

THE FUTURE OF IRAQ

This paper analyzes the implications of an ethnically divided Federation of Iraq. Regional implications, problems within “Kurdistan,” minority concerns and the revival of Islamism will be taken into consideration in analyzing security issues that arise vis-à-vis the creation of such an entity. Taken together, the study demonstrates that given U.S. and neighboring countries’ interests, a future Federation of Iraq based on ethnic lines would be ominous to the future of the Middle East. More specifically, the analysis argues that under the given circumstances a federation would likely lead to a war between Turkey and Iraqi Kurds, convergence of Iranian-Turkish security interests, a power vacuum susceptible to conflict, and the revival of Islamism.

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As the war against Iraq becomes more inevitable, the focus of policymakers and military strategists has been limited to the technical, logistical and military dimensions of the conflict. Unfortunately, not enough emphasis has been placed on issues regarding the post-Saddam era in Iraq. The limited understanding of the Iraq's internal dynamics and their likely implications on regional governments pose a serious threat to the stability of the region.

The Kurdish question within Iraq and its repercussions in the Middle East – specifically, in Turkey, Iran and Syria – will constitute a major impediment to any nation-building efforts in Iraq. Faced with regional resistance and fears over proclamations of autonomy, the Iraqi Kurds authorized a draft constitution that called for a future Federation of Iraq based on ethnic lines.

The following analysis examines the implications of an ethnically divided Federation of Iraq. Regional implications, problems within “Kurdistan,” minority concerns and the revival of Islamism will be taken into consideration in analyzing security issues that arise vis-à-vis the creation of such an entity. Taken together, the study demonstrates that given U.S. and neighboring countries’ interests, a future Federation of Iraq based on ethnic lines would be ominous to the future of the Middle East. More specifically, the analysis argues that under the given circumstances a federation would likely lead to a war between Turkey and Iraqi Kurds, convergence of Iranian-Turkish security interests, a power vacuum susceptible to conflict, and the revival of Islamism.

Introductory Remarks on a “Federal Republic of Iraq”

A draft constitution authored by the Kurdistan Democratic Party (KDP) and accepted by the “Group of Four”¹ has led to intense debate within Iraqi opposition circles, as well as in the U.S., Turkey, Iran, Syria, and major European capitals. The constitution calls for a change of the,

“Structure of the Iraqi state and the nature of its political system from a unitary state based on total centralization to a federal system based on federalism and the division of powers among the federal government and the regional ones in a manner that would be more consistent with the pluralistic nature of the Iraqi community made up of two primary nationalities, Arabs and Kurds, in addition to other national minorities present among the population.”²

Accordingly, the Arab federation will encompass central and southern Iraq, while the Kurdish region will be located in the North, including the provinces of Kirkuk, Sulaimaniyah and Erbil (based on their pre-1970 administrative boundaries). While each region will have its own constitution, parliament and president, the central government in Baghdad would have control over the army, and authority over foreign policy.

¹ The Group of Four is composed of the Kurdistan Democratic Party (KDP, chairman: Mahmoud Barzani), the Patriotic Union of Kurdistan (PUK, chairman: Jalal Talabani), the Supreme Council of the Islamic Revolution in Iraq (SCIRI), and the Tehran-based organization of Iraqi Shiites.

² *Constitution of the Federal Republic of Iraq*. Pg.1.

