business that matters. They own most of the media, and they have their own intelligence agents who sometimes spy on civilians. But there are third, fourth, and even fifth parties as well. They also run in elections and hold seats in parliament. They own newspapers and magazines and operate freely. There is certainly a great deal of corruption in Iraqi Kurdistan, and it is one of the most acknowledged problems among the Kurds themselves—but at least no one has a monopoly on it. No single party or clan, let alone person, holds all the power. And part of the reason is that Iraqi Kurdistan isn't a police state. The people there grouse about their elected officials, and they do it openly. Indeed, if Kurdistan-style graft were the scourge of Baghdad rather than death squads and car bombs, Iraq would be showcased as a smashing success and a model for the entire Middle East.

Perhaps the most refreshing thing about Kurdistan is that, its name notwithstanding, it is not an ethnic-identity state. Arabs can and do move there from the center and south of Iraq. As of May 2007, seven thousand Arabs per month are permitted to relocate to Kurdistan after they clear internal security checks. Of course, not everyone is happy about Arabs moving in. "The Arab, he is wild," said lawyer Iqbal Ali Muhammad over dinner one night. "He is not a civilized person." Racist-sounding comments like his are not typical, though. Even if most Kurds agree with what Muhammad says about Iraqi Arab culture, they nonetheless contort themselves like good

Western liberals to avoid expressing their thoughts in racial terms. They stress that many Arabs do not fit that description at all, that they do not mean to conflate a culture's worst elements with the whole. It is a strange thing to behold in a region where political correctness and racial sensitivity do not, as a rule, exist.

Perhaps it is not surprising, then, that Kurdish culture in Iraq is uncorrupted by terrorism. Unfortunately, the same cannot be said of Kurdish culture in Turkey. There, the Marxist-Leninist Kurdistan Workers Party (PKK) has been waging a low-level guerilla and terrorist war against the government and civilians for years. By contrast, Iraqi Kurds never murdered Arab civilians in Iraq or anywhere else—even though Saddam's regime was incomparably more oppressive than Turkey's. "Abdullah Öcalan was our own Yasser Arafat," one Kurd told me, referring to the PKK's former leader, who was at one time supported by some Iraqi Kurdish parties. "The difference between us and the Palestinians is that we learn from our mistakes."

And here we come to the most striking thing of all about the Iraqi Kurds, the thing that shows just how different they really are from most of the region: The Kurds are all right with the Jews.

Hatred and distrust of Jews in Kurdistan is but a whisper compared to what festers in the Arab and Muslim world. I have not knowingly encountered a single anti-Semitic person in Kurdistan, even after spending months there talking to people about regional politics. Of Kurdish bigotry against Jews, I have heard only secondhand.

"Is *Jew* the right word to use to describe Jewish people?" my translator asked me. "Yes," I said. "Jews call themselves Jews. Why do you ask?" "I want to make sure I'm not using an offensive word," he said, all but bristling with political correctness. "Some people use *Jew* as a bad word." Who? I wanted to know. I never heard anyone in Kurdistan use "Jew" in the pejorative. "Just some old people," he said. "Never young people?" I asked. "No, not at all," he said. "Young people have no reason to think Jews are bad people."

He could have been describing attitudes in the United States, which, after Israel, is probably the least anti-Semitic country in the world. In fact, young and old alike in Kurdistan both have reason to distrust those who think Jews are bad people: Saddam Hussein routinely libeled Iraq's Kurds as Zionist agents—which encouraged them to think highly of Zionism. Nor did that canard die with Saddam. “The Arabs call us a second Israel all the time,” Peshmerga colonel Salahdin Ahmad Ameen told me in 2007. “They instigate their people and say we want to make a second Israel here in the middle of their area.”

Arab nationalists and Islamists have been at war with the State of Israel since its founding, and at war with the presence of Jews in the Middle East before then, during the period of *aliya* in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. In Iraq, they have been at war with the Kurds for almost as long, and for many of the same reasons. So it is quite natural that the Arab-Israeli conflict looks different from the vantage point of Kurdistan than from, say, Damascus or Cairo. Indeed, Kurds and Israelis have something very important in common—they are, and have long been, besieged minorities in the Middle East, and at war with the same people.

