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Middle East Brief

The Kurds and Regional Security: An Evaluation of Developments since the Iraq War

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The Kurdish role in Middle Eastern politics has been a subject of much discussion since the 2003 Iraq War. Syria, Iran, and Turkey consistently present the Kurds as a wholly destabilizing force in the region owing to long-standing Kurdish interests in gaining autonomy or an independent state. A step-by-step analysis of circumstances affecting the Kurds, however, reveals the extent to which a series of external and internal developments have enabled and constrained Kurdish behavior, thus determining the Kurds' role relative to regional security. In turn, such an assessment allows one to identify some of the trends likely to affect Kurdish futures in the postwar regional security environment.

Threat Perceptions Preceding the 2003 War

During the run-up to the Iraq War, the Syrian, Iranian, and Turkish governments were concerned as to how the postwar settlement vis-à-vis the Iraqi Kurds might affect their own Kurdish populations. As a whole, the region's Kurds share a long-standing desire for a state of their own, and, since the 1991 Gulf War, had come close to realizing this dream owing to the existence of a democratic, economically developing, and autonomous Kurdish region (the Kurdistan Regional Government, or KRG) based in northern Iraq. This autonomy allowed the KRG's main Kurdish parties—Jalal Talabani's Patriotic Union of Kurdistan (PUK) and Masoud Barzani's Kurdistan Democratic Party (KDP)—to develop the political and military machinery needed to control Iraqi Kurdistan.¹ As a result, Syria, Iran, and Turkey worried that the Iraqi Kurds would use the post-conflict power vacuum to, at a minimum, transform their de facto autonomy into a de jure legality; at worst, the three feared that the PUK and KDP would seize the opportunity afforded by the overthrow of Saddam Hussein to declare an independent Kurdish state. Such potentialities were viewed with intense

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apprehension as greater Kurdish freedom in Iraq could precipitate region-wide Kurdish unrest and thereby imperil regional security.

The specific nature of the perceived security threat posed by anticipated Kurdish gains in postwar Iraq varied from state to state, however. In Syria, long-standing Ba'athist restraints on Kurdish access to the political system, along with a policy of Arabization that settled Arabs on confiscated Kurdish lands, had spawned a host of Syrian Kurdish opposition groups that were at once well organized and motivated to seek redress for Kurdish grievances.² President Bashar Assad was sufficiently new to office, and his regime sufficiently weak, that the government perceived a type of existential threat should Kurdish groups take the lead in organizing domestic opposition to the Ba'athist state. The overarching concern was that an increasingly democratic and economically robust KRG on Syria's border might arouse Syria's Kurds to agitate in support of improvements – perhaps including demands for autonomy – to their situation in Syria, potentially inspiring similar demands from other disenfranchised groups, and thereby undermining the regime's authority.³ To forestall this danger, Assad traveled to Syria's Kurdish areas in September 2002 and promised that the government would consider granting the Kurds greater rights so long as they maintained “national unity.” As one analyst noted, Assad's message was twofold: “Yes, we will look into your problems, but don't use this as a card to press for more.”⁴

By way of contrast, Iran and Turkey focused not on Kurdish existential threats, but on the potential for Kurdish secessionist violence to imperil their territorial integrity. This concern resulted from past experiences with nationalist-inspired Kurdish violence. Iranian Kurds, for example, rose up against the state in a bid for independence immediately following the Iraqi invasion of Iran in 1980. Occurring at a time when the Islamic Republic was at its weakest, the revolt was not suppressed until 1984 following a two-year campaign by the Iranian army.⁵ Meanwhile, the 1984–1999 revolt of the Kurdistan Workers' Party (PKK) in Turkey nearly succeeded in forming an independent Kurdistan in the Turkish southeast. Though the Turkish military had gained control of the military struggle by 1999, at a cost of nearly 35,000 Turkish and Kurdish dead, the conflict terminated only after the PKK declared a unilateral cease-fire and retreated across the border to northern Iraq following the capture of PKK leader Abdullah Öcalan; in order to keep the peace, Turkey maintained thousands of troops in its southeastern provinces.⁶ Given such past encounters with Kurdish nationalism, Iran and Turkey shared a concern that enhanced Kurdish autonomy, let alone the emergence of an independent Kurdistan in northern Iraq, might rekindle nationalist fervor among their Kurdish populations and spark renewed attempts at wresting Iranian and Turkish Kurdistan away from state control.⁷

