

## IRAQI KURDS AND IRAQ'S FUTURE

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**M**assoud Barzani, president of the Kurdish Regional Government and leader of the Kurdish Democratic party (KDP), remarked in early September 2005 that politics was so much harder than fighting.<sup>1</sup> His comments capture some of the texture of the situation the Kurds of Iraq find themselves in today. Two-and-a-half years since Saddam Hussein's overthrow, they face an enviable, but precarious, situation. They are virtually assured strong regional self-government in the new Iraq. They have made themselves critical players in Iraqi politics by virtue of the fact that they, unlike others in Iraq, had consolidated their territory and politics ahead of the constitutional and electoral developments. They, therefore, have contributed disproportionately to the new Iraq and its prospects for remaining a unified state but, paradoxically, are most vulnerable to the possible failure of the American project in Iraq. Were the new Iraq to fail and succumb to civil war, the Kurds would face stark choices and be left to their own devices to survive in a hostile atmosphere,

surrounded by states and groups opposed to their independence. At the same time, because they, of all Iraq's social and ethnic groups, have been the most open about having options outside of Iraq, the Kurds' demonstrated willingness to work for a unified Iraqi state will matter the most — more than that of the majority Shia — when it comes to achieving and sustaining that goal.

### **KURDISH ROLE IN THE CONSTITUTION**

The Kurds worked hard on the constitutional process that culminated in the October 15 referendum.<sup>2</sup> Their role in advocating for federalism and other issues particular to their minority status and interests had an even larger effect, given the very limited participation by Sunnis in the constitutional drafting process. The draft constitution put to the voters on October 15 was essentially a Kurdish-Shia pact on powersharing. It called for federalism with strong powers to the regional constituent provinces. The regions retained, at least initially, their sectarian or ethnic-

based militias, which may eventually function as a national guard, distinct from the Iraqi military forces and police. They retained the right to have a regional parliament that regulates many day-to-day matters in the region.

On identity issues, the Kurds won recognition of Kurdish as one of the two official languages of the Iraqi state. (Turkomen and Assyrian are to be additional official languages in areas where those groups are numerous.) The Kurds even initially prevailed in specifying that Iraq's Arab character should apply only to the Arab citizens of Iraq, though this was later revised through negotiations with the Arab League to a formula that recognizes Iraq as a founding member of the Arab League and a pledge to abide by its principles. The only principle the Kurds wanted that did not make it into the draft was the right to secede from the Iraqi state. The Kurds also did not achieve any closure on the status of the oil-rich city of Kirkuk, which would be key to the economic survival of a putative Kurdish state. Still, Article 58 of the Transitional Administrative Law (TAL) contains provisions regarding the future of Kirkuk that were maintained in the new constitution. The final status of the city and its possible incorporation into the Kurdish federal area is to be determined by the end of 2007. In effect, this articulation buys some two years of difficult but nonetheless political bargaining within the confines of the new system.

It can be argued that the Kurds were too successful in their negotiations and have now stimulated deep anxieties in the other communities about federalism and the future of the state. Sunnis in particular appear threatened by Kurdish demands,

even though their interests may well align with the Kurds in the strategic sense of their shared status as minorities. The late support by some Sunnis for the constitutional referendum process was engineered by the United States, but that success will not guarantee a long-term Sunni "buy-in" to the constitution. (Sunnis voted overwhelmingly against the constitution, but accepted the legitimacy of the process.) While the Shia leadership eventually embraced the concept of regions and therefore supported federalism as a key component of the constitution, it is clear that Ayatollah Sistani and Muqtada Sadr only reluctantly supported it. Should federalism be viewed over time as weakening the Iraqi state and the unity of the country, the Kurds and their effective advocacy of their interests could well be held accountable. Thus the approval of the constitution on October 15 may someday be seen as the Kurds' pyrrhic victory.<sup>3</sup>

### THE KURDS AND IRAQ TODAY

The Kurds' political fortunes have improved steadily in the tumultuous period since 1991. Initially dependent on the goodwill of the allies who enforced a no-fly zone over their territory, the Kurds were also subjected to a double embargo, one imposed by the United Nations on all of Iraq and one imposed by Saddam on their region. The embargo-related hardships led to bitter animosities and fighting between the two primary factions in northern Iraq, Barzani's KDP and Jalal Talabani's Patriotic Union of Kurdistan (PUK) over resources and control of trade routes. Active mediation by the United States and other outside parties helped keep the two main Kurdish parties working together for their shared goal of ousting Saddam

