

**Will the Kurds Go Home?**

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While the United Nations Security Council wrangled over military chains of command in Iraq and the violence in Arab cities like Karbala and Falluja grabbed the headlines, a story far more important to the country's future has been largely ignored: the growing unease of the Kurdish minority.

So while the United Nations congratulates itself on the resolution passed last night, the Kurds see only a further undermining of the conditions that make a unified Iraq acceptable to them. And we should not take lightly their threats of boycotting the government and even seceding. While the West has gone to great lengths to appease the country's Arabs, both Shiite and Sunni, the Kurds are the only players at the table with the ability and the mettle to walk away. If they do, hopes of a democratic, multiethnic Iraq go with them.

The other day at a military hospital here, I visited a former Kurdish guerrilla who had been working as a guard at the Baghdad offices of the Kurdish Democratic Party, one of two main Kurdish political groups. His name is Saadar Khajakadir, and he says he fought Saddam Hussein's troops in the mountains for more years than he can remember. Last week a Russian-built rocket exploded through the roof of the building he was guarding, killing one of his comrades and wounding him and four others.

I asked him if the wounds were worth it, if the political process in Baghdad was something he was happy to bleed for. "If Baghdad is where we must achieve our freedom, these wounds are an honor," he told me. "But if we do not win our freedom here, we will go home to the mountains and give up much more than blood to win it there."

That attack went entirely unreported. (One of the party's senior military commanders, Muhammad Qazi, told me they don't want to reward terrorists with publicity.) The same day, a suicide bomber killed a high-ranking member of the other Kurdish party, the Patriotic Union of Kurdistan, at its Baghdad headquarters. As a double attack on Kurdish offices, it was a grim echo of the twin suicide bombings that killed 101 people in the northern Kurdish city of Erbil in February.

In addition, smaller attacks on Kurdish targets have been occurring with greater frequency than the world knows. Three Kurdish officials were assassinated in Kirkuk in separate incidents in May; when I was there last week, I visited a Kurdish family whose house had just been hit by a rocket. While I was in Erbil over the weekend, a pipe bomb in the bazaar

killed one and wounded about 20. Mr. Qazi, the military commander, told me that in Irbil an "action in progress," like a suicide bomber trying to drive through barriers outside the Interior Ministry, is foiled about once a month.

This violence comes in the context of remarkable freedom, prosperity and order in the Iraqi Kurdish entity -- a calm forged during the 12 years American jets in the no-flight zone kept Saddam Hussein's troops out of the region. While Kurdish politics continues to be heavily dominated by the two main parties, there are scores of other groups in the region, including several each for the Communists, the Turkmens and the various Christian sects. Dozens of newspapers in the Kurdish area frequently criticize the two provincial administrations. Salaries for teachers, drivers and office workers have risen in the past couple of years to \$200 or more a month from \$20.

Of the 4,500 villages the Baathists are said to have destroyed, 4,000 have been rebuilt since 1991. Much of the mountainous countryside is dotted with young oak trees reclaiming the hills Saddam Hussein denuded. In Sulaimaniya, unmarried young men and women sit together at the outside tables of the MaDonal burger restaurant on the main street. Ready to defend all of this are 40,000 Kurdish militiamen, or peshmerga, drilled and in uniform, the only coherent domestic armed force in Iraq.

With all of this political and personal freedom long established, can the Kurds really want to be a part of a fledgling Iraq? Until now, the answer has been yes. They made a series of compromises -- concessions in the interim Constitution over the oil-rich city of Kirkuk; acceptance of a new government with no Kurds in top positions -- to help put the country back together.

But how much more are they willing to give up? After all, the Kurds have fought against every incarnation of the Iraqi state since the British mandate of 1920. It is almost impossible to meet a Kurd who does not have some personal horror to relate about suffering under Saddam Hussein. And now they see the chaos to the south every night on Al Jazeera. "We are the only people in Iraq with experience of functional government and democracy," Bruska Shaways, a Kurd who is deputy defense minister in the new Iraqi government, told me. "We want to export it to the rest of Iraq, but never at the expense of all we have earned."

This sentiment was echoed by Nesreen Berwari, a Kurdish woman who is minister of public works in the new government: "Why would we ever accept less today than we had for the last 12 years under Saddam?"

The Security Council was well aware of the situation. Yet it passed a resolution that not only explicitly fails to guarantee a federal Iraq, but also abandons the interim Constitution and its commitment to a Kurdish veto over the permanent Constitution. These guarantees have long been conditions for the Kurds' willing participation in the project of iraqi unity.

Is it too late to mend the rift? Perhaps not. Assuming the worst about the United Nations resolution, some of the Kurdish leaders have told me they might be open to an alternative: having their rights enumerated in parallel statements from the United States, the United Nations and the new Iraqi government. Washington would do well to press ahead on this.

The alternative is for the Kurds to head back to their lands and -- even in the face of a potential invasion of the Turks -- set about building one of the Middle East's only prosperous democracies. The Kurds hold strong cards, and one of the strongest is that everybody else knows they have always stuck up for themselves in the past. If they don't receive their guarantees, soon there may be no Iraq -- just a free Kurdistan and a burning Arabistan.