

**ASSESSING UNITED STATES
POLICY IN IRAQ: THE
KURDISH DILEMMA**

BY

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USAWC STRATEGY RESEARCH PROJECT

ASSESSING UNITED STATES POLICY IN IRAQ: THE KURDISH DILEMMA

by

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ABSTRACT

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ASSESSING UNITED STATES POLICY IN IRAQ: THE KURDISH DILEMMA

Background

The Kurdish people are a distinct ethnic group within the greater Middle East that speak an Indo-European based language. The Kurds live predominantly in four countries of immense strategic importance to the United States. These are Turkey, Iran, Syria, and Iraq and in each case they represent sizable ethnic minorities. As author David MacDowell explained, "... the Kurds inhabit a marginal zone between the power centres of the Mesopotamian plains and the Iranian and Anatolian plateaux."¹ Through history, this geographic location, locked in the mountains between the great Arab, Persian, and Ottoman empires, has explained the difficulty of their struggle for a national identity. In his book *A Modern History of the Kurds*, MacDowall describes the Kurds as, "...marginalized geographically, politically and economically."² Since the end of World War I and the collapse of the Ottoman Empire, the Kurds have sought national sovereignty and, "...with an estimated population of 25 to 28 million people are arguably the largest nation in the world without its own independent state."³ Today, approximately four and half million Kurds live in the northern provinces of Iraq.⁴ Although relatively unexplored in the Western press leading up to the 2003 intervention in Iraq, the United States has had a fitful relationship with the Kurds for decades.

Modern US involvement with the Kurds can be traced to the early 1970s, when the United States, led by President Nixon, and in collusion with the Shah of Iran, supported a Kurdish insurgency in Iraq as a side stage of the Cold War with the Soviet Union. When the Shah reached a surprise agreement with Iraqi leaders and the United States subsequently cut off aid in 1975, the abandoned Kurdish forces, led by Mustafa

Barzani, and innocent Kurdish civilians alike were brutalized by the Iraqi Army. In a 1992 article in the *Atlantic* monthly, author Laurie Mylroie describes the Kurdish plight and quotes their leader as saying, "“Our movement and people are being destroyed in an unbelievable way," Mustafa Barzani wrote to Secretary of State Henry Kissinger, pleading for help. Kissinger did not deign to reply. Explaining in secret testimony why the United States abandoned the Kurds, Kissinger offered this pithy profile in cynicism: "Covert action should not be confused with missionary work."⁵

Post-Cold War involvement in Iraqi Kurdistan continued with President George H. W. Bush’s encouragement of the Iraqi people to rise up in revolt against Saddam Hussein following the Iraqi Army’s 1991 defeat during Operation Desert Storm. Believing, falsely as it turned out, that the American president would back rhetoric of freedom with American force, the Kurds in the North, along with the predominantly Shi’a in the South, rose up in revolt against Saddam.⁶ Saddam and the Baath party apparatus violently crushed these revolts with their Republican Guard units as these units escaped from Kuwait, first in southern Iraq against the Shi’a, and then in the northern Iraq against the Kurds, committing brutal acts of reprisals in each case. As Kurdish refugees fled into the snow packed mountains of northern Iraq and southern Turkey to escape Saddam’s revenge, a humanitarian crisis developed which forced the UN and the West to take action. The United States and Great Britain, under UN Security Council Resolution 688, launched Operation Provide Comfort to provide humanitarian assistance and established a northern no-fly zone in Iraq. The operation’s purpose was to provide humanitarian relief while also enforcing the security of the Iraqi Kurdish refugees and the overall relief effort.⁷ In so doing, President Bush and the

United States became the 'accidental liberator of Kurdistan'.⁸ Between 1991 and the operation's end in 1996, United States and British aircrews flew over 42,000 sorties over northern Iraq.⁹

