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“*Ethnic Conflict and the Kurds*”

By George S. Harris

Annals of the American Academy of Political and Social Science, pp. 112-124, 1977

“*The Fate of the Kurds*”

By Graham E. Fuller

Foreign Affairs, Vol. 72, pp. 108-121, 1993

“*As Iraqis Celebrate, Kurds Hesitate*”

By Peter Galbraith

*The New York Times*, Section A, February 1, 2005

Invisible Nation

By Quil Lawrence

Walker & Company, New York, 2008

“*Kurds No Closer to Taking Kirkuk after Elections*”

By Joost Hiltermann

Foreign Policy, March 8, 2010

The Kurds in Iraq

The Kurds are a diverse but distinct ethnic group in the Middle East. The Kurdish region stretches over four countries: Iraq, Iran, Syria, and Turkey. This essay will examine the situation and the conflict of the Kurds specifically in northeast Iraq. The conflict that surrounds their autonomy and independence has existed since the fall of the Ottoman Empire after the First World War. However, the events that are most relevant to Iraqi and Kurdish relations began in the 1970s. This is also the point in time when the United States began to play an active role in the Kurdish situations, both political and ethnic.

This essay will attempt to answer two questions. First, is the Kurdish situation more of an ethnic conflict or is it deeply rooted in political desires? Furthermore, how would it be beneficial or costly for the Kurds to have an independent state? To help answer these questions are Quil Lawrence, Graham Fuller, Peter Galbraith, George Harris, and Joost Hiltermann. Their pieces chronologically examine the ethnic and political elements behind the failures and small successes of the Kurdish conflict in Iraq. Each piece is written at a different point in the conflict starting in 1977. In addition, the following topics will be included in the essay: the non-homogenous Kurdish ethnicity, the conflicts between the PUK and KDP, the significance of Kirkuk for Baghdad and the Kurds, the issue of oil exportation and revenues, and the American influence on the Iraqi Kurds.

History of the Situation

Chronology plays an important part in examining the plight of the Kurds. Historically, the Kurds have gone through a series of broken promises and betrayals since the 1970s. In 1970 a peace accord was reached between the Kurds and the Iraqi government. The Iraqi constitution was amended to acknowledge the Kurdish nationality within Iraq. The language and culture of the Kurds were recognized, but the status of the city of Kirkuk was left unresolved. When this accord failed in 1971, Mulla Mustafa Barzani, the leader of the Kurdistan Democratic Party, asked for aid from the United States through Iran. This Iranian support shortly ended, but in 1980 the Iran-Iraq War began and the Iranians looked to the Kurds for help against Saddam. After the failure in the early 1970s, another party, the Mam Jalal Talabani formed the Patriotic Union of Kurdistan because of disputes between the leaders of the KDP.

The Iran-Iraq War gave the Kurds another chance to push for autonomy, especially because they had support from Iran. However, the Kurdish support of the Iranians during the war proved fatal for the Kurds. Throughout the 1980s, Saddam unleashed a series of executions and campaigns against the Kurds that constituted as serious human rights violations. The most outstanding of these violations was the Anfal Campaign in which chemical warfare was used to kill thousands of Kurds.

In 1991 another opportunity arose for the Kurds. The United States started an international coalition against Iraq. To gain allies in the region, the US threw support behind the Kurds. However, when the Iraqi government surrenders to the US and the Kurds (with Shiites) lead a rebellion against the regime the US fails to support them and they are crushed. Under Saddam, thousands of Kurds are killed or displaced, many of them around the city of Kirkuk. Recognizing the importance and value of Kirkuk in terms of oil exportation and revenues, Saddam pushed or forced Kurds away from their land in Kirkuk.

After the Gulf War, the Kurdish Civil War broke between the differing Kurdish political parties. Although it was low intensity, it lasted for three years and ended with an American mediated agreement between the leaders of the two parties, Jalal Talabani (PUK) and Masoud Barzani (KDP). Most recently, the American invasion of Iraq in 2003 has presented yet another chance for the Kurds and they are taking full advantage of this.