Although the draft constitution raised the hopes of Kurds both within Iraq and in the diaspora, the likelihood of its success seems quite remote. A number of factors point to the fragility of a future “Federal Republic of Iraq”: a lack of support by and fears of regional states; the lack of a democratic culture among Iraqi Kurds; the uneasiness of other minority and Islamic groups within Iraq; and finally the role of oil in nation-building efforts in the Middle East. An analysis of these factors will demonstrate that a Kurdish regional federation would only lead to greater conflict and bloodshed in the region, while causing foreign policy re-orientation among key U.S. allies – i.e. Turkey – and changing the balance of power in the Middle East in a manner inconsistent with U.S. interests

International Actors

The dispersion of the Kurdish population among four states – Turkey, Iran, Iraq and Syria – constitutes a major difficulty in efforts to contain the Kurdish question within the territorial limits of one state.³ Developments in one state are therefore likely to influence Kurdish problems in neighboring countries. This could be regarded as the spillover effect of the Kurdish question in the Middle East. Moreover, the historically exemplified temptation for the different states to use their neighbors’ Kurdish problems in pursuit of their regional ambitions further complicates the debate over the future of the Kurds.

Since a breakup of Iraq would fundamentally alter the balances of power in the Middle East, an analysis of a future federated Iraq requires a rigorous examination of neighboring states’ national security issues vis-à-vis a change of balances in the region. Moreover, the interests of the United States and other Western powers should also be taken into consideration.

Regardless of whether or not the Iraqi Kurds see the federated entity as an interim step on the road to sovereignty, the proposed “Federal Republic of Iraq” is perceived as a direct challenge to Turkey’s territorial integrity. The nationalist aspirations of Kurds within Turkey are likely to gain momentum should Iraqi Kurds attain some sort of autonomy in Northern Iraq. The perceived threat of destabilization would trigger Ankara to take political, or even worse, military action against Iraqi Kurds. Senior officials already acknowledge that Turkey has deployed troops in Northern Iraq and that a “proclamation of an independent Kurdish state will meet with Turkish intervention.”⁴ Moreover, fears of deepening PKK support in the federated region of Kurdistan would further antagonize Turkey’s position vis-à-vis the Kurds, as well as its Arab neighbors.

The Kurdish nationalist movement in Turkey has been the preeminent factor in both domestic and foreign policies. Sukru Sina Gurel, former Turkish Foreign Minister, made it clear that Turkey would absolutely reject a federation system in Iraq.⁵ Since “Iraqi Kurdistan could only be sustained and protected by Turkey, given Iran’s relations with

³ The Kurds are estimated to number somewhere between 20 to 25 million people. Turkey is estimated to have a population of 10 to 12 million; with 5 to 6 million in Iran; 3.5 million in Iraq; and 1 million in Syria.

⁴ “Turkey Could Send Troops to Capture Iraqi Oil Fields”, *Middle East Newslines* (21 Oct. 2002) Pg.1.

⁵ Zeynep Gurcanli, “Gurel ve Kuzey Irak Politikasında Degisiklik.” *Star Gazetesi*. (22 July 2002) Pg.2

the West,”⁶ a lack of support by Turkey would most probably hinder any attempt to build a federated Iraq.

A future “Federation of Iraq” is also likely to endanger Iran’s security. Iran’s fears are inextricably linked to its own Kurdish minority, as well as to the Azerbaijan question and the flow of Iraqi Shi’a refugees. The spillover effects of a Kurdistan federation could trigger secessionist campaigns among Iranian Kurds. Furthermore, such sentiments could prompt nationalist sentiments among the Azeris of Northern Iraq who claim unity with the Republic of Azerbaijan. Such developments would not only threaten the stability of the Middle East, but would also bring up new issues of strategic security in the Caucasus region.

The convergence of the national security interests of Iran and Turkey highlights the need for a major re-thinking of foreign-policy. Turkey is a major consumer of Iranian natural gas. So much so, in fact that it could be dependent on Iran for 20 percent of its natural gas consumption by the end of the decade.⁷ The importance of the Iranian route for the proposed pipeline, which would cross through regions largely inhabited by Kurds in both Iran and Turkey, would create closer national security cooperation between Ankara and Tehran in an effort to prevent Kurdish forces from sabotaging the pipeline. The national security agreements between Turkey and Iran suggest that they are “more willing to cooperate regarding their respective policies toward countries in the Caucasus”⁸ and in efforts to prevent the emergence of a federated Kurdistan in Northern Iraq.