Throughout the remainder of the 1990s and through 2003, the United States continued to suppress the activities of the Iraqi military forces with Operation Northern Watch, flying over 36, 000 sorties.¹⁰ Simultaneously, US policy continued to encourage, if not collude, with Kurdish resistance leaders. As author, Quil Lawrence explains in his book *Invisible Nation*, "The Kurdish safe haven was supposed to serve Washington's Iraq containment strategy, a launching pad for the harassment of Saddam Hussein. But there was an unintended consequence: one of the most successful nation-building projects in American history. The Kurds held elections, set up their own social services, and started educating their children in Kurdish, not Arabic."¹¹ In fact, many younger Iraqi Kurds born since the mid 1990s do not speak Arabic at all.¹² In many ways then, Iraqi Kurdistan was born as a seed from Kissinger's foreign policy from the 1970s; but one that flourished during the last decade of the twentieth century by the strange convergence of continued American covert action against a new nemesis, Saddam Hussein, and a commitment this time to see through the "missionary" work.

In the run up to the 2003 US-led invasion of Iraq, Kurdish military forces (Peshmerga) continued to provide the United States with useful intelligence on Iraqi troop locations and movements. During the opening stages of Operation Iraqi Freedom, Kurdish forces assisted US Special Operation teams in northern Iraq to secure airfields where US airborne and mechanized units air-landed Coalition forces that established a northern front. With the removal of Saddam Hussein and the subsequent destruction of

the Iraqi Baath party control over Iraq, Lawrence argues that President George W. Bush completed the work of his father and consequently, "...America has played midwife to a Kurdish homeland that cannot be unmade...".¹³ Therefore, it is ironic but by no means an accident that, in the wake of the collapse of the Baath regime, the Kurdish region, which had been the scene of so much violence and so many atrocities under Saddam, quickly emerged as the only fully functioning part of the country.¹⁴

In the civic chaos which emerged following the regime change and which was exacerbated by the Coalition Provisional Authority, Iraqi Kurds quickly exploited the absence of a strong central Iraqi government. As author W. Andrew Terrill explains in his 2008 study, *Regional Spillover Effects of the Iraq War*, "Since 2003, Iraqi Kurds have been able to pursue a remarkably effective policy of maximizing their influence in the Baghdad central government while still making significant strides towards bypassing the authority of the national government in the Kurdish areas."¹⁵ Terrill explains how the Kurdish Regional Government (KRG) quickly began to perform many functions of a state authority such as negotiating business agreements, issuing visas, and maintaining an army with minimal ties to the fledgling Iraqi Army.¹⁶

Since the fall of the Baath Regime, US foreign policy towards Iraq with regard to Iraqi Kurdistan has walked a narrow path. The United States quickly established formal diplomatic relations with Iraq, first with the Interim Iraqi government and then later with the properly-elected Iraqi government, while also maintaining a unique and separate relationship with the KRG. The United States has sought to maintain this diplomatic triangle in Iraq while also avoiding any overtures that could give the appearance of US support to Kurdish aspirations for national sovereignty. During his March 2008 visit to

Irbil (Iraqi Kurdistan's seat of government) with the KRG's President Massoud Barzani, Vice-President Cheney characterized the exceptional nature of US-Kurdish relations. Mr. Cheney stated that, "Provide Comfort was an extraordinary mission that led to the establishment of the American "no fly zone" over northern Iraq. It also led to the establishment of a very special friendship between the United States and the people of Iraqi Kurdistan."¹⁷ More recently, President Bush formally received President Barzani in the Oval Office in October 2008; Barzani's second such visit to the White House in the last three years. In a *Wall Street Journal* opinion editorial in November 2008, President Barzani stated that, "Iraq's Kurds have consistently been America's closest allies in Iraq. Our Peshmerga forces fought alongside the U.S. military to liberate the country, suffering more casualties than any other U.S. ally."¹⁸ Therefore, while not formally recognizing the Kurdish Regional Government as a sovereign state, the United States clearly interacts with Iraqi Kurdistan differently than any other sub-state political entity in Iraq.