Hussein despite occasional setbacks and outbreaks of intra-Kurdish violence.<sup>4</sup>

The two Kurdish parties have dominated life in Iraqi Kurdistan for most of the last three decades. They control most economic activity and communication networks as well as the pesh merga, or Kurdish militia, which is used to both defend their territory and impose order. Having patched up their differences, the PUK and KDP have done a reasonably effective job of providing for their constituents and are now competing in the political arena over the modalities of sharing power in the regional parliament. As democracy in a unified Iraq takes root, however, it remains to be seen whether the two parties and their leaders will face competition from new actors with new agendas in Iraqi Kurdistan.

Iraq's Kurdish regions are not homogeneous. One of the more important minorities is the Turkomen. Exact Turkomen population numbers are difficult to obtain; informed observers put the number at 2-3 percent of the total Iraqi population.<sup>5</sup> How many of them live in Iraqi Kurdistan is even less certain. There are towns outside the Kurdish areas, such as Tal Afar, the scene of much recent fighting, that are primarily Turkomen in ethnicity and practice Shia Islam (some 50 percent of the Turkomen are Shia). Kurdish-Turkomen relations, especially those between the Sunni Turkomen and Kurds residing in Kurdish-controlled regions and Kirkuk, have been tense. In part, this is the result of Turkish interference. Ankara created and directly supported the Iraqi Turkomen Front (ITF). The ITF has taken a hard-line stand on such issues as Kirkuk and has also fanned the flames of sectarianism by accusing the Kurds and their U.S. allies of

committing crimes against the civilian population.<sup>6</sup> The ITF, however, does not represent the majority of the Turkomen. In fact, it fared very poorly in the January 2005 elections as the Kurdish-supported Turkomen appeared to have gathered more votes than the ITF itself. The ITF remains a factor, however, primarily because of Turkish military and logistical support.

There are also Arabs in the north, and disputes continue over their status since many came to the north via forced Arabization policies of the regime in Baghdad. Since 2003, a new phenomenon of Arab economic migration has occurred; the stronger economy in the north has attracted as many as 20,000 Arabs to seek jobs in Kurdistan.<sup>7</sup>

Islamist Kurds constitute another political actor in Iraqi Kurdistan, embodied by the nonviolent Islamic Movement in Iraqi Kurdistan (IMIK), headquartered in Halabja, and its more radical offshoot, Ansar al-Islam, which Kurdish leaders believe to have ties to al-Qaeda that predate the American invasion of 2003. The IMIK, geographically confined to Halabja, occasionally spars with the PUK but has also joined in the Kurdistan Front government that emerged in northern Iraq as a self-governing enclave in the early 1990s. Islamist Kurds have been influenced by the Egyptian Muslim Brothers, the Iranian revolution, the Afghan war and Saudi Wahhabism. Their political fortunes in a democratic Iraq are uncertain, and ties between them and non-Kurdish Islamists appear to be limited.<sup>8</sup>

The Kurdish region thus has a complex and rich local political culture, but its politics are also bound to its relations with Baghdad and the outside world. Since the fall of the Saddam regime, Kurdish politi-

cians have also been well represented in the various transitional governments. They will likely retain important ministerial portfolios when the first permanent government is formed after the December 2005 elections. During the Iyad Allawi administration, one of the vice premiers was Barham Saleh, the British-educated former prime minister of the PUK-controlled northern Iraq. Hoshiyar Zebari, affiliated with the KDP, was named foreign minister and had the ironic function of representing Iraq when it returned to the Arab League. After the June 2005 elections, Kurdish leader Jalal Talabani became president of Iraq, and Zebari remained foreign minister, so that two of the three positions linking Iraq to the outside world were held by Kurds. Barham Saleh, who many see as one of the Kurds who could well be a future prime minister, moved to the Ministry of Planning.