But the Kurds have something important in common with the Palestinians, too—statelessness. One might imagine, then, that Kurdish culture would be more or less equally divided on the matter of the Arab-Israeli conflict, or that individual Kurds might be conflicted internally, or even that Kurdish opinion would naturally side with fellow Muslims rather than with Jews. And indeed there are many Kurds who *are* conflicted when it comes to the Arab-Israeli dispute; you can find individuals who sympathize more with Israelis, and you can find, in principle, individuals who sympathize more with Palestinians. But every Kurd I have met supports the Israelis.

It is not hard to understand why: No one in Iraq can forget that Saddam Hussein's staunchest apologists in the Arab world were the Palestinians. In the run-up to the 1991 Gulf War, President George H.W. Bush assembled a coalition that included numerous Arab and Muslim countries, but Palestinian leader Yasser Arafat sided with Saddam Hussein. And the

Kurds know that the primary weapon in the Palestinians' fight against Israel is terrorism—the one violent act Kurds in Iraq refused to commit, even when they were victims of genocide. Palestinian terrorism may be explained away, even celebrated, in most of the Arab world, but in Kurdistan it is offensive.

I asked Peshmerga colonel Mudhafer Hasan Rauf if the Kurdish army or regional government has any relations with the Israelis. “We live in the Middle East,” he said. “The Arab countries don't want to have a relationship with Israel. Many Islamic groups inside the Arab world regard a relationship with Israel as something unholy. We believe in Islam, but if you compare us and the Arabs we think of Islam as a religion of brotherhood and peace. The Arab chauvinists wronged the religion's direction and made it another thing.”

“We would like to have a relationship with Israel,” Colonel Ameen said. “We have the same destiny. We are secretly their friends. We have many Jewish Kurds there now. They write articles for our magazines.”

“The problems in the area are because of a misunderstanding of each other's religion,” Colonel Rauf concurred. “Between the Jews and the Muslims and the Christians. I believe in the Koran. I know that Allah is the only God. God orders people and nations to have relationships with each other. But the fundamentalist Muslims don't think like this.”

A member of the Kurdistan regional government explained how the Kurdish government is compelled to publicly split the difference between Arabs and Israelis, because Baghdad demands it. “Right now we have to follow Baghdad on foreign policy. But at the same time, we say we have nothing to do with the Arab-Israeli conflict. If you told me you were Israeli I wouldn't have any problem with that. Most people here would rather meet an Israeli than an Arab. Arabs murdered our people.” Thus is Kurdish affection for Israel an open secret. Kurdistan regional government President Masoud Barzani said more or less the same thing on *al-Arabiya* earlier in the year: “The constitution does not give us the right to maintain ties with any country,” he said. “Diplomatic relations are the exclusive authority of

the federal state. If an Israeli embassy were opened in Baghdad, we would no doubt open an Israeli consulate in Erbil. If diplomatic relations are not established between the Iraqi and Israeli states, there will be no relations between the Kurdistan provinces and Israel. But, in fact, as I have said in the past, I do not consider relations with Israel to be a crime or something forbidden... I support the rights of the Palestinian people, but at the same time I am against driving Israel into the sea. This is impossible... this policy is wrong, illogical, and unreasonable. Why annihilate a people? I do not believe in annihilating the Israeli people.”

I asked General Rostam why the Kurdistan regional government does not simply cooperate with Israel clandestinely, since both have few friends and many common enemies. “We don’t have enough relations to be able to cooperate or discuss,” he said. “But we expect to have that in the future. We will have relations and cooperation.” It is unclear whether Rostam means he expects Baghdad to come around, which would mean that Erbil could cooperate openly, or if he expects Kurdistan to declare independence, in which case it will do whatever it wants. But one can make an educated guess.

If Kurdistan is a nation in all but name, Iraq is a nation in name only. Indeed, almost everyone in Iraqi Kurdistan thinks Baghdad is the capital of a deranged foreign country. The belief that northern Iraq is actually a nascent Kurdish state is so widespread, in fact, that the only people one meets there who think of Kurdistan as “Iraq” are from somewhere else.

In January 2005, the Kurds held an informal and non-binding referendum on Kurdistan’s status. 98.7 percent voted to secede permanently from Iraq. This is not surprising: If Middle Easterners had drawn their own borders, Iraq would not exist in its current form; the British shackled Kurds and Arabs together when they created the post-imperial map. But the dream of an independent Kurdistan dates back to the dissolution of the Ottoman Empire at the end of World War I, when Arab and Turkish nationalism were born as well. The League of Nations promised the Kurds autonomous

rights. Instead, their homeland was broken up and parceled out to Iraq, Turkey, Syria, and Iran. Only in Iran, where the Kurds call Persians “cousins,” do they feel much kinship with their nominal countrymen.

