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As Iraqis Celebrate, The Kurds Hesitate

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OF all the remarkable things that happened at the Iraqi polls on Sunday, perhaps the most striking was pulled off by the Kurdish independence movement. With almost no advance notice, hundreds of Kurds erected tents at official polling places in Iraq's Kurdish areas and asked those emerging from the ballot booths to take part in an informal referendum on whether Kurdistan should be independent or part of Iraq. From what I saw, almost everyone stopped to vote in the referendum, and the tally was running 11 to 1 in favor of independence.

This news will not be welcomed by American and British officials, who have studiously ignored the Kurdish independence movement, pretending that the unity of Iraq is not at issue in the country's transition to democracy. Those who organized the independence referendum -- mostly representatives of Kurdish nongovernmental organizations -- had sought a meeting last February with the American administrator in Baghdad, L. Paul Bremer III, to show him their petition with 1.7 million signatures asking for a vote on independence. Neither Mr. Bremer nor his main deputies would see the group. Thus the actual voting on Sunday caught coalition officials by surprise -- in part because Kurdistan, strongly supportive of the American presence in Iraq, has not been a priority for our diplomacy.

United States officials have preferred to see Kurdistan through their own lenses. Last summer, I heard Condoleezza Rice speak at a meeting in Washington about how impressed she was with the Kurdish commitment to the building a new, unified Iraq. I know every Kurdish leader she met with, and I know that none of them would prefer to be an Iraqi if an independent Kurdistan were a realistic option.

Kurdish leaders, well aware of the practical impediments to independence, repeat a mantra that the Americans want to hear: Iraq should be democratic, federal, pluralistic and united. But their hearts are not in it. As Massoud Barzani, leader of one of the two major Kurdish political groups, the Kurdistan Democratic Party, said at an Election Day news conference in his mountaintop headquarters nearby at Salaheddin, ''I am certain there will be an independent Kurdistan, and I hope to see it in my lifetime.''

While the Kurdistan Regional Government maintains that the referendum was entirely a private initiative, the voting was greatly facilitated by a younger generation of officials, who believe their elders have already made too many concessions to the unity of Iraq. With a wink from the government, election officials at many locations permitted the independence movement to distribute referendum ballots inside the polling places.

Iraq's new Assembly will face the task of preparing a constitution for a country where a sizable part of the population almost unanimously does not want to be part of the whole. The representatives of the Kurdish areas will most likely be the second-largest bloc in the Parliament. They will not press for independence any time soon, but they will be mindful of the referendum vote. A second election is scheduled for the end of this year, and it is quite possible that the referendum movement will convert itself into a political party by then if it feels that the major Kurdish parties have made too many concessions.

The Kurdish region today functions as if it were an independent state. The Kurdistan Regional Government carries out virtually all government functions, and Baghdad law applies only to the extent the Kurdish Parliament chooses to apply it. Kurdistan is responsible for its own security (which is the main reason it has been free of the violence wracking the rest of Iraq) and maintains its own armed forces.

For the people of Kurdistan, the issue is not simply a matter of keeping what they have. What drives the move for independence is not just the love of Kurdistan but also a widespread antipathy toward Iraq. The Iraqi flag is a hated symbol of a brutal regime, and it is still banned in areas controlled by the Kurdistan Democratic Party (it does fly, along with the Kurdistan flag, on a few public buildings elsewhere in the region).

The Kurds do not allow Arab units of the new Iraqi military onto their territory, nor do they permit Baghdad ministries to open offices. They refuse to surrender control of their international borders to Baghdad for fear that the central government will cut off their precious access to the outside world.

As the Assembly draws up the new constitution, Kurdish leaders likely will settle for a deal that preserves their region's de facto independence and financial autonomy and gives them control over the disputed province of Kirkuk. Especially important, the Kurds insist on a fixed percentage of Iraq's budget and full control over Kurdistan's petroleum, including the right to export it.

Kurdish dreams of independence have long been thwarted by the hostility not only of Arab Iraqis but also of Turkey, Iran and Syria -- each of which have substantial Kurdish minorities. These neighbors will be alarmed by the results of the independence referendum. Wiser heads, especially in Turkey, now see a loose Iraqi federation as by far the lesser evil than a Kurdish state.

The United States would do well to learn the lessons of the former Yugoslavia, where policymakers denied the reality of breakup until it was too late to contain the accompanying violence. Just four days before Yugoslavia's wars began in June 1991, the American Secretary of State, James Baker, was in Belgrade focused on the impossible task of stopping Slovenian and Croatian secession when he should have been trying to prevent the shooting.

A dying Yugoslavia was a different situation than a nascent Iraq, to be sure. But the question remains: will Kurdistan want to stay in an Iraqi federation -- even a very loose one? As the United States learned in Yugoslavia, it is hard in a democracy to hold people in a country they hate. The Kurds' demand for independence is not an immediate crisis, but it is a coming one.