Postwar Developments in Iraq: The Importance of the Transitional Administrative Law

Significantly, an unambiguous Kurdish challenge to regional security did not emerge for over a year following the U.S. invasion in 2003. Concerns that the Iraqi Kurds would use the downfall of the Iraqi government to immediately declare independence proved unfounded, as the PUK and KDP emphasized their commitment to keeping Kurdistan part of Iraq and remained engaged throughout 2003–2004 in efforts to reconstitute a central Iraqi government.⁸ Given a burgeoning United States–Kurdish partnership within Iraq stemming from Kurdish support for the American invasion; promises of American support for Kurdish interests provided the Kurds remained engaged in the Iraqi political process; and an oft-repeated threat of Turkish intervention in northern Iraq should the Kurds declare independence, the PUK and KDP were subject to both positive and negative external incentives to keep the KRG part of Iraq.⁹ Under such

geopolitical conditions, as Talabani himself noted in August 2003, Kurdish independence was “impossible”; instead, to be “realistic,” Kurds had to work to create a “democratic, parliamentary, federative, [and] pluralistic Iraq” in order to secure “the tangible goals of the [Kurdish] people.”¹⁰ Accordingly, there were few manifestations of Kurdish violence in Syria, Iran, and Turkey as the regional political structure, with its inveterate hostility toward expressions of Kurdish separatism and secession, remained essentially unchanged as compared with the situation before 2003.¹¹

As part of their participation in the negotiations leading to the 8 March 2004 adoption of Iraq’s Transitional Administrative Law (TAL), the PUK and KDP—with United States backing—secured approval for a federal Iraqi state that offered a means of legally recognizing the de facto Kurdish state within a state in northern Iraq.¹² At the same time, the TAL made substantial improvements to the Kurdish situation in Iraq by recognizing Kurdish as one of Iraq’s two official languages, guaranteeing the right of displaced Kurds to return to their homes, promising the KRG a share of Iraqi oil revenues proportional to the country’s Kurdish population, and securing KRG control of Kurdish militia forces (the *peshmerga*), with only nominal authority resting with Baghdad.¹³ Then, although rebuffed in their efforts to obtain control over Kirkuk and its oil fields—areas that were long claimed as part of the Kurdish nationalist narrative but were equally sought by Arab and Turkoman groups—the PUK and KDP succeeded in gaining a promise of a future referendum to decide control of the contested territory. Given the effectiveness of the *peshmerga* in maintaining peaceful conditions in Iraqi Kurdistan, past PUK and KDP experience in administering the KRG, and a 2003 agreement between the PUK and KDP designed to settle outstanding political differences and provide for joint PUK-KDP administration of the KRG, the KRG emerged as the one area of Iraq where U.S. troops were neither needed nor present to provide for the security of the population.

Regional Reverberations: The Kurds in Syria, Turkey, and Iran

By March of 2004, then, Iraq’s Kurds had attained autonomy within the confines of a federal state alongside improvements to their socioeconomic and political situation. Moreover, they managed to do so without seeing foreign troops encroach on KRG territory in such a way as to degrade KRG authority and freedom of action. These developments provided other Kurdish groups with the external conditions necessary to challenge the regional status quo.

