

## LEADER: The Kurds must not be betrayed again

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By Brendan O'Leary  
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The US is regularly accused of betraying the Kurdish people in pursuit of its perceived strategic interests in Turkey, Syria, Iran and, of course, Iraq. The fate of the Kurds in a post-Saddam Iraq is the latest instance.

Turkey does not want the Kurds to impose a federal design on the rest of the country. Ankara is anxious to prevent the Kurds from carving out an independent state in northern Iraq and is ready to pour in troops. Officially, Washington opposes such a deployment - but could back down in return for Turkish logistical help in the war. No wonder there are suspicions that the Kurds will be sold down the Potomac, the Bosphorus and the Euphrates.

The Bush administration, Turkey and some Iraqis have a point: the Kurds of Iraqi Kurdistan have no right to impose a federation, democratic or otherwise, on the rest of Iraq - though they certainly do have the right to negotiate for what Americans take for granted at home.

Equally, the Turks, Americans and non-Kurdish Iraqis have no right to insist that the people of Iraqi Kurdistan accept a unitary or centralised Iraq. A Turkish occupation of Iraqi Kurdistan is not in the interests of the US, Turkey or non-Kurdish Iraqis, whatever the outcome of the war to topple Saddam Hussein.

To permit, let alone encourage, Turkey to occupy anything more than the border rim of Iraqi Kurdistan will provoke both civil and armed resistance from the Kurds. A Turkish invasion is likely to provide the many European Union members worried about the prospect of Turkish membership with a pretext to block entry for good. So, if Washington foreign policy thinkers are smart, they should restrain their ally because getting Turkey into the EU has long been one of their goals.

Iraqi Kurdistan is internationally recognised as an autonomous region. It enjoys this status because the international community, including the US, sought to protect the Kurds from genocide. The world was making amends for the miserable fate of the Kurds during the 20th century, when they were partitioned, intermittently subjected to coercive assimilation and expelled from their homes (including by Turkish governments). Protected by the US and UK air forces, the region has governed itself for more than a decade, although not without internal strife. It is the sole part of Iraq with anything resembling democracy and the protection of local minority rights.

It should therefore be plain to at least some in Washington that supporting an aggressive Turkish policy towards Iraq would earn the Bush administration no credit in the wider world, damage Turkey's European interests and render hollow Republican commitments to the democratic reconstruction of the Middle East.

As for non-Kurdish Iraqis, their primary interest after the fall of Mr Hussein is reconstruction with self-government rather than American colonial administration. Snuffing out Iraqi Kurdistan will not help them.

The Bush administration could, however, be helped out of these difficulties by the Kurds themselves. They have learnt from their history. They know that they cannot create their own nation state, at least not now.

With the end of the Iraqi regime in sight, the regional government should declare Iraqi Kurdistan sovereign but not independent. It should say it is willing to negotiate with the rest of Iraq over

its future. What it should seek is a "federacy" - a federal relationship with the rest of Iraq that cannot be changed unilaterally by Baghdad - and protection of Kurds elsewhere in the country. But the Kurds should also state that it is up to the rest of the country to determine its preferred form of internal government.

Such an arrangement would fulfil the legitimate Kurdish aspirations for autonomy. It is one that the US and UK should support. They should resist Turkish pressure to keep a lid on Kurdish aspirations and oppose outright Turkish intervention.

London and Washington have tried to sell this war as one of liberation and have promised democracy and reconstruction. These promises would soon ring hollow if they were to collaborate with Turkey in the repression of the Kurds, the people of Iraq that the Iraqi dictator has targeted more than any other.

Nor could the US and Britain justify stamping out self-government in the one unit of Iraq that has some recent experience of democracy. America, after all, was built from self-governing autonomous entities that escaped a (British) tyrant. Nor could Tony Blair credibly advocate a centralised Iraq when at home he has designed and implemented a form of asymmetrical devolution for Britain and a special form of power-sharing for Northern Ireland.

The Bush administration and the UK government must unambiguously support the autonomous status of Iraqi Kurdistan and back negotiations between the parties and regions that might comprise a post-Saddam Iraq. By doing so, Mr Bush and Mr Blair could honestly tell the Turks that they are neither supporting the break-up of Iraq nor forcing Iraq as a whole to become a federation.

*The writer directs the Solomon Asch Centre for the study of ethnopolitical conflict at the University of Pennsylvania*

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