US-Iraq Policy Perspectives

The basis for the present US policy in Iraq can be clearly traced to the March 2006 *National Security Strategy* which states, "It is the policy of the United States to seek and support democratic movements and institutions in every nation and culture, with the ultimate goal of ending tyranny in our world....The goal of our statecraft is to help create a world of democratic, well-governed states that can meet the needs of their citizens and conduct themselves responsibly in the international system."¹⁹ In the opening statements of the strategy, President Bush elaborated, stating that the US national security strategy rests on two pillars; promoting core US values on one hand;

and confronting global security challenges with a US-led community of democracies on the other.²⁰ Subsequently, the US National Security Council's *Iraq Strategy Review* in January 2007 expanded President Bush's theme, stating that, "Our (US) strategic goal in Iraq remains the same: A unified democratic federal Iraq that can govern itself, defend itself, and sustain itself, and is an ally in the War on Terror."²¹

Policy Assessment

This manifestation of US policy with regard to Iraq fails to underscore how such an Iraq fits into the broader context of US security interests in the region. Iraq is strategically important to the United States for two major reasons: geostrategic location and natural resources. First, Iraq lays at the heart of the Middle East, adjacent to both Iran and Syria, states that the United States views as state sponsors and exporters of terrorism. A stable, secure and pro-US Iraq serves as a buffer between Iran and both Israel and Saudi Arabia, key US allies threatened by potential Iranian hegemony in the Middle East. A partitioned and weakened Iraq would fail properly to balance Iran or Syria and could potentially invite regional expansion. Additionally, the possibility of a continued US presence in Iraq beyond the timetable currently established in the US-Iraq Status of Forces Agreement (SOFA) would enable US strategic deterrence of either Iran or Syria. Thus, the US strategic goal in the 2007 *Iraq Strategy Review* purposefully emphasizes a "unified" Iraq. Current US policy clearly assumes, perhaps falsely, that a unified and democratic Iraq will in the future participate in the US-led community of democracies in continuing the War on Terror described by President Bush in the 2006 *National Security Strategy*. Left unstated but of additional benefit, Iraq may serve US policy as an example of how a US-led community of democracies can transform pariah

states into responsible members of the international community, a powerful message to Iran, Syria and even Saudi Arabia. In *The Pentagon's New Map*, author Thomas Barnett refers to the effects unleashed by Operation Iraqi Freedom as the Big Bang Theory, which could potentially lead to a series of societal changes throughout the Muslim world.²² However, many Middle East experts remain unconvinced that such an assertion would be realized.

Secondly, Iraq is a major source of oil, a resource to which US access will remain vital into the foreseeable future. "According to the *Oil and Gas Journal*, Iraq's proven oil reserves are 115 billion barrels, although these statistics have not been revised since 2001 and are largely based on 2-D (dimensional) seismic data from nearly three decades ago."²³ Additionally, "Geologists and consultants have estimated that relatively unexplored territory in the western and southern deserts (of Iraq) may contain an estimated additional 45 to 100 billion barrels (bbls) of recoverable oil."²⁴ Lastly, Iraq has the lowest ratio between known reserves and production of the major oil-producing countries.²⁵ Consequently, a stable and pro-US Iraq ensures that the US economy and the global economy would continue to have access to a critical resource.

Therefore, in the broader context of US security interests in the Middle East, Iraq remains strategically important to the United States for two major reasons: geostrategic location and natural resources. Consequently, implicit to the 2007 *Iraq Strategy Review* goal of "A unified democratic federal Iraq that can govern itself, defend itself, and sustain itself, and is an ally in the War on Terror" is a US national interest in 1) a continuing US military interest or presence in Iraq, particularly with regard to intelligence

collection focused on Iran and Syria, and 2) an uninterrupted flow of oil and gas to the US and its allies.