The Iranian-Turkish rapprochement is likely to gain momentum as a result of the European Union’s public snub, i.e. its refusal to give Turkey a date of accession. Turkey’s new foreign policy orientations are an ominous development for both Europe and the U.S. Losing Turkey, a key NATO ally and a pro-Western democratic country, would be detrimental to U.S. interests in the region. Therefore, “Washington must address Ankara’s increasingly vocal misgivings about Kurdish separatism as a part of planning for any post-Saddam scenario.”⁹

The U.S. has been careful to reiterate its policy of respect for the territorial integrity of Iraq. The U.S. is unlikely to prejudice its relations with Turkey by supporting Kurdish demands in Iraq. Also, Turkey’s reorientation toward Iran is likely to deter the U.S. from encouraging a Kurdistan federation in Northern Iraq.

The spillover effects of a to-be-established federated Kurdistan region in Northern Iraq are much more ominous than any lack of support from Kurdish opposition forces in a war against Iraq could ever be. Moreover, Turkey’s support in the war is unquestionably indispensable. The U.S. is therefore unlikely to alienate Turkey in its coalition building efforts against Iraq. In addition to the reasons outlined above, it is not just the lack of support but the forceful opposition of the U.S., Turkey and Iran towards the

⁶ David McDowall, *A Modern History of the Kurds* (New York: IB Tauris, 2002) Pg. 384.

⁷ Ilan Berman, “Losing Turkey: Europe’s Choice, and Ours” *National Review* (1 November 2002) Pg.1

⁸ Robert Olson, *Kurdish Nationalist Movement* (Kentucky: University Press of Kentucky, 1996) Pg. 94

⁹ Berman, Pg.1

establishment of a “Federal Republic of Iraq” raises serious doubts with regard to the sustainability of such an entity.

Problems within “Kurdistan”

Following the Gulf War of 1991, the situation in Iraq opened the way for some form of self-rule for Iraqi Kurds. Although it could not be construed as sovereignty – for sovereignty is defined as the recognition by internal and external actors that the state has the exclusive authority to intervene in activities within its territory¹⁰, – the Kurds nonetheless enjoyed autonomy more extensive than anything they had previously experienced in Iraq. However, the divisions within the Kurdish community – linguistic, regional and tribal – have marked the unsuccessful attempts by Kurdish leaders to convert the status quo into a more tangible entity.

1992 witnessed the first elections in the Kurdish enclave of Iraq.¹¹ The climate of optimism generated by free elections soon evaporated due to the overlapping antagonisms between the two parties. Although the elections resulted in a tie between the KDP and the PUK, the long-standing rivalry between the leaders, Barzani and Talabani, led to continuous competition between the two parties for influence, power and funding. Because most of the parties are linked with tribal groups, the elections highlighted an undemocratic culture, in which most voted according to their sense of loyalty to tribal clans.¹² The 50-50 power sharing system induced administrative paralysis and exacerbated the networks of patronage operated by each of the two main parties.¹³

The government’s attempts to raise revenue were based largely on the taxation of trade entering ‘Kurdistan.’ Smuggling and asset-stripping became widespread, with neither of the political parties doing anything effective to stop this traffic. On the contrary, “the struggle for control of borders and routes on which customs revenues could be levied became a key issue in the conflict between the parties.”¹⁴ The involvement of party leaders in the distribution of government supplies to the settlements through the system of *mujamma’at* (or, collective settlements), further strengthened their power, while creating new opportunities for clientelism.