Internal Conflicts

What has stopped the Kurds from creating an independent thus far? Some claim that it is mostly disunity among the Kurds. In 1975, the formation of the Patriotic Union of Kurdistan (PUK) caused conflicts with the long-standing Kurdistan Democratic Party (KDP). The Kurdish people are divided between the two political parties. The conflicts between the PUK and the KDP have greatly hindered Kurdish attempts for independence. Although, they have united once to form the Kurdistan Front, they still are separate political parties with separate political agendas. Because the Kurds have some autonomy, it is only natural for political factions to arise. Therefore, the Kurds are trapped in a contradictory loop. On one hand autonomy is a step towards independence, but still creates political divisions. On the other hand, independence is more possible if the Kurdish population unifies together under one political platform. The *peshmerga* also exacerbates the divisions. The *peshmerga* is the Kurdish military in Iraq that has been used by both the PUK and KDP as will be discussed later.

George Harris strongly argues that the internal and external conflicts among the Kurds are a great hindrance to the independence movement. It must be taken into account that his article was written in 1977 after the fall-out of Iranian and American support and before the Iran-Iraq War. At this point in time, Harris sees little to no prospect of an autonomous Kurdish region. Ironically, he predicts that the Kurds in Iraq will have minimal dissidence towards the Iraqi regime. Harris tells in detail what the Kurds have done in the three countries in which they have significant populations: Iraq, Iran and Turkey. He discusses the steps Kurds have taken to gain autonomy and independence and why they have failed. He talks about the battles they have already fought and the difficulties they have faced in their political and social movements.

Harris argues that the Kurds must overcome two major obstacles in order to have a greater impact in their movements. The obstacles are internal disunity and external opposition. Internally, the Kurds have differences within their ethnicity. Harris focuses more on the ethnic elements than the political elements of unification. The Kurds are not unified in language, cultural practices and religious behaviors which are all integral to their common sense of ethnicity. Also, the tribal structure of the Kurds at the time hindered unification as well. Harris also points out external factors that work against the Kurds, specifically Iran. Ultimately, he argues that the economic disparities and injustices that the Kurds experience will strengthen the sense of a unified ethnicity. The Kurdish leaders need to capitalize on the feeling of betrayal and inequality, and use it to unify the Kurdish people against the external powers that control and oppress them. However, Harris realizes that without external support, especially in the form of military aid, the Kurdish separation movement is unlikely to achieve its goals. This creates another contradiction for the Kurds to overcome.

American Involvement and the War in Iraq

As mentioned before, the United States has played an incredibly important role in the Kurdish conflict in Iraq since the 1970s. The United States has been an ally of convenience for the Kurds. This means that they have supported the Kurds either when the US needed an internal ally in Iraq or when it looked bad if they did not support them, especially because of the human rights violations that have occurred at the expense of the Kurds. Because the US is an ally of convenience to the Kurds, their support is superficial and filled with empty promises. For example, the American troops have fought alongside the *peshmerga* one day only to turn around and disarm them the next day. Unfortunately, as aforementioned, the Kurds do need the support of the Americans, especially because the US is so highly invested in the Middle East. There has been pressure on the UN and US to support and help the Kurds because of humanitarian concerns in the region. However, the US has eluded long-term aid and has fallen short on their promises to back up the Kurds.

Graham Fuller wrote his article in 1993, after the Gulf War and after the US backed out of supporting a Kurdish uprising against the Baathist Regime. Like Harris, Fuller makes the argument that the Kurds are not a united people. His article discusses how Kurds are seeking cultural and political autonomy and what regional conflicts they are causing because of this. Though the Kurdish population is not homogenous, the ethnic barriers that separate them are beginning to fall. Consequently the borders that separate them are also breaking down. The article explains how and why the countries housing the Kurds should allow for more federalism and acceptance. Without some kind of cooperation between the countries and the Kurds, turmoil will continue. One of Fuller’s first arguments about why the Kurds had not achieved independence was because it just was not convenient for the external powers. In the years after the Gulf War, the coalition against Saddam and his regime proved highly beneficial to the Kurds because it provided them an internationally recognized autonomous region. Fuller notes that external powers can no longer ignore the Iraqi Kurds and this is apparent because the Iraqi Kurds made deals with the Turkish government to protect borders and had support from the UN. Fuller seems to be optimistic about the outcomes and possible gains that Iraqi Kurds made. The article portrays the separate factions of the Kurdish government to be working together, but this article was written prior to the civil war between the PUK and the KDP. Once again, Fuller stresses that American and foreign involvement is needed for the Kurds to be able to push forward. The Kurds are dependent on support, but Fuller argues that the demand for support will increase more and more to a point where the Americans will not be able to deny the Kurds.