Such challenges began less than a week after the signing of the TAL when Kurdish rioting erupted throughout Syria on 12–15 March 2004.¹⁴ Though immediately precipitated by a fight between Kurdish and Arab fans of rival soccer teams,

the riots, as noted at the time, were inspired by “watching rights for Kurds being enshrined in a new if temporary constitution next door in Iraq.”¹⁵ Improvements to the Iraqi Kurdish situation contrasted with the failure of the Assad regime to make good on its 2002 rhetoric so that Syria’s Kurds, as one European diplomat told the *Christian Science Monitor*, “[saw] developments in Iraq as an opportunity to press for more rights.”¹⁶ “Although,” as Gary Gambill observed in April 2004, “foreign provocateurs did not directly instigate any of the rioting,” growing Kurdish power, influence, and assertiveness in Iraq catalyzed Kurdish challenges to their situation within Syria.¹⁷

Turkey’s Kurds were the next to avail themselves of the changed regional conditions, when a faction of the PKK renounced 1999’s cease-fire and resumed hostilities against the Turkish Republic in June 2004. At the time, the PKK claimed that Turkey’s failure to respond to the cease-fire by improving Kurdish rights made perpetuation of the cease-fire irrelevant and necessitated a renewed fight for Kurdish autonomy and ultimate independence.¹⁸ One notes, however, the geopolitical circumstances underlying the PKK move. In light of the autonomy afforded the KRG and continued American backing for the Iraqi Kurds, together with the need on the part of the United States to avoid destabilizing shocks to the nascent Iraqi government and the lack of U.S. forces in northern Iraq, the PKK found itself afforded a virtually free hand in operating against Turkey from its bases in Iraqi Kurdistan. The conflicting priorities of the KRG, the United States, and Turkey interlocked in such a manner that Turkey could not attack the PKK for fear of destabilizing the Iraqi government and/or inviting clashes with the KRG, risking the ire of the United States in either case. Given American support for Iraq’s Kurds and the concomitant neutralization of the prospect of Turkish intervention, the PUK and KDP lacked an incentive to move against the PKK. Moreover, with American forces needed elsewhere in Iraq to combat the Iraqi insurgency and Iraqi Kurdistan experiencing greater stability relative to the rest of the country, the United States itself lacked the means and motivation to attack the Kurdish rebels.¹⁹ In this sense, the postwar power vacuum saw the United States and the KRG abrogate responsibility for stopping the PKK while simultaneously and paradoxically restraining Turkish intervention to halt PKK terrorism.

Prospering under such conditions and once again finding support among Turkey’s Kurds, the PKK infiltrated large numbers of fighters across the Iraq-Turkey border throughout this period and increased the size, frequency, and scope of its attacks against the Turkish Republic.²⁰ These attacks took an ever-larger toll on the Turkish military and significantly raised the profile of the renewed Kurdish challenge to Turkey.²¹

More indicative of the PKK's growing power was its 2004 establishment of the Party for a Free Life in Iranian Kurdistan (PEJAK or PJAK) as a sister organization with the goal of fomenting Kurdish separatism in Iran by fostering Kurdish nationalism therein.²² Also based in northern Iraq and taking advantage of the selfsame conditions benefiting the PKK, PEJAK mobilized support amongst Iran's Kurdish population throughout 2004–2005.²³ Subsequently, as James Brandon observed in a piece for the Jamestown Foundation's *Terrorism Monitor*, "the group's first armed attack took place in 2004 in the Meriwan region of Iranian Kurdistan after Iranian security forces fired on a Kurdish demonstration killing 10 people."²⁴ When rioting later erupted in Kurdish cities in Iran following the killing of a Kurdish political activist by state security forces in July 2005, PEJAK members joined in the fighting and used the event to launch an ongoing campaign against the Iranian government.²⁵ Having killed several hundred Iranian soldiers and policemen since 2004, PEJAK militancy in support of Kurdish autonomy and eventual independence contrasts sharply with the conciliatory approach towards the Iranian government favored by more-established Iranian Kurdish groups.²⁶