Both the KDP and PUK recruited their own peshmerga forces – traditional Kurdish guerillas – which had the power to enforce party decisions, and maintain order in their respective spheres of influence. The elections of 1992 called for the integration of the parties’ military forces into unified policy and army structures, however, the peshmergas never surrendered their roles. On the contrary, they continued to highlight “the military

¹⁰ Janice Thomson, “State Sovereignty in International Relations: Bridging the Gap between Theory and Empirical Research” *International Studies Quarterly* (June 1995) Pg. 219

¹¹ Administratively, the region which fell under Kurdish rule consisted of three provinces, Dohuk, Arbil and Sulaymaniya, with the city of Arbil serving as the regional capital. Small sections of the Nineveh and Kirkuk provinces fell inside the Kurdish-controlled region. The Iraqi government retained control of strategically important areas of Kirkuk, Khanaqin and Sinjar.

¹² This is particularly true for the KDP and the Barzani clan. It is less apparent in the PUK.

¹³ Sarah Graham-Brown, *Sanctioning Saddam: The Politics of Intervention in Iraq* (New York: I.B. Tauris, 1999) Pg. 221

¹⁴ *Ibid.* Pg. 225

rather than political character of the parties and the increasing role of rural and tribal recruits at the expense of urban intellectuals.”¹⁵

The fighting between the two leaders has strengthened the role of the peshmergas. Despite frequent declarations of cooperation, the rivalry between Barzani and Talabani finally led to the partitioning of the Kurdish enclave into two regions with the KDP dominating the northwestern area, and PUK controlling the southeast. By 1997, the two parties had effectively created separate political administrations.¹⁶

David McDowall contrasts the traditional tribalism of the 1970s prevalent among Iraqi Kurds, with the emergence of neo-tribalism in the 1990s, in which each party is still dependent on those loyal to the those at the top, and where the system of patronage and power reaches down to the street.¹⁷ Similarly, Hurst Hannum raises an interesting point: “It is not clear whether traditional Kurdish leaders are as interested in tribal democracy as they are in the constitutional autonomy which they have demanded.”¹⁸

The lack of a democratic culture and political institutions among the Kurds in Northern Iraq is rooted in the legacy of tribalism, the networks of patronage and clientalism, and the absence of control over the peshmergas. The semi-autonomy granted to Iraqi Kurds since 1991 has not provided a platform conducive for the development of democratic institutions in the Kurdish enclave. Quite the contrary, the legacy of hatred and distrust between Barzani and Talabani, and the political, economic, social and military networks that have surrounded these leaders served only to further exacerbate the undemocratic mentality of the Kurds.

As the neo-tribalism argument presented above suggests, this political atmosphere is likely to persist in the future. The establishment of a “Federation of Iraq” today would only exacerbate the already-undemocratic system currently operative among Iraqi Kurds. Coupled with the chaotic regional implications discussed above, a Kurdish Federation would only lead to a power vacuum susceptible to continuous conflict.

Minority Concerns, the Oil Factor and the Revival of Islamism

Minority concerns in Iraq are mainly raised by the Turkmen¹⁹, and to a lesser extent by the Assyrian populations. The term “minority” is problematic in itself because there are no recent census data. The last population census dates back to 1957, in which the Turkmen numbered 567,000 out of a population of 6.3 million. Iraqi Kurds claim that the Turkmen population today is around 350,000-500,000, while the Turkmen estimate it to be around 2 to 2.5 million (14-16% of the total population)²⁰. The problem raised by

¹⁵ Graham-Brown, Pg. 217

¹⁶ Ibid. Pg. 227

¹⁷ McDowall, Pg. 386

¹⁸ Hurst Hannum, *Autonomy, Sovereignty and Self-determination: The Accommodation of Conflicting Rights* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1990) Pg. 199

¹⁹ Western studies use the word “Turcoman” to describe the Turkmen people.

²⁰ Tarik Oguzlu, “The Turcomans as a Factor in Turkish Foreign Policy” *Turkish Studies* (V.3, N.2) Pg.142. Also note that in the following census the Turkish category was dropped.

minority concerns in talks of a “Federal Republic of Iraq” stems from this very ambiguity.