The Kurds in Iraq are especially important and prominent today because of the War in Iraq and the political changes that are going on in Iraq right now. In the original government that the Americans set up that consisted of a rotating presidency, Paul Bremer included both Talabani and Barzani as rotating presidents. The tides have changed in Iraq and the Kurds have been given the opportunity to play a significant role in the government. The invasion of Iraq by the US army opened doors for the Kurds by revealing their story and their tragedies to the world. The disposition of Saddam gave the Kurds a new sense of freedom but they needed and still need the Americans to firmly secure this freedom. Of course, they can no longer be ignored because of what the invasion has already given them.

Peter Galbraith is optimistic that the formation of an independent Kurdistan is on its way. Galbraith witnessed many of the atrocities that the Kurds have had to go through during their struggle. His article, written in 2005, presents a warning to the diplomats in Washington who have largely ignored the Kurdish situation. The Kurds proved that they were a strong force by putting forth a private referendum in order to gage how people feel about an independent Kurdistan. The KDP and PUK have also been pushing for a referendum to decide the status of Kirkuk. They want to put it up to a vote based on ethnicity. The Iraqi elections will prove positive for the Kurds, but they should not count their chickens. Galbraith wrote the article in 2005 when the Kurds were first starting to taste the freedom of true autonomy. Galbraith says that the US views the Kurds as they want to and because of this the US is unable to see that the Kurds pushing for a strong Iraq is just a means for them to have more power. The US makes the mistake of thinking that the Kurds truly want to be part of Iraq when they are just taking steps towards independence. A unified and equal Iraq means more power for the Kurds and because an independent Kurdistan is not a realistic option at this point in time, the Kurds will take whatever they can get. That being said, the gains the Kurds have made are greatly helping their cause. In addition, the Kurdish youth are also starting to get involved in the political processes, thus creating a legacy for the Kurdish independence movement.

Ethnic Conflict behind the Politics

Most of the authors argue that ethnicity does play a role in the conflict. However, the desires that the Kurdish leaders have are far different than those of the Kurdish people. Talabani and Barzani have both used ethnicity to further political goals. Both parties have used the *peshmerga* together against the Iraqi regime and alongside the Americans. However, during the brief civil war, the PUK and the KDP used their military against each other. The status of Kirkuk is the most debated issue. Ethnically, the city is an amalgam of Turkomans, Arabs, and mostly Kurds. Kurds claim ethnic rights to the land in Kirkuk. However, the city is so highly contested because of the vast amounts of oil that exist there.

Looking at external factors, when the Iraqi Kurds are supported by external states it is always because those states required some sort of internal force within Iraq that would fight against the regime. The alliances were military and political alliances, not based on a desire to support a discriminated ethnicity. Similarly, when the Iraqi Kurds are targeted it is not only because of their different ethnicity but also because the land they possess is highly valuable. For example, the Anfal campaign was targeted specifically at the Kurds during the Iran-Iraq War. Saddam implemented a series of attacks on Kurdish villages. “Chemical Ali” used biological warfare to exterminate thousands of Kurds. These tactics were used not only because the Kurds were a different ethnicity but also because the land they possessed was very valuable to the regime and to Iraq.