Any degree of Kurdish national sovereignty could come at the detriment of a unified, democratic, and pro-US Iraq that acts as a counter to Iran. The vision of Kurdish sovereignty also threatens the internal security of Iraq's neighbors such as, Turkey, Iran and Syria due to their own Kurdish and other ethnic minorities. Internal to Iraq, major issues such as the resolution of disputed territories like Kirkuk and natural resource (hydrocarbon) control remain extremely contentious political issues. These issues will factor prominently in upcoming Iraqi national in 2009 and have the real potential to escalate into Kurdish-Arab violence. Therefore, the United States walks a fine line in Iraq between maintaining state-to-state relations and a real or perceived commitment to Kurdish interests outside the framework of a unified Iraq. In many ways the Iraqi Kurds, and consequently US policy with regard to them, hold the key to either regional peace or regional instability.

Towards the Future

For the new American administration, there are two basic conceptual frameworks from which to approach US relations with Iraq and the question of Kurdish autonomy. First, the United States could continue to nurture a long-term strategic relationship with Iraq while also attempting to maintain its special relationship with the Kurds. Adoption of this approach emphasizes the strategic importance of the state of Iraq but acknowledges that interests and circumstances have established over time a US-Kurdish relationship, a relationship that has been and remains mutually beneficial. Secondly, the United States could continue to nurture a long-term strategic relationship

with Iraq while discontinuing the special relationship with Iraqi Kurdistan in order to focus exclusively on state relations with the Iraqi government in Baghdad. Adoption of this approach still emphasizes the strategic importance of Iraq but views continuing the US-Kurdish relationship in the future as a political liability. While an examination of each conceptual framework will reveal supporting argument, strategy and policy formulation is a dynamic process and events in the Middle East and in Iraq itself will seek to influence US policy options and may even force the United States into one option over the other.

Under the first conceptual framework, the United States would continue to pursue a long-term strategic relationship with Iraq while also seeking to maintain the previously established special relationship with the Kurds. US policy would emphasize that there is a singular, unified, and sovereign Iraq of which Iraqi Kurdistan is a part. As President Barzani emphasized to the US public in his November 2008 opinion editorial in the *Wall Street Journal*, the Kurds have consistently been America's closest allies in Iraq even well before Operation Iraqi Freedom.²⁶ The US-Kurdish relationship has proven itself enormously beneficial to the United States. Consistently, the relationship gave the US policy objectives leverage within Iraq; containing Saddam Hussein throughout the 1990s; defeating Iraqi forces in 2003; establishing an interim Iraqi Government in 2004; supporting fledgling democratic institutions since 2005; and working to hold the country of Iraq together during the turbulent Sunni-Shi'a civil war of 2006-2007.

As Quil Lawrence points out, the Kurdish homeland and political entity that has evolved in Iraq cannot be undone.²⁷ Any attempt to weaken the existing autonomy of the Kurdish Regional Government would be unacceptable to Kurdish leaders and could

threaten their support for Iraqi unity; therefore, the United States should support and encourage a federal solution within the context of a unified and democratic Iraq. Such a federal solution may already exist in the Biden-Gelb plan which seeks, "...to maintain a united Iraq by decentralizing it, giving each ethno-religious group -- Kurd, Sunni Arab and Shiite Arab -- room to run its own affairs, while leaving the central government in charge of common interests."²⁸ The Biden-Gelb plan or similar federal models may indeed gain substantial traction in a new American administration with Senator Biden as Vice-President. Working within such a federal solution, the United States would promote the peaceful resolution of the internal issues of Iraq such as natural resources (hydrocarbons) and the disputed areas such as Kirkuk. This conceptual framework views Iraq as a singular federal entity but accommodates the maintenance of a unique relationship between the United States and Iraqi Kurdistan. In many ways, this relationship may prove to be similar to the situation in China with Taiwan, where US national interests support both state and state-like relations with the two and it promotes peaceful mutual interests.

