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John Bugnacki

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**A Dream Deferred: The United States' Role in the Development of the
Kurdistan Regional Government (KRG) from 1991 – 2011**

John Bugnacki

Dr. Margaret Manchester

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Throughout the history of the Iraqi Kurdistan Regional Government (KRG), the United States has both supported and undermined Kurdish nationalism depending upon changing geopolitical realities. In particular, the U.S. has sought to mollify important regional partners such as Turkey that possess large Kurdish populations who would presumably secede if the KRG were able to demonstrate the viability of an independent, Kurdish state. Despite its general policy of realpolitik, during the Iraq War, the U.S. embarked upon a period of nearly unprecedented positive support to the KRG, which allowed it to emerge as a major force in post-Saddam Iraq. However, the U.S. has always maintained the importance of a unified Iraq and has since sought to increase the level of economic and political parity between the KRG and other groups to achieve that objective.

Who are the Kurds?

Inhabiting northern Iraq, northeastern Syria, eastern Turkey, and western Iran, the Kurds are one of the largest recognized national groups that has yet to possess a state of its own. The mountainous geography of the area known as Greater Kurdistan has preserved the national identity of the Kurds in the wake of the rise of powerful nation-states on its periphery; and it has also allowed Kurdish communities to maintain their unique tribal identities, a system of social organization that has disappeared or diminished in importance for surrounding Arabs, Persians, and Turks. Thus there are many different Kurdish tribal groups vying for influence and power who are broadly united in their desire for the establishment of an independent Kurdistan, but often differ in their specific means and ideology. In the recent history of the Iraqi Kurds, this disunity has manifested itself in the conflict between the rural-oriented Kurdistan Democratic

Party (KDP) with its leader Masoud Barzani, and the urban-oriented Patriotic Union of Kurdistan (PUK) with its leader Jalal Talabani. Moreover, unlike many of their neighbors, the Kurds speak an Indo-European language closer to Persian than Turkish or Arabic, and practice Sunni Islam in a region that is majority Shia. Thus the Kurds have maintained a unique national identity that many surrounding nation-states view with hostility and fear. These states have either attempted to remove the Kurds from the lands that they have historically inhabited or to assimilate them into the dominant national-culture, whether it is Turk, Persian, or Arab.

The Anfal Campaigns

Ba'thism, the state ideology of Saddam's Iraq and Assad's Syria is rooted in the concept of Arab superiority or "Arab ethnic chauvinism,"¹ which justifies inferior treatment of and discrimination against non-Arab peoples such as the Kurds. During the 1970s to 1990s, Iraqi dictator Saddam Hussein, inspired and justified by the ideological paradigm of Ba'thism, often viewed the Kurds as proxy forces for other states that wished to undermine his regime such as Israel, the U.S., and, most notably, Iran. In 1988, at the end of the Iran-Iraq War, this murderous suspicion rose to a fever pitch as Saddam carried out a series of forced-deportations and mass-killings of Kurds, eventually called the Anfal Campaigns, in order to rid himself of what he perceived to be both an Iranian fifth-column and an alien entity in a unified, Arab Iraq. According to internationally accepted estimates, the Anfal Campaigns destroyed three thousand villages, displaced one and half million people, and killed up to one hundred and eighty thousand.² Even though the international community, and especially the United States, strongly

¹ Michael Rubin, "Are Kurds a Pariah Minority?," *Social Research* 70, no. 1 (Spring 2003): 295-330, Academic Search Complete, EBSCOhost (accessed December 1, 2013), 301.

² Kerim Yildiz, *The future of kurdistan*. London: Pluto Press, 2012, 22.

condemned the attacks, it did not respond with major military or economic intervention to stop the killings, punish Saddam, or recommend a referendum for Kurdish independence.