Attempts to Control the Kurdish Challenge

Thus, the Middle East was faced with an unambiguous Kurdish challenge to the prevailing politico-military situation by the beginning of 2005. Though the specific nature of the threat varied from country to country precisely in the manners feared, respectively, by Syria, Iran, and Turkey before the war, the fact that events in Iraq served as the driving force behind the Kurdish uprisings served to make the Kurdish challenge regional in scope and dimension. Syrian, Iranian, and Turkish moves to combat renewed Kurdish violence were similarly regional in scale and focused both on constraining Kurdish opportunities to exploit changed political conditions in the region and on eliminating the external circumstances catalyzing Kurdish actions.

The foundation for a regional response had, in fact, emerged even before the close of 2003's hostilities when Turkey began talks with both Syria and Iran in April 2003 with the apparent goal of establishing a consensus as to how to best address potential Kurdish aggrandizement in the postwar period.²⁷ In light of long-standing disagreements between the three parties stemming from Iranian and Syrian support for the PKK in the 1980s and 1990s, these talks helped settle such outstanding points of contention between the countries. The ensuing rapprochement resulted in a series of bilateral steps between Iran and Turkey and between Syria and Turkey designed to combat the Kurdish security challenge, including: the sharing of intelligence on PKK and

PEJAK activities; security sweeps of Kurdish areas within each country to eliminate Kurdish groups operating in neighboring states (e.g., Syrian operations against the PKK and Turkish operations against PEJAK); and ministerial-level meetings to review developments affecting the Kurds and regional security.²⁸ Given the escalating Kurdish violence in the region after 2004, coordinated action helped ensure that state responses to Kurdish violence did not work at cross-purposes and enable the Kurds to play one state off another.²⁹ Just as significantly, enhanced cooperation increased the pressure on Iraq's Kurds to eliminate the conditions within the KRG fostering Kurdish aggrandizement by presenting Talabani and Barzani (who were now President of Iraq and Prime Minister of the KRG, respectively) with a united front demanding Iraqi Kurdish help in stabilizing the regional security environment. Turkey was particularly vehement that the KRG, as well as its American partner, take steps to combat the PKK in light of the group's growing ability to exploit the northern Iraqi power vacuum.³⁰

Yet the KRG had only a limited ability to respond to this pressure as Talabani and Barzani found themselves in a much weakened domestic position by the close of 2005 and the start of 2006. Indeed, as early as the 2004 signing of the TAL, many Iraqi Kurds accused the two leaders of betraying the Kurdish cause by failing to gain control over Kirkuk and the northern oil fields, and by not securing the absolute independence—with no linkage to Baghdad—of the peshmerga. As one Kurdish politician bluntly told the *Washington Times*, "we should have gotten more" at the TAL negotiations.³¹ With the 2005 Iraqi Constitution making the TAL provisions permanent, criticism of the Kurdish leadership became more pronounced as many Kurds accused the PUK-KDP administration of mishandling KRG funds, intimidating political rivals, cronyism, and failing to provide basic government services.³² Hostility toward the PUK and KDP was particularly prevalent among Iraqi Kurdish youth and resulted in a growing segment of the Kurdish population fundamentally disagreeing with the earlier decision not to declare independence.³³ This resentment came to a head in March of 2006 when, in what the *New York Times* called "an authentic expression of popular rage," a Kurdish mob destroyed a museum dedicated to Kurdish victims of Saddam Hussein's regime guarded by PUK soldiers on the KRG payroll.³⁴ Faced with growing militancy amongst portions of their constituency and broader criticism of their leadership, action on the part of Talabani and Barzani in response to regional security concerns was neither feasible—the two lacked sufficient backing—nor plausible—to do so would further undermine their leadership.