The Kurds thus play a critical role in Iraqi national policy and retain their own relationships with the outside world. Relations with Washington remain the Kurds' top priority. The Kurds became Washington's primary ally in Iraq in the runup to the 2003 war. The relationship intensified when the Turkish parliament turned down the U.S. request to open a second front in the north against Saddam, and Kurds became more critical partners, working alongside American forces in the capture of key northern towns. The population in the Kurdish areas has wholeheartedly embraced the arrival of American troops. Support for the United States has also meant that Kurdish areas have been largely devoid of violence, and Washington has relied on the pesh merga forces to maintain security there. In many counterinsurgency actions, Kurdish forces

have served on the frontline, often earning the enmity of the Sunnis, especially in places such as Mosul and Fallujah. Kurdish leaders have been among the primary interlocutors with Washington. In October 2005, Massoud Barzani was received by the White House in his capacity as president of the Kurdish Regional Government, reassuring the Kurds of their special status for American leaders.<sup>9</sup>

But relations with Washington have also been subject to occasional rough spots since the fall of the Saddam regime. Kurds at various times began to feel neglected, as American policy makers, struggling to keep other major groups engaged in the rebuilding of Iraq, courted Shia leaders. Some American experts were worried that Kurdish assertiveness during the constitutional debates made it even harder to persuade the Sunnis to participate. Human-rights activists and democracy promoters are not entirely comfortable with Kurdish-style democracy. There are also worries about Kurdish behavior towards Arabs in Kirkuk and about methods the Kurds may use to assert their claim to the city.

### **SELF-DETERMINATION**

Kurds almost universally support the concept of Kurdish independence, an idea that predates Palestinian aspirations and has been recognized in international documents and agreements dating back to the early twentieth century. When they went to the polls as Iraqis in January 2005, Iraqi Kurds also voted in regional elections, choosing the president and parliament of the Kurdish Regional Government. At that time, they were polled informally by volunteers on the question of independence, and 95 percent responded that they

avored it. This is a sentiment as much as a practical political position, and current Kurdish leaders have been extremely careful to distinguish between a long-term goal and current political reality. In fact, during the constitutional debates, Kurdish leaders tried to assuage Arab anxieties by arguing that the Kurdish preference for federalism was driven by security needs more than a desire to break away, and that federalism was the strongest guarantee that the country would remain united. Given the strength of popular support for the still-vague idea of Kurdish self-determination, nonetheless, it is worth pondering what issues over the coming years will be most critical in shaping those preferences and possibly giving Iraqi Kurds a greater stake in the success of the new Iraq than any alternative.

**Security:** Today Kurds are reluctant to travel to Baghdad or to other cities outside of Kurdistan because of the security situation. This has reinforced a sense of separateness that is likely to make it harder and harder for Kurds to feel connected to other Iraqis. NGOs report that their efforts to foster contact across sectarian lines rely on Kurdistan, the safest zone of Iraq, but that Kurds themselves rarely initiate efforts to meet with Arabs.

**Social and Generational Change:** The many years of separation, when northern Iraq was already living in the post-Saddam era, have taken their toll on the sense among young Kurds that they are Iraqis. Many have never learned Arabic and have fewer cultural bonds with Arab Iraqis than their parents or grandparents did. According to a recent press account, at least one million young Kurds do not speak Arabic, a situation that did not pertain to the previous generation.<sup>10</sup> This

young population will need to be given opportunities to build relationships with non-Kurds to create the minimum bonds of shared Iraqi identity. Today's Kurdish leaders acknowledge the problem but may not rank it high on their priority list.

**Religious and Cultural Issues:** The Kurds by and large want a secular political structure and are relatively modern with respect to the role of women in the community and in public life. During the constitutional debates, it was clear that Kurds hoped regionalism would shield them from the possibility of Taliban-like social strictures imposed by majority-Shia rule. Even under the new constitution, should conservative Shia cultural norms be imposed on all Iraqis, Kurds could well react by further strengthening their separateness.

**Economics:** Kurds benefit from being more economically prosperous than the rest of Iraq, but they still need a stable and growing Iraq to sustain their own standard of living. If that fails to materialize, they may try to protect their economic interests by pursuing separate trade arrangements with their immediate neighbors. They have also won the right to have the "regions" represented in Iraqi embassies abroad. This could well reinforce their ability to make separate trade and economic agreements and to try to insulate themselves from shortcomings of the Iraqi economy. Similarly, the sharing of oil revenues (part to go to the Iraqi government, part to the regions according to formulas not yet worked out) will permit them to manage their own economic affairs up to a certain point. But their landlocked situation means they will always be vulnerable to embargos and blockades, and must manage their economic relations with Baghdad and the neighbors with great care.