And nowhere do Kurds feel more distant from their fellow citizens than in Iraq. Old people’s views of Baghdad are colored by memories of brutal oppression, genocide, and war, but young people have no memories of living under Saddam, no memories, in fact, of living among an Arab majority. Most do not even speak Arabic; English is now the second language taught in schools. Nor do they see any point in *creating* ties with Baghdad that haven’t existed in living memory, especially when Baghdad is burning. Today, the Iraqi flag is not flown in Erbil; it has been banned. The defiance of the Kurds may be quiet, but it is strong, and hardening.

Kurdistan regional government officials, when they are speaking on the record, say they support federalism in Iraq, and do not seek independence. Privately, though, they say they are simply stalling. Even *that* puts them out of step with most Kurdish citizens—but everyone knows they are not sincere. Maintaining nominal relations with Baghdad is a pragmatic, temporary, and likely prudent position for them to take. Better, they think, to hold off on declaring independence until their nation is strong enough—or until that independence can be guaranteed by foreign powers.

Kurdistan regional government President Barzani, who is little more than a figurehead, plays the bad cop. He has influence but little real power, and he isn’t constrained by Iraq’s internal politics. So he broods in his mountain palace and openly threatens secession. “Self-determination is the natural right of our people,” he says. “When the right time comes, it will become a reality.” As Christopher Hitchens has written, “The Kurds have now stepped onto the stage of Middle Eastern history, and it will not be easy to push them off it again. You may easily murder a child, as the parties of god prove every single day, but you cannot make a living child grow smaller.”

The United States will possibly withdraw from Iraq before the fighting is finished. American public opinion may well demand it. But if that should happen, the war will simply rage on without the Americans, and the Iraqi government might not survive the post-withdrawal scramble for power from insurgents, militias, terrorists, and their foreign patrons. And if the government falls, there probably won't be another.

Iraq may end up resembling other regional weak-state anarchies, such as Somalia, which exist solely as geographic abstractions. Or it could go the way of Lebanon in the 1980s and divide into ethnic and sectarian cantons. Perhaps it will be invaded and picked apart by Turkey, Syria, and Iran, all of which have vital interests in who rules it and how. Iraq could even turn into a California-size Gaza, ruled by militants who wear black masks instead of neckties or *keffiyehs*.

But one certainty, at least, is that if Kurdistan declares independence and is *not* protected, one of two possible wars is likely to begin immediately. The first will involve Turkey; after all, few things are more undesirable to Ankara than Turkish Kurdistan violently attaching itself to Iraqi Kurdistan. The second will be about borders: Iraqi Kurdistan's southern borders are not yet demarcated. If Turkey doesn't invade, the Kurds will want to attach the Kurdish portions of Kirkuk Province, and possibly also Nineveh Province, to their new state.

Even if Kurdistan doesn't declare independence, there may still be more war on the way. "We believe if the Americans withdraw from this country there will be many more problems," Colonel Mudhafer said. "The Sunni and Shia want total control of Iraq. We are going to get involved in that. Iran is going to be involved in that. Turkey is going to be involved in that. Syria is going to be involved in that. The Sunni and Shia fighting in Baghdad will pull us in. We are going to be involved. Turkey and Iran will make problems for us. It is not going to be safe. All the American martyrs

will have died for nothing, and there will be more problems in the future. Americans should build big bases here.” For obvious reasons, the idea of the American military garrisoning its forces in Kurdistan is wildly popular among the Kurds.

It should be obvious by now why an American-guaranteed independent Kurdistan would benefit the Kurds of Iraq. But few Americans seem to realize that—after Kurdistan itself—no country would benefit more from this than the United States.

For starters, if the United States insists on cutting its losses in Iraq, it would be best to cut *only* its losses. And clearly, Kurdistan is not a loss. Indeed, it would be a waste and a disgrace if this eminently decent society is abandoned to war, terror, and mayhem. Certainly the Kurds would have to be crazy to trust, let alone work with, Americans ever again. Moreover, the complete and permanent liberation of Iraqi Kurdistan and its rehabilitation from mass grave to free state would surely be one of the great foreign policy successes in American history. It would rightly take its place alongside the democratic transformation of Nazi Germany and Imperial Japan, and the rescue of South Korea from the Stalinist starvation monarchy in Pyongyang. Losing Arab Iraq would be a partial loss, for sure. Yet no serious person says America unambiguously lost in Korea because only *part* of that country was saved.