The Gulf War and the No-Fly-Zone

In 1991, as Saddam invaded Kuwait and challenged the prevailing economic and political order of the Persian Gulf, the Gulf War Coalition, particularly the U.S., viewed the Kurds as useful allies in the struggle to restore the status-quo. In 1991, the CIA's *Political and Personality Handbook of Iraq* argued that, "The most serious ethnic split [within Iraq] is between the Arab majority and the Kurds," alluding to the latter's willingness to take up arms against the former.³ On February 15, 1991, Voice of America broadcast a speech by U.S. President George H.W. Bush, in which he encouraged "the Iraqi military [and people] to take matters into their own hands to force Saddam Hussein, the dictator, to step aside."⁴ With the expectation of American support, Kurdish *peshmerga* forces, or tribal paramilitary-units, staged a revolt in the north of Iraq while the majority of Saddam's troops were preoccupied engaging Coalition forces in the south along the Kuwaiti border. After the Coalition made the fateful decision to allow Saddam to remain in power, the Iraqi dictator re-deployed his forces against the Kurdish rebels and "up to half a million [Kurds] took refuge in Turkey, and one and a half million in Iran. Thousands died of cold, exposure and hunger in their flight."⁵ In the wake of these atrocities, many Kurds believed that the U.S. had betrayed them because it did not give them the necessary support to secure independence from Saddam while nonetheless encouraging them to do so. In particular, many Kurdish leaders harshly denounced the

³ CIA. *Political and Personality Handbook of Iraq*, January 1991, CIA Electronic Reading Room <http://www2.gwu.edu/~nsarchiv/NSAEBB/NSAEBB167/06.pdf> (accessed December 1, 2013).

⁴ Kerim Yildiz, *The future of kurdistan*. London: Pluto Press, 2012, 42.

⁵ Rubin, Michael, "Are Kurds a Pariah Minority?," *Social Research* 70, no. 1 (Spring 2003): 295-330, Academic Search Complete, EBSCOhost (accessed December 1, 2013), 303.

decision to allow the release of prisoners-of-war from the Iraqi Republic Guard, whose members were known for their loyalty to Saddam and deadly combat proficiency, before the KRG could secure its positions from Baghdad's inevitable military response.⁶

In order to stop the bloodshed, the Coalition moved to establish a no-fly-zone over northern Iraq through U.N. Security Council Resolution 688. Resolution 688 reflected a humanitarian concern for the plight of Kurds, but always did so within the greater context of the geopolitical interests of the U.S. and its regional allies, most notably Turkey. For example, the resolution expressed concern over "the repression of the Iraqi civilian population in many parts of Iraq, including most recently in Kurdish-populated areas," but emphasized that this destabilization was particularly damaging because of the "massive flow of refugees towards and across international frontiers and to cross-border incursions which threaten international peace and security in the region."⁷ Although the resolution recognized that "the Kurdish population, [was] suffering from the repression in all its forms inflicted by the Iraqi authorities,"⁸ it only advocated humanitarian aid and restraint on the part of the central government in lieu of Kurdish independence. However, this aid was sufficient to spark a new period in the history of the KRG. The Kurds of northern Iraq were now substantially protected from Saddam and able to begin indigenous political and economic development.

⁶ Rubin, Michael, "Are Kurds a Pariah Minority?," *Social Research* 70, no. 1 (Spring 2003): 295-330, Academic Search Complete, EBSCOhost (accessed December 1, 2013), 303.

⁷ United Nations, Security Council, Resolution 688, 5 April 1991, <http://daccess-dds-ny.un.org/doc/RESOLUTION/GEN/NR0/596/24/IMG/NR059624.pdf?OpenElement> (accessed December 2, 2013), 32.

⁸ Ibid.

Iraqi Kurdistan After the Establishment of the No-Fly-Zone

From the declaration of the no-fly-zone in 1991 until the beginning of the Iraq War in 2003, the KRG underwent a period of internal conflict, development, and consolidation, which put it at an advantage when Saddam's government fell and power was available to the groups that had the ability to seize it. Isolated from the corruption and aggression of Saddam's government, the KRG used its thirteen-percent share of Iraq's oil-for-food revenues to invest in much-needed infrastructure and public institutions. Over time, the KRG was able to gain legitimacy amongst the Kurdish population for its ability to produce and sustain beneficial economic and political structures.⁹ As early as May 1992, truly democratic elections were held with the KDP obtaining 45 percent of the vote and the PUK obtaining 44 percent.¹⁰ However, the Kurdish government still faced indirect, but significant challenges from Saddam such as his denial of visas to UN workers whose missions were intended to help rebuild and re-develop Iraqi Kurdistan.¹¹ It was especially difficult for the KRG to sustain itself as it suffered the same crippling, economic sanctions that the U.N. levied onto Saddam's government in Baghdad.¹² Furthermore, over time, the fractiousness that has characterized the Kurdish political experience arose once again in a dispute over the distribution of border-crossing revenues, sparking a civil-war between the KDP and the PUK from 1994 to 1998.