In parallel fashion, the United States continued its support for the Iraqi Kurds. Instead of eliminating the conditions and/or groups imperiling regional security, it merely expressed its support for “Turkey and Iraq to work together against the PKK and for good relations between the two countries.”³⁵ With the U.S. fearing a break with the only group in Iraq supporting its presence, its position vis-à-vis Iraq’s Kurds remained unchanged from its 2003 formulation.³⁶

In response to this reticence, Turkey and Iran—as the countries most affected by increasing Kurdish militancy—moved during the spring and early summer of 2006 to take matters into their own hands. Increasing their bilateral military and intelligence coordination against the PKK and PEJAK, the two states escalated the military situation by attacking the groups’ bases in northern Iraq.³⁷ They also began a build-up of forces along their borders with Iraq so as to intimidate Talabani and Barzani into clamping down on the “terrorism” emanating from northern Iraq.³⁸

Yet Talabani and Barzani did not respond as desired to this pressure. In lieu of moving against the armed groups, the PUK-KDP leadership instead expressed support for a “peaceful” solution to Turkey and Iran’s Kurdish problems and urged the PKK and PEJAK to “respect the law and not use our territory to stage attacks against Iran or Turkey.”³⁹ Reflecting the need to be seen as defending Kurdish interests in the face of mounting internal criticism, Talabani did, however, criticize Iran and Turkey for meddling in Iraq’s “internal affairs” and warned the two countries that Iraq would retaliate if attacked.⁴⁰ By way of contrast, the PKK sought to utilize the Turkish-Iranian attacks to tap into the growing discontent with the PUK-KDP leadership, issuing calls that spring and summer for “brotherly” ties between Turkish and Iraqi Kurds and promising to expand its attacks in response to Turkish-Iranian hostility.⁴¹ Such calls led to further criticism of the PUK-KDP leadership and, one may infer, enhanced the popular support afforded to PEJAK, the PKK, other Kurdish groups agitating for autonomy/independence in the region, and parties challenging PUK-KDP authority.⁴²

The Crisis of July and August 2006—and the Response

The Kurdish role in the Middle East political and security equation, then, was in a state of flux by the summer of 2006 as three cross-cutting trends created a cycle of instability. First, owing to the United States presence in Iraq and the U.S.-Kurdish partnership, Turkey, Iran, and Syria lacked the ability to directly eliminate the conditions in northern Iraq imperiling the security environment. Second, indirect pressure on the KRG was ineffective owing both to U.S. support for the Kurds and to the growing challenge to the PUK-KDP leadership from within Iraqi Kurdistan itself.

Finally, the combination of a lack of incentives for the KRG to respond to regional concerns and its growing inability to do so even if it so desired, exacerbated the security concerns of the three states while further constraining the KRG’s ability to act against regional instability on account of its constituents’ increased opposition to Turkish, Iranian, and Syrian interests.

It was amidst this dynamic instability that fifteen Turkish soldiers died between 12 and 19 July 2006 as a result of PKK activities.⁴³ The Turkish government immediately indicated that it was prepared to invade northern Iraq in order to punish the PKK, even at the risk of breaking with the United States; as Turkish Prime Minister Teyyep Erdogan declared on 16 July, “We have so far tried to handle this issue [the PKK] with patience... [but] these are not acts that one can put up with.”⁴⁴ Plans were drawn up for various military operations inside Iraqi Kurdistan; officials held an emergency meeting of the High Anti-Terrorism Council to review potential actions against the PKK; and members of the Turkish opposition called for an emergency meeting of Parliament to authorize an immediate cross-border operation. These events raised the possibility of an invasion to a level not seen since the 2003 war.⁴⁵