However, the United States must seek to avoid support of any Kurdish state autonomy outside the context of an Iraqi federation. Such US support, whether tacit or overt, could destabilize both Iraq and the region. Instead, the United States should consistently and aggressively engage Iraq's neighbors with strategic communications and diplomacy that place Kurdish autonomy within a federal Iraq. As author, Brendan O'Leary points out in a March 2007 article entitled *Iraq's Future 101: The Failings of the Baker-Hamilton Report*, "A U.S engagement with Turkey, which emphasized Turkey's interests in a stable Kurdistan inside a stable federal Iraq, and which reassured Turkey

that the Turkomen would be treated fairly is what is patently required."²⁹ Similar logic applies to both Syria and Iran due to their sizable Kurdish populations. In an interview with *National Public Radio*, author and former US ambassador to Croatia, Peter Galbraith echoed this point further by stating that, "With regard to the Kurds, actually there's been a change in attitude on the part of Turkey," Galbraith says. "There was a time when they thought the idea of an independent Kurdistan was an almost existential threat to Turkey. But increasingly, Turks recognize, first, that this is an accomplished fact — it's already happened; and second, that there are opportunities — after all, they share in common that they're secular, they're pro-Western, and, like the Turks, they aspire to be democratic and they're not Arabs."³⁰ Additionally, a stable Kurdish political entity in northern Iraq would also insulate Turkey from potential radical influences of radical Islamists extremists emanating from the Arab portions of Iraq.³¹

In support of this policy approach, the United States should continue the drawdown of US troop levels in accordance with the US-Iraq SOFA. However, as US combat elements depart Iraq's urban areas by June 2009, the United States should purposely consolidate into major bases located within each of Iraq's major factional regions: the Kurdish north, the Arab-Sunni west and the Arab-Shi'a central-south. A major US presence in Irbil in Iraqi Kurdistan would reassure the Kurds of continued US long-term political support. Within the new American administration, this policy seems to have a clear advocate in Secretary of State Hillary Clinton. During her unsuccessful bid for the Democratic nomination for US president, then-Senator Clinton told the *New York Times* that she foresaw a, "...remaining military as well as political mission" in Iraq, and says that if elected president, she would keep a reduced military force there to fight

Al Qaeda, deter Iranian aggression, protect the Kurds and possibly support the Iraqi military.”³² Lastly, the United States should plan to provide economic and military assistance to the central government in Baghdad while also encouraging direct private sector investments in both Iraq and directly in Iraqi Kurdistan to move both parties towards a federal democracy. Furthermore, critical to any approach is the use of public diplomacy to shape public perception of US aspirations in the region. This One-Iraq Policy would continue to build on the security improvements and internal Iraqi political progress in trust enabled by the recently concluded US surge and associated policies.

An Alternative Approach

Within a different conceptual framework, the United States could continue to nurture its long-term strategic relationship with Iraq. However, it would discontinue its special relationship with Iraqi Kurdistan in order to focus exclusively on state relations with the Iraqi government in Baghdad. This approach takes the position that the US-Kurdish relationship is one that has become or threatens to become a political liability. Since the United States does not maintain overt and direct political ties with other provincial level governments within Iraq, it should not do so with Iraqi Kurdistan. The perception of Iraqi Kurdistan’s exceptionalism within Iraq combined with a US emphasis on seeking an Iraqi federal solution on their behalf creates mistrust inside Iraq.

The central government in Baghdad and leaders in Iraqi Arab provinces view with suspicion Kurdish aspirations and moves towards further autonomy. The special relationship that has formed over time between the United States and the Kurds plays on these suspicions and may be counter-productive to the establishment of a strong central democratic government institution. Professor Carole A. O’Leary from the