Quil Lawrence has definitely been emotionally captured by the Kurdish cause in Iraq. Invisible Nation is written much like Imperial Life in the Emerald City by Rajiv Chandrasekaran. There are many first-hand accounts of the situation and it is apparent that Lawrence is biased in favor of the Kurdish separation movement. Like the other authors, Lawrence recognizes the ignorance of the US as a partial cause of Kurdish failures. In the book, which was published in 2008, Lawrence describes the failures of both the Kurds and the US in supporting Kurdish endeavors. The US was aware of the humanitarian violations that were occurring during the Iran-Iraq war, but supporting the Kurds was only convenient when the violations were made apparent to the rest of the world. Once again, the Kurds find themselves depending on American policy to further their goals. Predictions said that if the Americans pulled out of the war prematurely, before Iraqi security forces could maintain order, then a civil would break out. Then the gains that the Kurds made during the occupation would be severely risked and possibly destroyed. Lawrence is incredibly wary of trusting the Americans again and believes that it would be unwise for the Kurdish leaders to invest their hopes on the US. He says they need to look for support in other areas if they want to be able to secure their power. Lawrence is also well aware that the dream that the Kurds have of an independent state could easily turn sour. An independent state would mean the direct involvement of Syria, Iran, Iraq, and Turkey in creating boundary lines. The kinds of conflicts that would arise would definitely create more chaos before anything is settled.

In terms of benefits and costs of an independent Kurdistan, the costs, or possible problems, may outweigh the benefits. Firstly, being an independent state would allow the surrounding countries to oppose the Kurds without seeming like they are targeting an ethnic group within their nation. Protection would be less guaranteed and Kirkuk would be even more of an unresolved issue. Secondly, alliances would be much more difficult for the Kurds. The United States would probably assume the battle to be over if the Kurds have an independent state. Lastly, internal factions within the Kurdish population will be further exacerbated as they form a new government and fight for power. Kurdistan would incorporate Turkish, Iranian, Iraqi, and Syrian Kurds creating an even more volatile amalgam of factions and divisions. However, Kurdish independence must be followed by continued aid from external powers.

Autonomy to Independence?

For the time being, the Kurds essentially run themselves. The Kurdish Regional Government carries out governing functions in Kirkuk and Baghdad law does not necessarily apply. Kurds have effective control of Kirkuk. However, some problems with autonomy do come up. For example, the Kurds are completely landlocked so if they wanted to take oil out of Iraq they have to go through either Baghdad or Turkey. At the same time, Baghdad does need to cooperate with the Kurds in order to reap some of the benefits from oil exportation from Kirkuk. This mutual cooperation is especially important during a financial crisis.

Joost Hiltermann keeps an updated blog on the situation with the Kurds in Iraq. One of his more recent posts was written right after the most recent elections in March 2010. These elections are crucial for the Kurds in order to have a greater stake in what happens to Kirkuk. He also brings up the internal divisions among the Kurds between the PUK and the KDP. Overall, he had a pessimistic view towards the outcome of the recent Iraqi elections saying that the other populations in Kirkuk, like Arabs and Turkomans, will pose obstacles to the Kurdish goals. Hiltermann argues that it is too early to determine how much power each of the parties has, especially because predictions cannot be made assuming that each ethnicity is going to vote for their respective party. He realizes the importance of the election, however, in terms of determining the status of Kirkuk.

Ultimately, the Kurdish people would rather be Kurdish than Iraqi. The Kurdish people will no longer stand for being part of country they did not want to be part of in the first place. This proves that underneath it all the Kurdish conflict is founded on an ethnic argument. However, it has become far more than just an ethnic conflict. Essentially, ethnic diversity is being used as a tool for the Kurdish leaders to obtain power in Iraq. At the same time, they are fighting for the rights of the Kurdish people. Perhaps, it is an issue of identity and ethnicity for the Kurdish people, but for the leaders of the Kurdish cause it has become more of a power conflict and struggle. This is apparent because of the corruption that exists within the KDP and the PUK. The same goes for the countries allying with the Kurds. Of course, because the conflict has ethnic elements the volatility of the situation increases every day. The Kurds may not be successful as of now, but the attention they have received will definitely benefit them in the future.

All in all, the situation of the Kurds seems to be heading towards independence. The level of autonomy they have now in Iraq is unprecedented. All of the above authors recognize that the Kurds have been long ignored, but now is their time to make gains. The outcome of the Kurdish separation movement will cause a tremendous change in the Middle East. Although it is not an issue that the Middle Eastern nations have to face in the coming days, it is definitely something they must think about in the coming years, especially now that the Kurds have so much power in Iraq. It all comes down to the ability of the Kurdish people to unite and maintain the control that they already have.