Declaring partial victory isn't just a matter of pride. Al-Qaida has set up shop in Iraq and hopes to defeat America there, just as the Mujahadeen drove Soviet troops from Afghanistan in the 1980s. The Mujahadeen's defeat of the Soviets there has long been one of al-Qaida's most effective ideological talking points and recruiting slogans, insisting (however wrongly) that the economic and military superpowers are in fact easily defeated façades. Osama Bin Laden insisted that America would be next, and millions of radical Muslims loved him for it. Many wished to help him and joined al-Qaida.

And for a time, particularly in the weeks and months following September 11, it might have looked as though they were right. But they have been in decline ever since, unable to top their murder of three thousand civilians in New York and Washington. If they drive the American *military* out of Iraq, however, they will surely have topped themselves. They will no longer be in decline; they will, rather, be at a whole new peak. Bin Laden's old and dubious claim that America is "next" will look almost plausible, and he will have a new case in point when he says that America and the West are the "weak horse." Now, a partial American victory in Iraq won't stop al-Qaida from declaring its own partial victory. But a draw certainly beats a rout. If al-Qaida manages to build a statelet in the Sunni Arab portion of Iraq—the only part of the country it *could* take over, even in theory—that statelet will exist right on the border of Kurdistan. How much better it would be if American troops were just minutes, and not time zones, away. Without a doubt, no better strategic location exists for American forces to disrupt or destroy al-Qaida's new base—or, for that matter, to undertake future operations, should the need arise, in Iran or Syria.

As if more reason were needed, the odds of American soldiers facing a Kurdish insurgency are vanishingly close to zero. A few hundred troops are based there already, and not a single shot has been fired at them. In fact, Iraqi Kurdistan is where American soldiers go to relax on the weekend, a place where they can briefly take off their body armor. Nearby Arab countries—even those with friendly governments—are scarcely as welcoming: Most Kuwaitis, for example, don't mind hosting American troops, since it was America that liberated them from Saddam Hussein. But some Kuwaitis think it's time for American troops to go home now that Baghdad has a new government. American troops in Saudi Arabia also protected that country from an Iraqi invasion after Saddam swallowed Kuwait, but Osama Bin Laden cites that very protection as one of the grievances that triggered al-Qaida's formation. Moving American troops to friendly Kurdish soil and away from hostile Arab soil will help put this long-standing problem to bed. American bases won't be needed in Saudi Arabia or Arab Iraq if they are re-located to Kurdistan.

And one thing is certain: The United States military needs bases it can use without walking into the minefield of regional politics. If radical regimes like those in Syria and Iran are more emboldened than ever in the wake of recent American setbacks, new bases in Kurdistan may prove their worth very quickly.

In the mid-1970s, the United States quietly armed and funded a Kurdish insurgency against Saddam Hussein. This was before America's notorious—and bogus—alliance with Iraq during that country's war against the Islamic Republic of Iran.

Although the Iran-Iraq war broke out just after the 1979 revolution that forced Shah Muhammad Reza Pahlavi into exile and brought Ayatollah Khomeini to power, hostilities had long been brewing: The shah, an American client-state dictator, was no more enamored of Saddam than the Islamic Republic would prove to be. So the United States and the shah were all too happy to back Iraq's Kurds in their fight against Baghdad. When the shah signed a peace treaty with Saddam, however, American aid to the Kurds was cut off without warning. The Kurds were left stranded, cruelly exposed to Saddam's murderous retaliation.

Between 150,000 and 300,000 Kurdish civilians were forced to flee to Iran. Some sought asylum in the United States, but Washington refused to grant them refugee status: "Covert action," said then-secretary of state Henry Kissinger, "should not be confused with missionary work." Indeed, Washington refused even to provide humanitarian assistance to the people Congressman Otis Pike admitted were used as mere "tools."

Today, the Kurdistan regional government is bracing itself for another round of more of the same. "As a military person, I am disturbed by what is going on in America now," said General Karam. "They want to withdraw their troops. We want the Americans to stay. Why are people thinking like this? I want you, as a reporter, as a journalist, to get our Kurdish voice to the

American people so they know about Kurdish suffering in Iraq. We don't want the American army to leave this area. The terrorists are excited about what is going on in the Congress."