American University's School of International Service and Center for Global Peace testified before the US Senate Committee on Foreign Relations in April 2008 that, "The longstanding and robust Kurdish support for regional and economic federalism has obfuscated the issue for Arab Iraqis, as well as served to "turn them off" (as the Kurdish embrace of federalism created a visceral Iraqi Arab reaction and rejection of the concept.)"³³ Due to these very real Arab-Iraqi concerns, Professor O'Leary explained that, "Conflation of the terms partition and federalism on our (US) side is not only erroneous but dangerous, as it contributes to an environment of confusion and mistrust on the part of the Iraqi body politic." O'Leary further suggests that what is needed in Iraq, is, "Rather, an education campaign ... to debunk the idea that —federalism for Iraq is a conspiracy by the US aimed at dividing Iraq and stealing its oil."³⁴ Unilateral US plans for Iraq such as Biden-Gelb that forcefully seek to impose a federal system on Iraq reinforce existing fears and give the impression US-Kurdish collusion. Therefore, a Baghdad-exclusive approach in Iraq, coupled with curtailment of the US-Kurdish relationship, would be received favorably by Iraqi Sunni and Shi'a interest groups and may lead to an increase in Arab public perception of US long-term interests in Iraq.

Direct US-Kurdish political relations also play on Syrian, Iranian, and Turkish concerns and therefore color all US relations, current or potential, with them. For decades, Turkey and Iran have dealt with internal security challenges arising from domestic terrorism by Kurdish separatist movements, the Kurdistan Worker's Party (PKK) and the Kurdistan Free Life Party (PJAK), respectively, both whom are Kurdish insurgent groups that use the mountainous area of northern Iraq as a safe haven from which to launch attacks into Turkey and Iran respectively.³⁵ A US approach to Iraq that

appeared more Baghdad-exclusive would be better received in Istanbul where Turkish fears of Kurdish sovereignty are strong. In a 2007 article in *Foreign Policy*, former US ambassador to Turkey, Morton Abramowitz writes, “The mostly autonomous Kurdish entity next door is the threat to Turkey’s territorial integrity that its leaders long feared—potentially deepening Kurdish nationalism among its 12 to 15 million-strong Kurdish minority.”³⁶ As author W. Andrew Terrill points out, “Turkey is clearly deeply concerned about the prospect of an independent Kurdish state which would gain allies and diplomatic clout through the export of significant amounts of oil.”³⁷ As an example of the regional spillover of the current US-Iraqi-Kurdish triangular dilemma, Abramowitz points to the overall failure to deal effectively with the PKK, which has harmed the public perception of the United States in Turkey. “U.S. inaction has turned the Turkish public against the United States—just 9 percent of Turks have favorable views of the United States, according to the latest Pew Global Attitudes survey.”³⁸

With regard to Iran, an Amnesty International report states, “An estimated 12 million Kurds live in Iran, between 15-17 per cent of the (Iranian) population.”³⁹ The report points to the political, social and economic success of Iraqi Kurdistan as having, “...reinforced longstanding fears among Iran’s leaders that minority communities bordering the same ethnic group in a neighbouring country may want to secede from Iran.”⁴⁰ Therefore, in context of the US-Iraq SOFA, a US base in Iraqi Kurdistan could potentially reassure Turkey and Iran of US obligations to place checks on any Kurdish support, tacit or overt, of the PKK or PJAK.

The perceived loser under this second US conceptual framework would be the people of Iraqi Kurdistan who would feel abandoned, or even potentially betrayed by the

United States. Iraqi Arab groups, both Sunni and Shi'a, would favorably receive such an approach seeing it as a rejection of the notion of partition. This scenario, with winners and losers, risks a hardening of relations and political rhetoric between Irbil and Baghdad with the potential for an escalation of violence over the contentious issues of control of the city of Kirkuk and hydrocarbon control.

An Uncertain Future

A third conceptual framework from which to approach US policy in Iraq could potentially exist as a branch or failure option to either of the approaches discussed above. This realist approach would recognize the growing divide between Iraqi Kurdistan and the concept of a unified Iraq as insurmountable. In an interview on *National Public Radio*, Ambassador Galbraith pointed out that the major ethnic factions in Iraq have already started taking on clear and distinct roles. "We have, in the north Kurdistan, which is, in all regards, an independent country, with its own army and its own government. And now between the Shiites and the Sunnis there are two separate armies — there's a Shiite army — it's the Iraqi army, but it's dominated by the Shiites — and in the Sunni areas there's now the Awakening — a 100,000-man strong militia."⁴¹ The specter of Arab-Kurdish violence, particularly over Kirkuk and its oil resources, remains a very real possibility. To understand the centrality of Kirkuk's importance, author W. Andrew Terrill explains that, "Virtually all Iraqi Kurds consider Kirkuk to be their "Jerusalem" and state that its inclusion into the Kurdistan region is an issue upon which they will not compromise."⁴² As recent as late January 2009, tempers flared when, in advance of Iraqi provincial elections, the Iraqi Army's 12th Division moved from their bases to towns around the city of Kirkuk and into close proximity to Kurdish military

