

American Hegemonic Designs in the Middle East Not Helpful to the Kurds

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Dramatic events have taken place in recent years in regards to the Kurdish struggle, particular in relation to the 2003 U.S. invasion and occupation of Iraq. Some of these have been generally recognized as positive, some generally recognized as negative, and some will have to wait for history's judgment. In any case, it still amazes me that so many in the Kurdish community still trust that the United States policy has the best interests of the Kurdish people in mind.

In the mid-1970s, while working with the dictatorial Shah of Iran to goad Iraqi Kurds into an armed uprising against the then left-leaning Iraqi government with the promise of military support, the United States abandoned them precipitously as part of an agreement with the Baghdad government for a territorial compromise favorable to Iran regarding the Shatt al-Arab waterway. Suddenly without supply lines to obtain the necessary equipment to defend themselves, the Iraqi army marched into Kurdish areas and thousands were slaughtered. Then-Secretary of State Henry Kissinger dismissed concerns about the humanitarian consequences of this betrayal by saying that "Covert action should not be confused with missionary work."

The March 1988 Iraqi attacks on Halabja – where Iraq government forces massacred upwards to 5000 civilians in that Kurdish town by gassing them with chemical weapons – was downplayed by the Reagan Administration, even to the point of claiming that Iran, then the preferred American enemy, was actually responsible. The Halabja tragedy was not an isolated incident, as U.S. officials were well aware at the time. UN reports in 1986 and 1987 documented Iraq's use of chemical weapons, which were confirmed both by investigations from the CIA and from U.S. embassy staff who visited Iraqi Kurdish refugees in Turkey. However, not only was the United States not particularly concerned about the ongoing repression and the use of chemical weapons, the United States actually was supporting the Iraqi government's procurement efforts of materials necessary for the development of such an arsenal.

U.S. agricultural subsidies and other economic aid flowed into Iraq. American officials looked the other way as much of these funds were laundered into purchasing military equipment. The United States also sent an untold amount of indirect aid – largely through Kuwait and other Arab countries – which enabled Iraq to receive weapons and technology to increase its war-making capacity.

When a 1988 Senate Foreign Relations committee staff report brought to light Saddam Hussein's policy of widespread killings of Kurdish civilians in northern Iraq, Senator Claiborne Pell introduced "The Prevention of Genocide Act" to put pressure on the Iraqi government. However, the Reagan Administration successfully moved to have the measure killed.

This history of appeasement raises serious questions regarding the sincerity of both the strategic and moral concerns subsequently raised by U.S. officials about both the nature of the Iraqi regime and the treatment of the Kurdish population.

Military intervention against Saddam's regime could have arguably been considered legal during the Anfal campaign of the late 1980s under provisions of the Genocide Treaty. One cannot, however, justify such military intervention retroactively a full fifteen years later. Therefore it is disingenuous to the extreme to justify the U.S. takeover of that oil-rich country on the grounds that "Saddam used chemical weapons against his own people"* when the United States did nothing to stop the slaughter when it was going on. The suffering of the Kurdish people under Saddam's rule has been shamelessly used as an excuse, but should under no circumstances be considered an actual motivation, for the American conquest.

At the end of the Gulf War, the long-suppressed Kurds in the north (as well as Shiites in the south) launched a rebellion against Saddam Hussein's regime. They initially made major advances, only to be crushed in a counter-attack by Iraqi government forces. Despite President Bush calling on the people of Iraq to rise up against the dictatorship, U.S. forces – which at that time occupied the southern fifth of the country – did nothing to support the post-war rebellion and stood by while thousands of Iraqi Kurds, Shiites, and others were slaughtered. In the cease-fire agreement at the end of the war, the United States made a conscious decision to exclude Iraqi helicopter gunships from the ban on Iraqi military air traffic. These were the very weapons that proved so decisive in crushing the rebellions.

U.S. officials have claimed that they were tricked into thinking that Iraqi military helicopters would only be used only for post-war humanitarian relief. More likely, however, the Bush administration feared that a victory by Iraqi Kurds might encourage the ongoing Kurdish uprising in Turkey, a NATO ally.

