

MIDDLE EAST

The Kurds: a ghostly and embarrassing nation

INVISIBLE NATION

How the Kurds' Quest for Statehood is Shaping Iraq and the Middle East
By Quil Lawrence
Walker & Company,
366 pages, \$28.95

REVIEWED BY BRENDAN O'LEARY

Thinking of Kurds makes two types of North American feel guilty or embarrassed.

Liberals and leftists who oppose the U.S. military presence in Iraq do not like to be reminded that the Kurdistan Region of Iraq is a success story, or that its citizens refer to the liberation, not the occupation, of Iraq, and do not want a hasty exit strategy from a new U.S. president to destroy their accomplishments. The region is democratic, peaceful, becoming prosperous and pro-American, and its government is willing to recognize Israel.

The "realist" rightists, the Kissingers, Scowcrofts and Bakers, and others among Washington's basement Machiavellians, do not like to be reminded that they betrayed the Kurds to the genocidal Baathists. In 1975, they did so to cement a deal between the Shah of Iran and Saddam Hussein. In the 1980s, U.S. policy-makers aided Saddam against Ayatollah Khomeini, and Arabs against Kurds - even denying that the Baathists gassed Kurdish civilians. In 1991, president George H. W. Bush called on Kurds and Shia Arabs to revolt against Saddam, but left them to the butcher's mercy when oil-rich Kuwait was freed.

Liberals and leftists would like to forget about the Kurds: They embarrass their simple good-and-evil portrait of the Iraq wars (note my use of the plural). By contrast, the realist rightists actively want to betray them again, as the Baker-Hamilton Report of 2007 made clear.

The Kurdistan Region is a truly remarkable embarrassment for certain theories and bigots. It is a Muslim-majority democracy in which women have rights, and families drink Christian-made wine at spring picnics outside Sulaimania. In the capital, Erbil, the elected Kurdistan National Assembly zealously protects the co-sovereign rights it won in the negotiation of



Iraqi Kurds celebrate the arrival of U.S.-led coalition forces in Baghdad in 2003: Successful northern semi-state doesn't want to see a hasty U.S. exit strategy. REUTERS

Iraq's constitution. That was endorsed by four out of five of Iraq's voters in October, 2005, and with the near-unanimous consent of Kurds.

The region's elected president, Masoud Barzani, watches warily for signs of another U.S. betrayal, like that of 1975, which destroyed his father, Mulla Mustafa Barzani, the great guerrilla general. In Baghdad, his coalition partner and long-term rival Jalal Talabani serves as president of Iraq, trying to coax the Arab parties to implement the constitution.

The Kurdistan Region has more autonomy within Iraq than Quebec has in Canada, and more than any member-state in the European Union. It has full control over its security, governs in its own language, has full authority over its natural resources and has a proportional share of Iraq's oil revenues from currently

exploited fields. It shares power in one of the formally weakest federal governments in the world; the important exclusive competencies of the federal government can be numbered on less than one set of fingers. Kurdistan's diplomatic missions are entitled to represent the region's interests on all important domestic policy matters.

The Kurds of Iraq have therefore, through their own efforts, won something better than formal independence and membership of the United Nations. They enjoy the substance of independence without giving their Turkish or Iranian neighbours any reasonable excuse to intervene to block their sovereign rights.

They are Quil Lawrence says in this well-crafted and elegantly written book, an "invisible nation."

The former BBC correspon-

dent in Iraq draws upon his extensive and valuable interviews with Kurdish leaders, new Arab leaders and former and serving U.S. policy-makers to provide a very effective and generally very accurate contemporary history of the Kurds of Iraq.

He makes only two significant mistakes, one of which may owe most to U.S. editors' misleading style rules. He asserts that "The Kurds are the largest ethnic group on Earth that has no homeland." In fact, most Kurds are living on their homeland; what they have lacked is a genuinely self-governing region, or a sovereign and independent state of their own.

What Lawrence relates, in a compelling narrative, is the accidental means through which the Kurdistan Region has become a state within the federation of Iraq, one that deserves its right to breathe.

Those who recommend an immediate U.S. withdrawal from Iraq and a handover to the United Nations need to be asked what that will do for the Kurds, and asked what the 22 Arab majority member-states of the UN have ever done to protect the human, let alone the national, rights of the Kurds.

The other error is Lawrence's assertion that the Kurdistan Regional Government (KRG) has ratified its own regional constitution. Having advised on its drafting, I know that the regional constitution has been neither legislated nor ratified. That is partly because the Kurdistan government and National Assembly want to consult widely, including with the prospective new minorities that should soon join it from Kirkuk and other currently "disputed territories."

Prime Minister Nechirvan Barzani has promised that the region's new constitution will contain state-of-the-art provisions to protect non-Kurdish nationalities and other human rights. I expect him to abide by that promise, which will be essential to assist in a calm unification of historic Kurdistan within Iraq.

Lawrence tells a vivid, lucid, "warts and all" account of the Kurdish national liberation movement in Iraq. He is unsparing in his evaluation of internal Kurdish conflicts, especially those of the mid-1990s between the Kurdistan Democratic Party, the KDP, led by Barzani, and the Patriotic Union of Kurdistan, the PUK, led by Talabani.

He also, rightly, acknowledges the remarkable and mostly uninterrupted run of good luck of the Kurdistan Region since 1998. But if the 21st century is to be kinder to the Kurds of Iraq than the 20th was, if its experiment is not to be crushed by Turks, Iranians and Sunni Arabs, it will need liberals, leftists and rightists within the Western democracies to defend what the Kurds have accomplished under the U.S. umbrella - but not under Uncle Sam's directions.

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