**The Neighbors:** The emergence of Kurds as an important force in Iraq has created significant problems for Iran, Syria and Turkey, who all have troublesome Kurdish minorities of their own. For the Turks, in particular, it is not just the demonstration effect of having an autonomous federal Kurdish state as part of Iraq that is the issue. There is also the question of the remnants of the Kurdish Workers' party (PKK), which sought refuge in northern Iraq following the capture of their leader, Abdullah Ocalan, in 1999. There are an estimated 3,000-4,500 PKK fighters in northern Iraq, some right across the Turkish border and others encamped on the Iranian side. In 2005, the PKK abandoned its unilateral ceasefire and has once again begun operations. Although the organization no longer represents the kind of threat it did in the 1990s, the resumption of fighting and the mounting toll of casualties have unnerved the Turkish leadership, especially the powerful military, and caused it to openly consider intervening in Iraq to deal with the PKK. If it has not done so to this day, it is because Ankara is worried about the backlash in its relations with the United States. Still, Turkey maintains a contingent of 1,200-1,500 soldiers in northern Iraq to watch out for PKK cadres and provide support for the Turkomans.

The Turks, who in the late 1990s began to strongly support Turkomen concerns to the point of creating the ITF, have maintained all along that oil-rich Kirkuk is a Turkomen city that ought not become part of the Kurdish federal state. Although Ankara's support for the ITF declined following the latter's poor performance in the January 2005 elections, it remains an important issue for hard-line Turks, who do not want to see any Kurdish expression of

self-determination. Moreover, they have often repeated their claim that Kurdish success in winning Kirkuk, either through ethnic cleansing or even under the current demographic distribution, would be a violation of their self-declared "red line."

On the other hand, Turkey represents a potential lifeline for Iraqi Kurds. A European-bound Turkey that becomes progressively more prosperous and democratic is a welcome potential neighbor for the Iraqi Kurdish federal state. To the Kurds, who are more secular and more likely to be pro-Western, access to Europe through Turkey, and to Turkish markets as well, is critical for economic well-being and political support. Turkish fears of Kurdish self-determination can be mitigated by Ankara's own attitude towards the Iraqi Kurds. Ironically, the more supportive Ankara is of the Iraqi Kurdish federation, the more secure the Kurds will feel within Iraq and therefore the less likely they will be to seek independence.

The Iraq War has caused new disturbances in both Syria and Iran. For the Iranians, who have long provided refuge for the PKK, 2005 has been a year of renewed Kurdish activism, with clashes in the Kurdish regions claiming many lives. Some of this can be attributed to the PKK-affiliated group PEJAK, which has turned on the Iranians because of Tehran's increased cooperation with Turkish authorities. But there remains a great deal of ferment that Iranians themselves have attributed to either U.S. interference or, as an Iranian parliamentary-committee rapporteur argued, to the relative economic backwardness of the Iranian Kurdish regions in comparison with their neighboring Turkish and Iraqi brethren.<sup>11</sup> The Iraqi Kurds' new self-confidence is likely to

further encourage Iranian Kurds to become more assertive, which, in turn, is likely to engender a reaction from Tehran. Among Iraq's neighbors Iran has the greatest number of assets inside Iraq: the close relationship with the main Shia Iraqi parties and movements provides Tehran with additional instruments of pressure on the Kurds.

Syria also experienced the ripple effects of the Iraq War among its citizens of Kurdish origin. There were demonstrations in Qamishli, in the heart of the Kurdish region, to which the security forces responded rapidly; afterward, a large number of Kurds were taken into custody. For the Bashar al-Asad regime, Kurdish dissent and mobilization are particularly unwelcome, given its vulnerable position following the assassination of the former Lebanese president Rafiq Hariri and the ensuing UN investigation. The Kurds in Syria are one of the best-mobilized groups within an otherwise disorganized opposition. Still, this may explain the regime's decision to suddenly talk of offering citizenship to tens of thousands of Syrian Kurds denied that right for some 43 years.<sup>12</sup>

Understandably, the neighbors have little sympathy for Kurdish separatist aspirations in northern Iraq. In the past, Turkey, Iran and Syria have tried to collaborate on limiting Kurdish progress. The problem they face at the moment, however, given the chaos that has followed the war, is that any attempt directed at deterring separatism could easily backfire and have the opposite effect. On the other hand, both Iran and Turkey can potentially influence the future of Iraqi Kurdistan through economic and political incentives. They both can provide linkages with other

parts of the world and access to markets and trade. Strategically speaking, Turkey should welcome a robust and secular Kurdish presence as an insurance policy against an Iraq that has the potential to fall under the sway of fundamentalist elements, Sunni or Shia. By contrast, Iranians have an interest in maintaining good relations with the Kurds precisely because they would not want them to become Turkish clients.