As Kurdish refugees streamed over snowy mountain passes for safety in neighboring Turkey, Turkish officials largely ignored their obligations under international humanitarian law to allow the fleeing civilians sanctuary. However, the United States, Great Britain and France unilaterally initiated "no-fly zones" in northern Iraq in March 1991 in response to widespread international concern over the humanitarian crisis. These no-fly zones had no precedent in international law and had no direct authorization from the United Nations.. Despite their dubious legality, however, the no-fly zones initially received widespread support as a means of curbing the Iraqi government's savage repression of the Kurds since they were initially designed to protect the area from Iraqi air strikes by banning Iraqi military flights.

According to two State Department reports in 1994 and 1996, however, the creation and military enforcement of "no-fly zone" in fact did not protect the Iraqi Kurdish populations from potential assaults by Iraqi forces. The straight latitudinal demarcations of the no-fly zones did not correspond with the areas of predominant Kurdish populations and the targets of the American and British air strikes have no relation to preventing Iraqi attacks against vulnerable minorities. That the United States has allowed the Turkish Air Force to conduct bombing raids and armed incursions within the northern Iraq "no-fly zone" against

* Personally, I do not consider the Kurd's "Saddam's own people" or "the people" of any Iraqi, Turkish, Iranian, Syrian or any other foreign leader. The Kurds are their own people, nobody else's.

Kurdish targets is but one indication of the lack of concern about actually protecting the Kurdish population. What began as an apparent humanitarian effort quickly turned into yet another excuse for continuing a low-level war against Iraq. France soon dropped out of the enforcement efforts.

In September 1996, following an Iraqi incursion into the northern part of the country at the request of a Kurdish faction battling a rival Iranian-backed Kurdish faction, the United States launched another series of major bombing raids against Iraq. This rush to the defense of the Kurds may have been just a pretext, however: while the incursion took place in the north, most of the U.S. air strikes took place in the central and southern part of Iraq.

But to really understand U.S. attitudes toward the Kurds, we need to look no further than Turkey: The fifteen million strong Kurdish minority, located primarily in the eastern part of the country, has suffered enormously under Turkish rule. There have been periods when simply speaking the Kurdish language or celebrating Kurdish festivals has been severely repressed. In addition to being denied basic cultural and political rights, Kurdish civilians have been the primary victims of a Turkish counter-insurgency campaign ostensibly targeted at the Kurdish Workers Party (PKK), a Marxist-led guerrilla group fighting for greater autonomy. The Turkish regime has capitalized on the PKK's use of terrorism as an excuse to crush even nonviolent expressions of Kurdish nationalism. The United States has been largely silent regarding the Turkish government's repression but quite vocal in condemning what it sees as Kurdish terrorism. President Clinton was the only national leader in the world to openly support Turkey's incursions into Iraq to attack Kurdish targets.

Human Rights Watch, which has also criticized the PKK rebels for serious human rights violations, has documented how the U.S.-supplied Turkish army was "responsible for the majority of forced evacuations and destruction of villages."

The Clinton Administration justified its eleven-week bombing campaign of Yugoslavia in 1999 on the grounds that atrocities such as the Serbian repression of the Kosovar Albanians must not take place "on NATO's doorstep." Ironically, similar ethnic-based repression on an even greater scale had been already taking place for a number of years *within* a NATO country. During the 1980s and 1990s, the United States supplied Turkey with \$15 billion worth of armaments as the Turkish military carried out widespread attacks against civilian populations in the largest use of American weapons by non-U.S. forces since Israel's 1982 invasion of Lebanon. Most of this took place during President Bill Clinton's first term. Over 3000 Kurdish villages were destroyed and over two million Kurds became refugees in an operation where more than three-quarters of the weapons were of U.S. origin. The fifteen-year war cost over 40,000 lives. Human Rights Watch, which has also criticized the PKK rebels for serious human rights violations, has documented how the U.S.-supplied Turkish army was "responsible for the majority of forced evacuations and destruction of villages."