True, the Kurds have a lot less to worry about than do most Arab Iraqis. Those who work with the United States in the Iraqi government, the Iraqi army, and the Iraqi police are already on the hit lists of numerous death squads, terrorist cells, and militias. Doctors, lawyers, writers, journalists, and countless others have already been singled out for extermination for choosing democracy and civil society over politics by bullets and car bombs. The terror that plagued Pol Pot's Cambodia in the 1970s and Algeria in the 1990s now stalks every decent person in the center and south of Iraq.

When American troops leave, they can't (or, more accurately, won't) bring all these people home with them. Fortunately, the Kurdish Autonomous Region already admits some of them as refugees. Iraqi Kurdistan is about twice the size of Switzerland: Not big enough to absorb every moderate person in Iraq who wants to live in a normal country, but with room enough to shelter those who are exposed by name. Securing Kurdistan with American forces, on the condition that Erbil admits a certain number of refugees, could demonstrate that the United States at least tries to keep its word—not only with its Kurdish allies, but with its Arab ones as well.

It may also serve as a lesson on what happens to those who *don't* cooperate with the United States. After all, the Sunni Triangle and Iraq's Shia south could have followed Kurdistan's lead; the choice was theirs alone to make. Sadly, both the innocent and the guilty alike will likely suffer the terrible consequences of that decision. Let Middle Easterners beyond Iraq's borders pay heed: If they wish to experience a less convulsive transition of power when their tyrants are deposed, Kurdistan will stand as the model to emulate. Arab Iraq will be the anti-model, the warning: *If you prefer bullets to ballots, you will be left to your fate.*

Fifteen million Kurds live in eastern Turkey, and the separatist war between the government and the PKK has raged there, at varying degrees of intensity, for decades. In the all but impassable mountains on Iraq's northeastern border with Turkey, the PKK has dug in its heels. Its guerillas launch hit-and-run-attacks against soldiers—and sometimes civilians—in Turkey, then retreat into their Iraqi valleys and caves. The Turkish military shells the redoubt from its side of the border, crosses the frontier in hot pursuit of the terrorists, and threatens to launch a major invasion if the Kurdistan regional government won't militarily shove the PKK back into Turkey.

Why won't the Kurds of Iraq evict the PKK? Why do they give Turkey an excuse to invade? Colonel Mudhafer was tired of that question. He impatiently unscrolled a map when I met with him in his office. "That's where we lived when we fought against Saddam Hussein. We chose that place for a reason. It was impossible for Saddam to flush us out there, and it's impossible for us to flush out the PKK now."

If only it were that simple. The Kurdistan regional government *could* work with the Turks to prevent this from exploding into a larger, international struggle. But the Kurds are torn. Kurds in every country have a terrible history of fractious, internecine war. After Saddam was ejected from Iraqi Kurdistan, and before he was removed from power in Baghdad, Iraq's Kurds fought a pointless civil war over resources and power. The results were devastating, but at least they learned an important lesson from the experience: When surrounded by enemies, don't go fighting each other.

As their inaction in dealing with the PKK shows, however, the Kurds may have learned that lesson too well. Like both Hamas in Gaza and Fatah in the West Bank, the PKK arguably harms Kurds and their interests far more than their enemies do: It brings increasingly destructive reprisals down on their heads and makes a diplomatic solution to their problems all but impossible.

“Fighting is not a solution,” one Kurd told me. Nor do the Iraqi Kurds want to fight, he continued, because the reason for the PKK’s terrorist activity is that the Kurdish people in Turkey don’t have rights.

Now, apologists for Palestinian terror say much the same thing. The analysis is partly persuasive, though, because it isn’t entirely wrong. Kurds in Turkey really *do* have legitimate grievances, just as stateless Palestinians do. But those grievances can’t be addressed by exploding bombs in Tel Aviv and Istanbul.

Iraq’s Kurds know better, but they are locked in a holding pattern. They are pulled in one direction by their political morality, and in another by ethnic solidarity. They’ll need help if they are to avoid an all-out war with Ankara.

And make no mistake: The Turks may say their problem is the PKK, but they have also threatened to launch a full-scale invasion of Iraqi Kurdistan should the people there dare to declare independence. After all, Turkey fears a Turkish Kurdish unraveling of its own—not to mention an emboldened PKK—should an independent Kurdish state exist anywhere.