#### **Global Norms and Precedents:**

Political change among the relatively cosmopolitan Kurds will not occur in a vacuum, and Kurds are well aware of analogous situations around the world. Political leaders are familiar with recent precedents for multiethnic states to negotiate separation: Czechoslovakia's peaceful divorce into two states, the role of the international community in managing the breakup of Yugoslavia and possibly Kosovo's separation from Serbia, and the more recent peace agreement in Sudan calling for a referendum for the southerners on independence after six years of autonomy. Should Iraq descend into civil war, the Kurds could well invoke recent international practice in promoting separation arguing that their greater capacity for democracy should make them at least as promising a gamble as the states of the former Yugoslavia. Over the next decade, should Palestine achieve full statehood, it will also resonate in Kurdistan and possibly affect the psychology of politics in the region.

#### **THE PROSPECT OF CIVIL WAR**

The prospect of civil war in Iraq between Arab Sunnis and Shia is strong in fall 2005. Some observers believe a threshold has already been crossed. Sunni

insurgents and their allies are targeting Shia mosques and large social gatherings to terrorize and intimidate Shia as a means of making them disaffected from the new politics and creating enough chaos for Sunnis to perhaps reclaim leadership of the country. The only factors to date that have prevented large-scale fighting are the presence of the coalition forces and the remarkable consensus among Shia to avoid violence. Shia leaders, clerical and secular, appear united in trying to avoid retribution and retaliation, although their success to date cannot be taken for granted.

In these turbulent circumstances, what are the Kurds likely to do? There are two levels to consider: first, what the Kurds need to do to protect their own people and their own interests, and, second, how they might help the Arabs prevent or minimize the damage of civil strife in the interest of the Iraqi state.

The Kurds would be primarily concerned about safety and the possible spillover of violence or instability into their territory. They might try to impose new measures of internal border security between the Kurdish region and the rest of Iraq, giving new visibility and responsibility to the *pesh merga*. They might need to provide accommodations or develop policies towards Arab refugees fleeing the violence into the northern regions. A possible danger would be excessive use of force to prevent Arab refugees from entering, or mistreatment of them to prevent them from establishing permanent residence or altering the demographic balance in the north.

The Kurdish leaders would surely debate privately whose side they should be on — whether their interests converge most with the Shia, who are seen as

working constructively to build a new democratic political culture in Iraq, or with the Sunnis as fellow minorities. If the Kurds believe a Shia victory in a civil war is essential (in part because the Sunnis are likely to be held responsible for precipitating the violence), they could play a military or security role in pressuring the Sunni forces and thereby opening up a second front for the Sunnis to deal with. If they decide instead to support the Sunnis in the hope of a different power-sharing arrangement, they might have a less significant military role to play but could offer political and even diplomatic support. The Kurds would calculate how such a struggle might appear to the outside world and to the Kurds' friends and supporters. They would also assess their stakes in the outcome according to which side might prevail.

It is equally possible that the Kurds will decide against backing either side and work instead to end civil strife, including mediating between the parties. They would have powerful leverage on their side, with a physical presence in Baghdad, new but strong ties to Shia power centers, and proximity to Sunni areas where meetings and contacts with Sunni activists would be possible. Their semi-autonomous security through the *pesh merga* would make them less dependent on the warring factions for access to Iraqi territory as they worked to bring an end to the conflict. But it remains to be seen if the Arabs would accept Kurdish mediation. Would the Shia blame the Kurds for the alienation of the Sunnis from Iraqi political life caused by the debate over federalism and the constitution?