In the months leading up to the U.S. invasion of Iraq, I did quite a bit of public speaking and appeared on numerous radio talk shows to speak out against the impending war. Repeatedly, during question-and-answer periods, Kurdish-Americans would claim I did not care about their people's suffering because I did support a U.S. invasion of Iraq, apparently assuming that the United States – despite this history – would somehow be helping them.

Let me say this to my Kurdish sisters and brothers: as long as you think that people like me are your enemy and people like George W. Bush are your friends, you will never get your freedom!

Are the Kurds of northern Iraq really better off now than they were before the U.S. conquest? Thanks to the United Nations Security Council imposing a no-fly zone and other restrictions against Iraqi intervention, combined with a strictly-enforced embargo of military equipment, the Kurds enjoyed effective autonomy – and, except for the periodic U.S.-backed Turkish incursions – relative peace for a dozen years. Now, we are seeing a frightening rise in bombings, terrorism and ethnic strife throughout Iraqi Kurdistan. If and when a new central government in Iraq takes hold, will the communal political rights included in the interim Iraqi constitution be allowed to remain in the face of opposition by Iraq's Shiite Arabs? If the United States is forced to choose between alienating Iraq's Shiite Arab majority – whose cooperation the U.S. needs to maintain any influence in the country – and defending the country's Kurdish minority, which do you think they will choose?

(While I personally disagree with the Shias' opposition to a federal system or other means of allowing Iraqi Kurds special status, it is understandable if one examines Iraqi history: Though the majority in Iraq, Arab Shiites have consistently been denied power for centuries under the rule of the Ottomans, the British, the Hashemites, and the Baathists. Now, finally on the verge of finally having real power, suddenly there is a call from a major Western power to give giving special status to a minority community. The Shias are therefore asking, "Where was this concern for the rights of a minority community – or even the majority community – before we were finally able to exercise our majority status? Why does it only become an issue now, once we are on the verge of finally controlling the government?)"[†]

Another serious question must be considered. Given the growing opposition in Iraq over the U.S. invasion and occupation and the violence and terror it has unleashed, Iraqi Kurds – the most visible supporters of the U.S. invasion – could, as a community, become the targets of a popular backlash nationalist or Islamist backlash. Unable to go after American forces in their fortified garrisons or perhaps after eventually forcing American troops out, the wrath of the population could then be turned on the Kurds. It would be naïve to think that the United States would come to the Kurds' rescue.

It is not up to me as a non-Kurd, of course, to tell you to refuse outside assistance from anybody. Indeed, if the activist community in the United States and elsewhere had worked harder over the years in support of your cause, Iraqi Kurds would not have felt compelled to seek U.S. assistance. As one Kurdish friend said to me, "Sometimes you might need to use Satan's money to do God's work."

[†] One can find an analogous situation which has occurred periodically in American urban politics: When an African-American or other minority group stands on the verge of becoming the majority in a given city, there is suddenly an effort to amend the city charter so the city council is elected by districts rather than city-wide and power is devolved from city hall to the neighborhoods. While such proposals may not be unreasonable in themselves, the timing understandably raises serious questions of intent among the incipient majority.

Still, I implore you: Do not trust any government that has such important strategic and economic interests in the Middle East and Central Asia to have your best interests in mind. Do what you need to do, but don't put yourselves in a position where, should the United States abandon you once again, you will be unable to defend yourselves.

At the same time, please know that you are not alone. You are not without allies.

You have the support of what the *New York Times* has called the world's other superpower: international public opinion.

You have the support of millions of people around the world who care about human rights and who care about justice.

People like those who – after the United Nations and virtually every government in the world had given up – kept the issue of East Timor alive until, against all odds, the Indonesians ended their occupation and finally granted the East Timorese their freedom. People like those who are today working to free Palestine from Israeli occupation, to free Western Sahara from Moroccan occupation and to free Tibet from Chinese occupation.

People who will continue to work with you in solidarity until – Inshallah – we will see a free Kurdistan!