In a dramatic turn of events, at the end of August 1998, Barzani and Talabani met in Washington, D.C. and, with mediation from the U.S. State Department, reached an

⁹ Vera Eccarius-Kelly, *The Militant Kurds: A Dual Strategy for Freedom*, Santa Barbara, Calif: Praeger, 2011, eBook Collection (EBSCOhost), EBSCOhost (accessed October 27, 2013), 168.

¹⁰ Michael Rubin, "Are Kurds a Pariah Minority?." *Social Research* 70, no. 1 (Spring 2003): 295-330, Academic Search Complete, EBSCOhost (accessed December 1, 2013), 304.

¹¹ Ibid, 308.

¹² Ibid, 305.

agreement to lay down arms. In doing so, both leaders and their respective political parties devoted themselves to the common cause of establishing greater autonomy for the KRG within Iraq.¹³ Significantly, this experience of national consciousness and consolidation allowed the KRG to organize more quickly and effectively than many non-Kurdish groups, both before and after Saddam's fall from power.¹⁴ Finally, the experience with governing that the Kurds gained from 1991 until 2003 put them in an excellent position to exercise influence as a political force not only within their own autonomous region, but also in the national parliament, or Council of Representatives.

The Iraq War

In 2003, during his pivotal speech to the U.N. calling for pre-emptive military action against Iraq, "A Policy of Evasion and Deception," U.S. Secretary of State Colin Powell cited the massacres of Kurds during the Anfal Campaigns as evidence of Saddam's maliciousness and threatening posture. Specifically, Powell said that, "Saddam Hussein's use of mustard and nerve gas against the Kurds in 1988 was one of the 20th century's most horrible atrocities."¹⁵ However, while the United States no doubt had some concern for the human-rights violations of Saddam's regime, Powell argued that the threat that such weapons posed to the international community was the principal reason for the invasion, "Nothing points more clearly to Saddam Hussein's dangerous intentions and the threat he poses to all of us than his calculated cruelty to his own citizens and to

¹³ Michael M. Gunter, "The Five Stages of American Foreign Policy towards the Kurds." *Insight Turkey* 13, no. 2 (April 2011): 93-106, Academic Search Complete, EBSCOhost (accessed December 1, 2013), 100.

¹⁴ Gareth Stansfield, "The unravelling of the post-First World War state system? The Kurdistan Region of Iraq and the transformation of the Middle East," *International Affairs* 89, no. 2 (March 2013): 259-282, Academic Search Complete, EBSCOhost (accessed December 2, 2013), 269.

¹⁵ Colin Powell, "A Policy of Evasion and Deception," *Washington Post*, February 5, 2003, http://www.washingtonpost.com/wp-srv/nation/transcripts/powelltext_020503.html (accessed November 25, 2013).

his neighbors.”¹⁶ Similarly to how the U.S. reacted to both the Anfal Campaigns and the Iraqi counterattack against the KRG in 1991, Powell denounced Saddam, but recommended military intervention mostly rooted in the threat to the international community and never mentioned supporting Kurdish independence.

In early 2003, in exchange for working with the U.S. in the northern theater of Operation Iraqi Freedom, the KRG was able to increase its political power significantly in post-Saddam Iraq. A few months before the invasion, Turkish leaders refused to allow the U.S. to use the country’s military bases as staging points because they were worried that the overthrow of Saddam would lead to the disintegration of Iraq. Turkey feared that this disintegration would lead to the establishment of an independent Kurdistan that would ally with the Kurdistan Workers' Party (PKK), a prominent Kurdish terrorist-organization operating within Turkey, and spur their own Kurdish populations, who occupy much of the eastern half of the country, to secede.¹⁷ Consequently, the U.S. contacted Kurdish leaders within the KRG for military aid from their *peshmerga* forces during Operation Iraqi Freedom. In exchange, the U.S. allowed Kurdish leaders to participate in conferences that shaped American developmental policies for post-Saddam Iraq, such as Future of Iraq Project. The PUK and KDP used the opportunity in order to lobby for a federal Iraqi government in which the KRG would have significant political and economic autonomy. Specifically, a report on the findings of the Democratic Principles Working Group of the Future of Iraq Project records, "representatives of the

¹⁶ United Nations, Security Council, Resolution 688, 5 April 1991, <http://daccess-dds-ny.un.org/doc/RESOLUTION/GEN/NR0/596/24/IMG/NR059624.pdf?OpenElement> (accessed December 2, 2013), 32.