Such a role, even if not successful, would bring great stature and respect to the Kurds, and could work to their favor if

the future of the Iraqi state were seen as nonviable. Their efforts to keep Iraq together would win sympathy and understanding should the Kurds move along the path to independence as a result of a prolonged civil war in Iraq. A Kurdish effort to “save” Iraq would presumably emerge from their perception of American interests and policy, and would be conducted in coordination with the outside powers having a stake in Iraq’s stability. One can imagine the two senior Kurdish politicians, Iraqi president Jalal Talabani and Kurdish regional president Massoud Barzani, working together to cajole and influence Sunni and Shia factions. (Their own feuding in the 1990s was mediated by American diplomats with support from Iraqi National Congress leader Ahmad Chalabi and some neighboring states.) But if the underlying forces tearing Iraq apart prove too strong, even Herculean efforts by the Kurds might not produce the desired results.

### LOOKING AHEAD

The Kurds have contributed, for better or worse, intentionally or not, to today’s dynamics. Their early and energetic advocacy for federalism compounded the Sunnis’ problem and made Sunni alienation from the political process more acute. Kurds cannot be singled out as bad actors, but their demands have complicated the quest for a unified, stable and peaceful Iraq.

It is simply not possible, in this turbulent time, to determine whether Iraqi Kurds will develop enduring loyalty to the Iraqi state above their sense of Kurdish identity, or whether the current period is already sowing the seeds of an even deeper commitment to separation. Should Iraqi

Kurds be planning for independence, there are no signs that such a move would be carried out in coordination with, or for the purpose of politically uniting, the Kurds of the neighboring states.

From the point of view of the United States, the Kurds have been and are likely to continue to be important American partners in building the new Iraq. They have proven their democratic credentials and their political acumen in the elections and political processes since 2003. History, however, teaches that American policy can be damaging to the Kurds’ interests when other strategic stakes are at risk for Washington, and Kurds must imagine scenarios in which their interests and American interests in Iraq will not be compatible. As we look ahead and try to envision the choices Iraqi Kurds may make, three external factors could be critical:

- Kurds must be concerned that **the United States** will lose interest or turn away from Iraq, either because Washington believes that Iraq no longer needs U.S. help, or because it represents a political failure and the domestic costs are too high for an American president to remain heavily engaged. Without a strong American presence and support, would Iraqi Kurds behave differently towards their Arab compatriots? Under today’s circumstances, it is hard to predict how the United States will look at Iraq in the years ahead. It is possible that Washington will seek to construct bases in Iraq, most probably in Kurdish areas, given the greater receptivity to such an endeavor within that population, as both an instrument of pressure and involvement in the Middle East, but more important, as a means of deterring others

from interfering in Iraqi affairs as Iraq tries to restore its own security capacity. Will a small ethnically homogeneous territory that is largely pro-western, democratic and capitalist become the natural ally of the West if the rest of Mesopotamia is mired in religious politics and violence? Will forces for unity define Iraq and make the Kurds troublesome outliers? Will intra-Kurdish rivalries remain under control?

- **Turkey** has, in recent years, had a form of veto power over Iraqi Kurdish choices, and the relationship has not been easy despite its economic and political potential for partnership. Over the next decade, Turkey will be working to gain admission to the European Union. Should Turkey be on a clear path for entry, its foreign policies could well evolve in the direction of EU approaches. This will likely reduce Turkish anxieties regarding its own Kurdish population while increasing Ankara's bargaining power with Iraq, in general, and Iraqi Kurds, in particular. European interests in securing access to energy resources and limiting unrest along its periphery for purposes of reducing immigration will mean that it will take an increasing interest in Iraq. Already, pipelines from northern Iraq traverse Turkey towards Mediterranean ports. Were more oil to be found in northern Iraq, such networks could be further developed. All of these bode well for future relations between Ankara and Iraqi Kurds.

- Another challenge may arise if unrest among the **Kurdish populations in Syria and Iran** were to bubble up. The Iraqi Kurds' favorable status as a confident, self-governing community could affect the dynamics, should Kurds in Syria and Iran see an opportunity from increased political uncertainty at the center. This could well

occur in either state. It is possible that the Kurds would feel pressure or inclination to help neighboring Kurds by providing a safe haven, which could change the political and demographic realities in Iraq. Such developments could create new tensions between the interests of the Iraqi Kurds and U.S. policy, as well as between the Kurds and Baghdad.

### SUMMING UP

For now, the Iraqi Kurds have a stake in the new Iraq and still believe that their gamble with a controversial American policy has paid off for them and for all Iraqis. Kurdish leaders are often the most optimistic of Iraqi leaders in their upbeat assessments about prospects for greater stability and for building new pluralistic institutions. For the most part, the Kurds have been constructive players, not only in advocating for their own interests but in seeking fairness and openness in Iraqi institutions and practices.