Simultaneously, however, Turkey used the opportunity to reiterate its demands that the KRG and its U.S. backer finally move against the PKK. “What we expect [from Iraq],” Turkey’s justice minister observed, “is... the removal of a threat toward a neighboring country and for our ally, the United States, to support Iraq in this.”⁴⁶ In increasing the pressure on the United States via its diplomatic entreaties and saber rattling, Turkey revealed the degree to which it feared expanding its Kurdish conflict and sought to avoid a rupture with its U.S. ally even as it emphasized the extent to which it was contemplating an invasion. This dual approach paid off, as the U.S. now intervened in the crisis and changed its policies to account for Turkish security concerns; this subsequently prompted a change in the KRG position. Hence, while United States Ambassador to Turkey Ross Wilson restated the American position that “unilateral military action across the border with Iraq would be unwise,” talks commenced between the U.S. and Turkey to enable “more effective U.S.-Turkish collaboration in Iraq to cut off funding, apprehend PKK leaders... and shut down PKK front groups.”⁴⁷ Additionally, President Bush spoke with Prime Minister Erdogan on two separate occasions during the crisis to assure Turkey that the United States recognized the “urgency and seriousness” of the situation. After the second conversation, the *Turkish Daily News* reported that Bush “said he had given the necessary instructions [...] and that the Iraqi administration had also been given a strong message that the United States would work together with Turkey in the fight against terrorism”

as the heightened tension prompted the U.S. government to consider ways the U.S., KRG, and central Iraqi government could coordinate action against the PKK and combat the conditions allowing it to prosper.⁴⁸

Thus, Turkish pressure caused a reformulation of U.S. policy toward the Kurds in accordance with the Turkish position. U.S. Deputy Assistant Secretary of State for European and Eurasian Affairs Matt Bryza, for example, promised that the U.S. would obtain “more concrete results [against the PKK] shortly. ...part of that will come through the [Turkish-Iraqi/KRG-U.S.] trilateral process, but there will be other ways that you’ll see us moving against the PKK.”⁴⁹ National Security Advisor Stephen Hadley underscored the changed U.S. position when, on 27 July, he acknowledged that the PKK situation “is something we have to address more aggressively” and noted that the U.S. and Iraq had “already identified some steps that can be taken.”⁵⁰

As a result, the months that followed witnessed efforts on the part of the United States and the KRG (under the auspices of the Iraqi government) to recognize and address Turkish security concerns. The Iraqi government announced plans to close PKK offices throughout Iraq, while Talabani emphasized his personal support for all measures “to stop the PKK [from] using Iraqi territory against Turkey.”⁵¹ Of equal importance, American pressure compelled Talabani and Barzani to issue an ultimatum to the PKK to either “lay down arms or face isolation” in the mountains.⁵² Coming amidst reports of joint United States, Turkish, and KRG military planning against the PKK, these steps represented a united trilateral campaign against the political and military centers of PKK power.⁵³ Finally, the United States appointed retired Air Force General Joseph Ralston as the first “special envoy for countering the Kurdistan Workers’ Party” in order to institutionalize and enhance coordinated action by the U.S., Turkey, and Iraq against the PKK; Turkey and Iraq reciprocated by naming, respectively, Amir Amed Hassun and former General Edip Baser as Ralston’s counterparts. By creating this position, the U.S. affirmed its dedication to an extended campaign against the PKK while providing what the Turkish Foreign Ministry described as “a new opportunity to nourish the current cooperation . . . as well as the current political will against the PKK/Kongra-Gel terror organization with concrete steps.”⁵⁴ Collectively, altered American and KRG policies helped assuage Turkey’s concerns relative to the Kurdish question as the Turkish foreign minister, reflecting on the new political dynamic, proclaimed the dawning of a “new period... regarding the fight against [Kurdish] terrorism,” predicated on burgeoning U.S., Turkish, and Iraqi/KRG cooperation.⁵⁵ Indeed, given the PKK’s announcement of a unilateral ceasefire on 30 September, there is some evidence that U.S., Turkish, and

KRG pressure has begun to affect the group’s political calculations and limit its freedom of maneuver.⁵⁶