Regardless of the numbers, the Turkmen population constitutes the third largest group in Iraq. The draft constitution authorized by the Kurdistan Regional Government (KRG) divides Iraq into two regions “consistent with the pluralist nature of the Iraqi community made up of the two primary nationalities, Arabs and Kurds, in addition to other national minorities present among the population.” The constitution does not name these minorities, nor does it provide them with seats at the National Assembly (Article 27) or the Assembly of the Regions (Article 33). Moreover, in Article 6, it envisions a Federal Republic of Iraq with “a flag, an emblem, and a national anthem that reflects the union between the Kurds and the Arabs,” while failing to mention the inclusion of other minority groups. In a similar vein, the constitution designates Arabic as the official language of the federal state and the Arab region, and Kurdish as the official language of the Kurdistan region. Again, no mention of Turkish or other minority languages (Article 8).²¹

Turkmen objections to Kurdish federation aspirations lie in the fact that the Kurds regard the former as a minority²². The Turkmen are not against a Federation per se, but oppose Kurdish inclusion of cities largely populated by the Turkmen. They therefore conclude that if there is a Kurdish region in a future Iraqi Federation, there should also be a Turkmen region, as well.

The chief sticking point in the disagreement over population measures is the town of Kirkuk, which has vast reserves of high-quality oil. The Kurds claim a majority in the city, while the Turkmen assert they constitute 75% of the population. The draft constitution authorized by the KRG assigns Kirkuk to the Kurdish region. Moreover, it calls for the return of previously deported Kurds back into Kirkuk (Article 78). In the eyes of the Turkmen, this constitutes a major threat to the security and economic welfare of their peoples, as they declare, “We will have control of this city, that is what we are fighting for.”²³ The Kurds seem determined to make Kirkuk “the political capital and economic heart”²⁴ of a Kurdish federal state. A study conducted in 1992 suggests that oil production in Iraq will continue for approximately 129 years (compare to: Saudi Arabia; 118 years, US: 10 years)²⁵. This implies that oil will remain a key determinant in the future of Iraq, not only in any nation-building efforts, but also in its relations with neighboring countries and with the international oil market, at large.

The existence of the Turkmen population in Iraq has been neglected by many scholars mainly because the Turkmen have been “unarmed, without outside support, disorganized

²¹ Federal Constitution of Iraq, Pg 2-11

²² Personal interview with Orhan Ketene, USA Representative, Turkmen Front

²³ Craig Smith, “Three Groups Already Squabbling Over Oil-Flushed Northern Iraq” *The Turkish Times* (12 September 2002) Pg. 1

²⁴ Ibid. Pg.1

²⁵ Alan Richards and John Waterbury, *Political Economy of Middle East* (Colorado: Westview Press, 1998) Pg. 54

and consequently docile.”²⁶ This attitude has changed since Turkey indicated that it would protect its Turkmen relatives. In May 2001, then Turkish Prime Minister Bulent Ecevit issued a directive to government agencies, in which he cited the protection of the rights of the Turkmens as a new strategy.²⁷ As Ambassador Ugur Ziyal stated, “the Turkish government has no intention of meddling in the affairs of third countries, but it does have a legitimate concern for the welfare of those of Turkic origin – if for no other reason than the possibility of an influx of refugees in a worst-case scenario.”²⁸ This change in Turkey’s foreign policy suggests that an establishment of a Kurdish Federation in Iraq that includes the cities of Kirkuk, Sulaimaniyah and Erbil (all highly populated by Turkmens) is likely to trigger Turkish action against Iraqi Kurds. Such an environment would further destabilize the region, and would likely spark more conflict in and around Iraq.

The corruption of the KDP and the PUK as perceived by Iraqi Kurds has led to the rise of Islamic sentiments among the population. This has been fueled by financial support from Iran. The on-going conflict between Barzani and Talabani during and after the elections created an environment conducive to the rise of Islamism and this is confirmed by the significant achievements of the Islamic Movement of Kurdistan (IMK) in the 1992 elections. As one politician remarked at the time, “The ground in Kurdistan is ready for an Islamic revival.”²⁹ This is especially true for the Shi’a majority in Iraq, who are being supported by Iran.