forces (Peshmerga). In an email to the Associated Press, the KRG's Prime Minister Nechirvan Barzani stated that the Kurdish Government considered the Iraqi Army deployment a provocative act.⁴³ Therefore, in the event that Iraq began to dissolve, whether peacefully or violently, the United States would be hard pressed to remain neutral.

Conclusion

The Kurdish people are a distinct ethnic group within the greater Middle East who predominantly live in four countries of immense strategic importance, those being Turkey, Iran, Syria, and Iraq. The impact of circumstances and US foreign policy in Iraq since at least the early 1970s has given rise to what has become Iraqi Kurdistan. Subsequently, Iraqi Kurdistan has come to represent the reality of a Kurdish homeland to the four and half million Kurds that live in Iraq and also the promise of hope to the remaining twenty-one to twenty four million Kurds scattered throughout the Middle East, Europe and the Americas. Iraqi Kurdistan and the KRG is a truly a genie that cannot be put back in the bottle. Despite the legitimate concerns of neighboring countries, future US foreign policy must deal with an Iraq as it is now and not as how Turkey and others would choose it to be. As Ambassador Abramowitz points out, "At some point, Turkey must decide how to deal with Iraqi Kurdistan other than to ignore its political existence. More importantly, the Turks will finally have to deal with their own Kurdish dilemma."⁴⁴

As stated within the US National Security Council's *Iraq Strategy Review*, "Our (US) strategic goal in Iraq remains the same: A unified democratic federal Iraq that can govern itself, defend itself, and sustain itself, and is an ally in the War on Terror."⁴⁵ However, this policy objective fails to underscore how such an Iraq fits into the broader

context of US security interests in the region. Iraq is strategically important to the United States for two major reasons: geostrategic location and natural resources. Iraq lies adjacent to both Iran and Syria, two states that the US views as state sponsors and exporters of terrorism. Therefore, a stable and pro-US Iraq serves as a buffer between Iran and both Israel and Saudi Arabia, key US allies threatened by potential Iranian hegemony in the Middle East. Additionally, continued US presence in Iraq enables US strategic deterrence towards either Iran or Syria. Secondly, Iraq is a major source of oil, a resource to which United States access will remain vital into the foreseeable future. Consequently, a stable and pro-US Iraq ensures that the US economy and the global economy would continue to have access to a critical resource.

The United States Government conceptual frameworks from which to approach US relations with Iraq and the question of Kurdish autonomy should follow a One Iraq Policy. The aim of this policy is to nurture a long-term strategic relationship with Iraq while also maintaining its special relationship with the Kurds. The risks are that 1) the PKK and the PJAK continue to operate from Iraqi Kurdistan and the United States is forced to take direct action against them to prevent either Turkey or Iran from doing so, 2) failure to resolve the issues of federal powers, Kirkuk, or hydrocarbon sharing could result in an Iraq, divided along ethno-sectarian lines, sliding back into potential open violence, or worse, civil war between Kurds and Arabs. However, adoption of this approach emphasizes the strategic importance of the state of Iraq but acknowledges that interests and circumstances have established over time a US-Kurdish relationship, a relationship that has been and remains mutually beneficial. It recognizes that the Kurds have been the US's staunchest ally in Iraq and earned our continuing support

despite concerns in Istanbul, Tehran or even Baghdad. As Quil Lawrence points out, "...the ramifications of throwing away America's most natural ally in the region may be far greater..."⁴⁶

Endnotes

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