¹⁷ Douglas Little, "The United States and the Kurds," *Journal Of Cold War Studies* 12, no. 4 (Fall 2010): 63-98, *Academic Search Complete*, EBSCOhost (accessed November 21, 2013), 96.

PUK and the KDP spoke eloquently on the subject of federalism.”¹⁸ During the early days of the war, in a move that signaled its growing power, the KRG was able to occupy substantially more territory than it had ever held during the duration of the no-fly zone. The Kurds justified their occupation and seizure of these lands, especially the valuable city of Kirkuk, by arguing that they had been predominantly Kurdish before Saddam implemented his system of planned deportations and Arabization that began in the 1970s.¹⁹ Thus, the Kurds argued that they were only reasserting control over lands that constituted their national territory.

During the war, the U.S. risked alienating its regional-partner Turkey by moving to end its decades-old practice of conducting border raids on Kurdish positions inside Iraq. Prior to the Iraq War, Turkey had been able to send soldiers at will over the border into KRG territory, mostly to hunt down itinerant PKK forces, but also to harass the PUK and KDP and undermine their legitimacy among Kurdish populations in Turkey. In 2003, during the advance of the *peshmerga* forces, the U.S. military discovered that Turkish soldiers had crossed the border and were attempting to destabilize the KRG's rule in the city of Sulamaniya. As a consequence of its newly supportive position toward the KRG, the U.S. captured the Turkish soldiers, deported them, and, in doing so, risked a diplomatic incident to support its new Kurdish allies,²⁰ which only years earlier would have been an unthinkable policy.

¹⁸ State Department, Future of Iraq Project, Democratic Principles Working Group - Important Themes 4-5, 2002, National Security Archive, George Washington University, <http://www2.gwu.edu/~nsarchiv/NSAEBB/NSAEBB198/20020904.pdf>, 3.

¹⁹ Vera Eccarius-Kelly, *The Militant Kurds: A Dual Strategy for Freedom*, Santa Barbara, Calif: Praeger, 2011, eBook Collection (EBSCOhost), EBSCOhost (accessed October 27, 2013), 155.

²⁰ Michael M. Gunter, "The Five Stages of American Foreign Policy towards the Kurds." *Insight Turkey* 13, no. 2 (April 2011): 93-106. Academic Search Complete, EBSCOhost (accessed December 1, 2013), 101.

The KRG in Post-Saddam Iraq

In 2005, during the writing of the initial Iraqi Constitution, the KRG and the Shia Islamic Supreme Council of Iraq (ISCI), an alliance consisting of various Shia groups, influenced both the framing and execution of Iraq's new laws. This coalition was particularly powerful because Sunnis and many non-ISCI Shia groups decided to boycott the country's first, post-invasion elections because of what they perceived to be disproportionate American, Kurdish, and ISCI influence.²¹ As an example of the Kurds' newly-won privileges in the Iraqi Constitution, Article 4 reads, "The Arabic language and Kurdish language are the two official languages of Iraq," guaranteeing, "Speech, conversation and expression in official settings ... Recognition and publication of the official documents and correspondences in the two languages ... and Opening schools that teach the two languages."²² The Kurds, in securing their language as co-official with Arabic, won a considerable victory, especially against their rivals the Turkmen and Syriacs, which only have semi-official language status in "the administrative units in which they represent a majority of population."²³ Additionally, since the KRG had been organized as a semi-autonomous region since the establishment of the no-fly zone in 1991, it was able to accede as a consistent entity during the constitutional process, "legislation enacted in the region of Kurdistan since 1992 shall remain in force."²⁴ This measure gave the KRG certain rights and privileges that would have been more difficult

²¹ Wladimir Wilgenburg, "Breaking from baghdad." *World Affairs* 175,(*World Affairs*, Nov 01, 2012; Vol. 175, No. 4, p. 47-54; 2012-11-01): 47-54, 49.