Implications and Analysis

Assuming this three-way cooperation is maintained, the settlement of Turkey’s Kurdish concerns in Iraq thereby holds the promise of again transforming the relationship between the Kurds and regional security dynamics. Insofar as Turkey proved the actor most involved in fostering a regional response to the growing Kurdish security challenge by constructing the series of bilateral measures noted above, a sustained Turkish move away from extensive cooperation with Syria and Iran may well undercut the regional response to Kurdish violence. Instead, Syria and Iran might be forced either to increase their bilateral cooperative endeavors (a development not witnessed to date) or to rely on individual, state-specific means to combat Kurdish security challenges—that is, pursue unilateral policies. As such, the Turkish settlement holds the potential to transform the Kurdish issue from one of *regional* security into one of *state or semi-regional security* by virtue of the changed responses to Kurdish separatist ambitions and the separation of Turkish security concerns from those of Iran and Syria.⁵⁷

This possibility, in turn, highlights the fact that the Kurdish role in Middle Eastern politics is not that of a monolithic threat to the region’s prevailing political and security structure. Rather, given the different causes and manifestations of Kurdish nationalist violence seen in Turkey, Iran, and Syria, the Middle East is witness to a number of distinct Kurdish movements that *collectively* imperil regional security, but which *individually* enjoy their own internal dynamics and goals. As states contemplate the best means by which to address Kurdish issues and control Kurdish violence, this realization implies that they may better achieve their desired ends by attempting to exacerbate and exploit the differences between individual Kurdish movements instead of relying on the predominantly military responses witnessed to date. In other words, a “divide-and-conquer” approach may better serve to ameliorate the region’s Kurdish problems, and offer more opportunities for stabilizing the Kurdish role in Middle Eastern politics, than armed confrontation. Turkey’s ability to garner KRG support for anti-PKK operations without the KRG’s committing itself to concomitant action against PEJAK might represent the start of such a reformulated policy.

At the same time, however, attempts to exploit intra-Kurdish group divisions may be countered by what may ironically be termed a “Young Turk” movement among Iraqi Kurds. Growing hostility toward PUK and KDP policies and increasing militancy among Iraqi Kurdish youth could

eventually serve to mobilize greater support for active confrontation vis-à-vis the political status quo in ways reminiscent of the PKK and PEJAK, albeit with distinct political goals. With such forces at play, the support that the PUK-KDP afforded the 2006 settlement with Turkey will likely intensify various challenges to its continued leadership from within Iraqi Kurdistan itself. It is then entirely possible that the KRG will be unable to sustain its partnership with Turkey as Barzani and Talabani are either forced to respond to popular opinion and embrace increased confrontation, or are replaced by a new and more militant generation of leaders. Framed in this light, the present KRG leadership and its approaches may be viewed as a moderating force in regional politics, subject to contradictory pressures from domestic and foreign sources.

Finally, attention must be paid to the role of the United States. The primary American concern relative to the Kurds since 2003 has been ensuring the stability of the new Iraqi government, the securing of which would allow the U.S. to declare “victory” in Iraq. Support for Kurdish demands and resolution of Turkey’s concerns both arose from this situation, reflecting the fact that Iraqi stability requires the Kurds to stay in Iraq while foreign forces stay out. In this regard, the United States has been a moderating and stabilizing outside force with respect to the Kurdish situation by limiting the opportunities for both Kurdish aggrandizement and risk of foreign intervention in Iraqi Kurdistan. Furthermore, the United States’ failure to restrict PKK/PEJAK activities may be explained, according to this analysis, on the basis that the insurgency poses a direct challenge to the stability of the Iraqi government whereas PKK/PEJAK activities threaten the situation only if foreign actors shirk American warnings and attack the KRG; hence, U.S. resources are directed against the Iraqi insurgency instead of the Kurdish groups. One may therefore anticipate continued American backing for the Iraqi Kurds along with constraints on Kurdish freedom to maneuver so long as Kurdish interests do not directly and immediately conflict with those of greater Iraq.