Certainly these are legitimate fears, not to be dismissed. But they don’t change the fact that nations inconvenient to Turkey have a right to exist. The United Nations can’t—or won’t—act as an honest broker between the two sides: It’s too weak and uninterested. But the United States can. Indeed, Americans are the only people in the world who consider both Turkey and Kurdistan allies. The Turkish-American alliance is strained, to be sure, but it is still an alliance. American soldiers could flush out Iraq’s PKK terrorists on the condition that Turkey’s relationship with its Kurdish minority is properly liberalized. And they should.

On the matter of Iran and Syria, however, the United States should make no such deals. Both these countries have restive Kurdish populations of their own—and both also sponsor insurgencies against the United States, Lebanon, Israel, and Iraq. Surely, they don’t deserve insurance against insurrections of their own.

The Americans are learning that a violent insurgency against conventional state forces works. And the insurgency's sponsors—Tehran and Damascus—are learning it, too.

The Kurds of Iran and Syria would like nothing more than American assistance in launching anti-regime insurgencies of their own. An American-guaranteed Kurdish state in Iraq would serve to make such insurgencies only more likely, even without American help. Of course, the United States should never sponsor, or threaten to sponsor, an insurgency that isn't morally just, or that's merely temporarily useful. The Kurds of Iraq were used this way once before, with terrible and shameful results. Yet a Kurdish insurgency in Iran and Syria could be both a useful weapon *and* a just cause, so long as the moral corruption from the likes of the PKK can be neutralized.

Some critics would no doubt accuse Americans of imperialism were they to support Kurdish resistance in these countries. Yet it can more plausibly be argued that such support demonstrates the very opposite. Take the case of Iran: Almost half the country isn't even Persian. That's because Iranian territory is, in fact, what remains of the Persian Empire, which includes not only Persia but also Kurdistan, Western Azerbaijan, Balochistan, and the Arab region of Khuzestan. Iran, much like Iraq, is thus a nation state in name only. If Palestinians, Tibetans, and Chechens (to name just three examples) should have the right to self-determination, so should Kurds, Azeris, Balochis, and Iranian Arabs. True, there may be a case for the preservation of what's left of the Persian Empire. But so long as Tehran is ruled by clerical tyrants, the case for American-supported Kurdish resistance may be the stronger one. Therefore a large presence of American troops between Turks and Kurds may be the only military force in the world that can prevent a bloodbath.

Terrorism works. Up to a point. That is the tragic lesson of recent history in the Middle East.

The Palestinians aren't the only people in the world who seek and deserve a homeland of their own. But the squeaky wheel gets the grease. The Kurds do not receive billions of dollars in Western aid. The Kurds do not receive endless media attention. There are no rallies on Western campuses demanding their freedom, nor does the United Nations Security Council require that a state be created for them, although—unlike the Palestinians—they fought honorably against their enemies and have already carved out a moderately prosperous, free, and functional de-facto state of their own. They are America's allies, but most Americans know nothing about them.

One could argue—and thank God the Kurds of Iraq don't—that waves of suicide bombers would surely attract world attention and garner sympathy for their cause. After all, the international community has long acted as an enabler of violent national liberation movements, not because terrorism is acceptable but because appeasing it is the path of least resistance for the conflict-averse. Meanwhile, liberal and moderate groups that seek the same goal but do not employ terrorism are shunted aside. The way of reason and morality, it would seem, is bound to go unrewarded.

If the Kurds of Iraq get their state before the terrorists in Turkey and Palestine get theirs, it will be the great reversal the Middle East desperately needs. Terrorism will have proven to be the less effective tactic. And who knows? Perhaps others who seek independence will take note. Palestinian terror groups like Hamas won't, of course, but Kurdish terrorists in Turkey just might. And the Kurds of Iran and Syria are even more likely to do so.

But the real moral case for an American-guaranteed Kurdistan is simpler than that: They've earned it. They fought alongside the United States in Iraq and built a decent society there. They don't start wars, they don't terrorize people, and they don't deserve to be bullied and lorded over by others. America owes them. Everyone owes them.

“I ask Americans not to leave us,” Colonel Ameen said to me at the Ministry of Peshmerga. “From 1920 until now, we have been frustrated and disappointed by their pledges and promises. Eight times we have been disappointed. I ask the American people, do not make it nine.”

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