²² Iraqi Constitution, *The Washington Post*, October 12, 2005, <http://www.washingtonpost.com/wp-dyn/content/article/2005/10/12/AR2005101201450.html> (accessed December 1, 2013).

²³ Iraqi Constitution, *The Washington Post*, October 12, 2005, <http://www.washingtonpost.com/wp-dyn/content/article/2005/10/12/AR2005101201450.html> (accessed December 1, 2013).

²⁴ *Ibid.*

to acquire in an open, parliamentary vote and reinforced the KRG's autonomy in the federal system.

The city of Kirkuk is incredibly important to the KRG's national consciousness and lies on the border between areas under its own control and those under the control of the central government. Kirkuk is so central to Kurdish nationalists and leaders that PUK leader and Iraqi President Jalal Talabani has gone on record multiple times in stating that "Kirkuk is our Jerusalem."²⁵ Possibly even more important than its apparent ideological significance, the area around Kirkuk is estimated to contain up to twenty-percent of Iraq's oil and natural gas reserves.²⁶ As a further measure of its power, during the drafting of the 2005 Constitution, the powerful KRG lobby succeeded in including Article 14, which called for the "normalization [or importation of Kurds and deportation of Arabs], [a] census and ... [a] referendum in Kirkuk [for accession to the KRG]... by a date not to exceed the 31st of December 2007."²⁷ The normalization would work to correct for the effects of Saddam's Arabization policies by allowing Kurds from the KRG to establish residency within the city with government subsidies. With the importation of Kurds into the city, the KRG stood poised to win the referendum and gain control of Kirkuk, a significant victory for both its ideological and material dimensions.

Iraqi Prime Minister Nouri al-Maliki and his supporters have argued that the Iraqi constitution is illegitimate because most Iraqi voters chose to boycott the political process, which was hijacked by a proactive minority careful in extending and guarding its

²⁵ Kerim Yildiz.. *The future of kurdistan*. London; New York: Pluto Press, 2012, 74.

²⁶ Vera Eccarius-Kelly. *The Militant Kurds: A Dual Strategy for Freedom*. Santa Barbara, Calif: Praeger, 2011. eBook Collection (EBSCOhost), EBSCOhost (accessed October 27, 2013), 154.

²⁷ Iraqi Constitution. The Washington Post. October 12, 2005. <http://www.washingtonpost.com/wp-dyn/content/article/2005/10/12/AR2005101201450.html> (accessed December 1, 2013).

own prerogatives.²⁸ According to this view, the constitution is a product of the turbulent, sectarian post-invasion period and has thus proved ineffectual in producing an inclusionary, equitable state. In contrast, the KRG currently expresses the view that the constitution was a burdensome compromise that it made in deference to the other groups of Iraq in order to remain part of a unified state.²⁹ Such strong differences of opinion are examples of a much wider political, economic, and cultural disconnect between the KRG and the remainder of the country. For example, surveys conducted between 2005 and 2010 reported that the majority of non-Kurdish Iraqis preferred continuing central-government control of Kirkuk while ninety-eight percent of Kurds preferred the cession of Kirkuk to the KRG.³⁰ In the KRG, many children who were born after the declaration of the no-fly zone can barely understand Arabic and have rarely left their northern enclave because of the ongoing, violent insurgency between the Sunni and Shia in the rest of Iraq. Recurring violent standoffs between the KRG and Maliki's central government are an outward manifestation of this fundamental divide in political and ideological outlook.

The United States Reasserts its Policy of a Unified Iraq

Despite the incredible power that the KRG wielded during this early period, the U.S. was still its senior partner and limited its ambitions for total independence. Years earlier, in 1999, the U.S. arranged a conference of experts in the fields of foreign-policy and military-science in order to form contingency plans in the event of a post-Saddam

²⁸ Gareth Stansfield and Liam Anderson, "Kurds in Iraq: The Struggle Between Baghdad and Erbil," *Middle East Policy* 16, no. 1 (Spring 2009): 134-145, Academic Search Complete, EBSCOhost (accessed November 23, 2013). 142.