Should the United States withdraw from Iraq, however, without providing the Kurds a vested interest in the future of the state, it is much more plausible that extensive and sustained region-wide Kurdish violence would erupt in support of Kurdish nationalist ambitions. Indeed, an American withdrawal would leave the threat of foreign intervention as the Iraqi Kurds’ only external inducement to remain part of Iraq even as domestic criticism of the KRG continued unabated, thus raising the likelihood of a unilateral Kurdish declaration of independence and a subsequent war for Kurdish independence. Yet even if an independent Kurdistan were not declared in the post-withdrawal period, Barzani and Talabani might be tempted

to export growing Iraqi Kurdish militancy to the rest of the region and so expand the security challenge.

Conclusion

Ultimately, the Kurdish role in the Middle East will be decided by the interaction of the internal and external forces discussed above. While an independent Kurdistan would fulfill long-standing Kurdish dreams and satisfy the demands of a restive ethnic group, the political and security ramifications of such a move have the potential to wholly reshape the Middle East geopolitical environment. Thus, although efforts to keep the Kurds part of Iraq should continue, all of the actors involved in the region must also consider the entire range of potential Kurdish political futures in the region and the possible responses thereto. Only by a consideration of all such possible outcomes can new approaches to the Kurdish issue be uncovered and new policy options explored.

Endnotes

1 Although it needs revision and updating, David McDowall’s *A Modern History of the Kurds* (London: I. B. Taurus, 2000) remains the best single source regarding the circumstances involving Iraq’s Kurds before the 2003 war; in particular, see pp. 368–92. For more on the status quo before 2003, see Kerim Yildiz, *The Kurds in Iraq: The Past, Present, and Future* (London: Pluto Press, 2004), pp. 48–50, and Michael M. Gunter, *The Kurdish Predicament in Iraq: A Political Analysis* (New York: St. Martin’s, 1999), pp. 100–107.

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6 McDowall, *Modern History of the Kurds*, pp. 442–46.

7 See, e.g., Nader Entessar, “The Impact of the Iraq War on the Future of the Kurds in Iran,” in *The Kurdish Question and the 2003 Iraq War* (Costa Mesa, CA: Mazda, 2005), ed. Mohammed M. A. Ahmed and Michael A. Gunter, p. 182; Guy Chazan, “Turkey Strengthens Ties with Two U.S. Adversaries: Iran, Syria,” *Wall Street Journal*, 10 April 2003; Ian Bruce, “Turkey on Alert to Stop Kurdish Freedom Move,” *The Herald* (Glasgow), 5 February 2003, p. 10.

8 See, e.g., Michael M. Gunter, “Kurdish Futures in a Post-Saddam Iraq,” *Journal of Muslim Minority Affairs* 23, no. 1 (April 2003), pp. 9–10; Ofra Bengio, “Iraqi Kurds: Hour of Power?” *Middle East Quarterly* 10, no. 3 (Summer 2003), pp. 46–47; Henri

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- 10 "Talabani: Independent Kurdish State 'Impossible'," *Turkish Daily News*, 16 August 2003. Talabani reiterated this point throughout 2004 and 2005; see, e.g., "Iraqi Kurds, Turkey Warm Relations," Agence France Presse, 22 June 2004, and [Radio Liberty/Radio Free Europe, interview with Jalal Talabani, 5 October 2005](#).*
- 11 For more on the regional power structure vis-à-vis the Kurds, see Michael M. Gunter, "Why Kurdish Statehood Is Unlikely," in "The Kurds in Iraq," ed. Hakan Yavuz and Michael Gunter, *Middle East Policy*, Vol. 11, no. 1 (Spring 2004), pp. 106–110, and Hadi Elis, "The Kurdish Demand for Statehood and the Future of Iraq," *Journal of Social, Political, and Economic Studies*, Vol. 29, no. 2 (Summer 2004). Note that a review of major American, European, and Middle Eastern news sources failed to reveal any systematic Kurdish attacks on Syria, Iran, or Turkey in the March 2003–June 2004 period.
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