The Turkish elections held on November 3, 2002 led to the formation of a majority government ruled by the Justice and Development Party (AKP), which embodies the Islamist sentiments of its founders. This raises important questions and concerns regarding the future of the Middle East. The revival of Islamism both in Iraq and in Turkey (the only democratic and secular country in the region with a predominantly Muslim population), as well as the existence of a neighboring Islamic Republic of Iran is a major cause of concern. The inclusion of Article 7 in the draft constitution submitted by the KRG which maintains that “the state religion is Islam” should raise concerns in the West. The other arguments presented in this analysis, which presuppose the probable convergence of Turkish and Iranian interests based on a future federated Kurdish region, further demonstrates the complications inherent in the establishment of such an entity.

Conclusions

It is possible to draw a number of conclusions from the arguments presented above. The dispersion of the Kurdish population among four countries makes it difficult to contain the Kurdish question within the territorial limits of one state. Hence, the creation of a Federation of Iraq based on ethnic lines, which calls for a regional federation of Kurdistan, is likely to influence not only the balance of power in neighboring countries, but also these neighbors’ attitudes and policies toward such an entity.

²⁶ Yuksel Soylemez, “Iraqi Turkomans: A Lost Tribe” *Turkish Daily News* (1 October 2002) Pg. 2

²⁷ Oguzlu, Pg. 146

²⁸ Ugur Ziyal “The Middle East: A Turkish Perspective” *Policy Watch* (Washington DC: Washington Institute for Near East Policy, #655) Pg.3

²⁹ McDowal, pg. 386

Since the creation of a Kurdish Federation is perceived as a direct threat to Turkey's territorial integrity – due mainly to secessionist aspiration among Kurds in Turkey and fears of deepening PKK support in the federated region – this constitutes a *casus belli* from the Turkish perspective. Moreover, Turkey's recent foreign policy strategy guaranteeing the protection of its Turkmen brethren could also be regarded as a destabilizing factor that might spark more conflict between the two countries. The oil reserves in Kirkuk, a province proclaimed to be under the authority of a future Kurdish federation could also instigate further tension in the region. Overall, an ethnically divided Iraq has the makings of a recipe for disaster, as it would antagonize Turkey's position vis-à-vis Iraqi Kurds.

The likely convergence of national security interests between Iran and Turkey and the possibility that this rapprochement might gain momentum in the upcoming days are issues of concern. Iran's own fears of a future Kurdish Federation – linked to its own Kurdish minority, the Azeri question and the flow of Iraqi Shi'a refugees – the revival of Islamism within Iraq, the AKP government in Turkey, and the recent E.U. snub toward Turkey are important and interrelated developments both policy-makers in the U.S. and secular circles in Turkey should closely observe before committing to a Kurdish Federation within Iraq.

Moreover, the lack of democratic culture and political institutions among the Kurds in Iraq, the legacy of tribalism, the networks of patronage and clientalism, and the absence of or reluctance to assert control over the peshmergas are factors likely to lead to a power vacuum in the region susceptible to continuous conflict. While trying to get rid of a threatening Saddam regime, the creation of an ethnically divided "Federation of Iraq" might be even more ominous for regional and global stability.

This analysis does not claim to provide a solution to the Kurdish question or to nation-building strategy issues in a post-Saddam era. The objective of this article is to demonstrate the detrimental and inauspicious repercussions of a Federation of Iraq based on ethnic lines as proposed by the Constitution drafted by the KRG. It argues that given the current set of circumstances, a federation would likely lead to war between Turkey and the Iraqi Kurds, a convergence of Iranian-Turkish security interests, a power vacuum susceptible to conflict and the revival of Islamism – developments counter to the interests of the U.S., European countries, and secular circles in Turkey.

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