²⁹ Ibid.

³⁰ Wladimir Wilgenburg, "Breaking from Baghdad." *World Affairs* 175, (World Affairs, Nov 01, 2012; Vol. 175, No. 4, p. 47-54; 2012-11-01): 47-54; 49-50.

Iraq. Again, the U.S. recognized the importance of the Kurds in creating stability within the region, "To this end, the United States should identify and initiate, or be prepared to initiate, dialogues with key leaders in the PUK, KDP, and Shia tribes as early as possible."³¹ However, the U.S. always framed the negotiations with the Kurds with the belief that "Iraq should remain unified."³² In order to balance Kurdish desires for independence against the objective of preserving a unified Iraq, the conference suggested, "that a federalist model could provide sufficient protection of Kurdish concerns to keep the country united."³³

In 2007, the U.S. reasserted its *realpolitik* approach by ignoring the aforementioned deadline for a referendum on Kirkuk's accession to the KRG to appease and strengthen the faction of Prime Minister Maliki. Moreover, during the Surge in 2007, the U.S. government strengthened Baghdad's relationships with local Sunni power brokers and created a larger base of support for Maliki at the cost of the Kurds' relative political power.³⁴ Finally, in December 2010, the Obama administration made a commitment to broker agreements between the KRG and Baghdad in exchange for the ratification of a new election law that forced the Kurds to give up a small number of proportional representatives in the Iraqi parliament.³⁵ While the U.S. has aided the Kurds

³¹ U.S. Military, Desert Crossing Seminar After Action Report, June 28-30, 1999, http://www2.gwu.edu/~nsarchiv/NSAEBB/NSAEBB418/docs/1%20-%20Desert%20Crossing%20After%20Action%20Report_1999-06-28.pdf, (accessed November 20, 2013), 12.

³² Ibid, 15.

³³ Ibid, 24.

³⁴ Joost R. Hiltermann, "Revenge of the Kurds," *Foreign Affairs* 91, no. 6 (November 2012): 16-22, Academic Search Complete, EBSCOhost (accessed November 20, 2013).

³⁵ Michael M. Gunter, "The Five Stages of American Foreign Policy towards the Kurds," *Insight Turkey* 13, no. 2 (April 2011): 93-106, Academic Search Complete, EBSCOhost (accessed December 1, 2013), 94.

more forcibly than previously, it has no plan to face the thorny foreign policy dimensions that an independent, Kurdish state would create.

The Future of the KRG

From the 1980s until the 2010s, the United States has maintained the territorial integrity of Iraq to ensure general regional stability and to please regional partners who fear the establishment of a Kurdish state from Iraq's ruins. During the Anfal Campaigns of the late 1980s, the Gulf War, and the Iraq War, the U.S., along with the international community, denounced Saddam's treatment of the Iraqi Kurds, but only intervened when it suited greater geopolitical interests and never promulgated a policy supporting Kurdish independence. Nonetheless, from the declaration of the no-fly-zone in 1991 until the Iraq War in 2003, the KRG were able to unify to an extent both unprecedented by Kurdish communities in surrounding states and by other ethnic groups within Saddam's Iraq. When Turkey refused to allow the U.S. to use its bases in Operation Iraqi Freedom, the KRG leveraged its cooperation with American forces to occupy more Iraqi territory and to influence the formation of post-Saddam Iraq's political institutions to its own advantage. Although its level of support to the KRG has increased, the U.S. has remained resolutely committed to a unified Iraq and has actively strengthened the government of Prime Minister Nouri al-Maliki to offset the increasingly powerful KRG.

As years pass, the two sides are only becoming more divergent in their understanding of a federal Iraq and are losing their ability to consider each other as citizens of the same country. While the U.S. will no doubt support its traditional policy of maintaining a "unified Iraq," doing so will become increasingly difficult and fraught with the risk of violent civil war between Baghdad and the KRG. Finally, as the increasingly

sovereign Kurdish population in Syria slowly secures its own independence, it will undoubtedly look to the KRG both as a model to be imitated and possibly as a partner in the creation of a pan-Kurdish state.

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