Beyond the current rollercoaster of elections and insurgent violence, the political preferences of the Kurds are harder to assess. The Kurds have been successful in insisting on a robust autonomy in the new federal system, including some control of oil revenue. They are likely to remain relatively democratic, although patronage and tribal culture still hold sway in the more rural parts of Kurdistan. Today's Kurdish leaders, some of whom may have long careers as Iraqi politicians, seem to believe that for their generation, the costs of a secession that does not have regional support are too high. Should peace and prosperity prevail in Kurdish lands, citizens will be even less inclined to risk the human and property costs of defying the regional order by

moving to independence, and Kurds may find their interests well embedded in the success of the new Iraq. That is the good scenario for the Kurds and for Iraq.

There is also a chance for a more troubled outcome, where Kurds weigh the tradeoffs and options of staying with an unstable Iraq or moving to a separate status. With Sunni Arabs reacting badly to the Kurdish success in making the constitution,<sup>13</sup> will the Kurds want a negotiated divorce now? Iraq's Sunnis (and the Arab world, in general) have yet to come to grips with the deleterious effects of Saddam's rule on Kurdish and Shia sensibilities.

Because they see themselves as victims of the American intervention, Sunnis have yet to take steps towards national reconciliation that are essential to remaking Iraq. The new parliament to be elected in December may provide this opportunity if the Sunni participation, as expected, were to substantially increase. The challenge for the international community will be to help the Kurds balance their two identities, to provide incentives to remain part of Iraq, and, should the idea of Iraq slip away, to help the Kurds and the Arabs manage a transition to a different outcome.

<sup>1</sup>“Let me tell you, politics is much more difficult than war,” said Mr. Barzani, 59, the leader of the Kurdish Democratic Party, who was a warlord when he was younger. “In politics, there are so many more fronts,” in Dexter Filkins, “Ex-Rebel Kurd Savoring Victory in Iraq's Politics,” *The New York Times*, September 2, 2005.

<sup>2</sup>The Independent Electoral Commission of Iraq announced the official results of the referendum on October 25. 78.59 percent of the voters voted for the constitution. Sunnis voted overwhelmingly against, but did not meet the 2/3 no vote in three provinces necessary to defeat it.

<sup>3</sup>In an interview with a Turkish journalist on October 24, 2005, President Talabani described the compromises that both Kurds and Shia made to achieve consensus on the constitution, but said the Sunni representatives “did not make sacrifices and refused all kinds of compromises.” See interview with Ilnur Cevik, *The New Anatolian*, October 24, 2005.

<sup>4</sup>The United Nations' oil-for-food deal, implemented in 1996, allocated to the Kurdish region 13 percent of all Iraqi oil export revenues. This helped ease some of interfactional tensions though but not eliminate them altogether.

<sup>5</sup>Phebe Marr, *The Modern History of Iraq*, (Westview Press, 2004), p. 16.

<sup>6</sup>Henri J. Barkey, *Turkey and Iraq: Perils (and Prospects) of Proximity* (Washington, DC: U.S. Institute of Peace, Special Report 141, 2005).

<sup>7</sup>See Jeffrey Fleishman, *The Los Angeles Times*, February 16, 2005.

<sup>8</sup>For different assessments of the strength of Islamists in Kurdistan, see “Radical Islam in Iraqi Kurdistan: The Mouse that Roared?” International Crisis Group Iraq Briefing, February 7, 2003, and “The Islamist Threat in Kurdistan,” by Michael Rubin, [www.meib.org/articles/0112\\_irl.htm](http://www.meib.org/articles/0112_irl.htm).

<sup>9</sup>While in Washington, President Barzani had an opinion piece in *The Washington Post* (October 26, 2005) in which he thanked Americans for their sacrifices “to advance the banner of freedom and democracy.”

<sup>10</sup><http://msnbc.msn.com/id/6969687/>

<sup>11</sup>William Samii, “Iran: Kurdish Grievances Remain a Thorny Issue,” Radio Free Europe, August 17, 2005.

<sup>12</sup>Michael Slackman, “Facing Threats, Syria Weighs Steps to Rally the Home Front,” *The New York Times*, October 28, 2005.

<sup>13</sup>See opinion by Hatem Mukhlis, *The New York Times*, October 18, 2005, p. A27.