The Kurds and the Destiny of the Middle East

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DRU-188-RC
February 1993

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PREFACE

This paper seeks to place the current Kurdish problem in the broader context of regional relations and geopolitics in the Middle East and to discuss its implications for the U.S.

The research and writing of this paper was made possible by support from RAND’s own research funds granted to the author through RAND’s National Security Research Division. It will appear shortly in an outside journal in slightly more condensed form.
The dilemma of the Kurds in the Middle East can be put off no longer; it has now placed itself high on the agenda of Middle East policy. For the first time in modern history, control over the Kurdish problem has slipped out of the grasp of all regional parties as Kurdish politics has taken on a momentum of its own. The Kurds, the fourth biggest nationality in the Middle East, are now banging on the door of national recognition and self-determination—with the most serious of consequences for the states in which they live. But the impact of the new Kurdish political momentum does not stop there. It has brought a host of post-Cold War issues to the doorstep of the Middle East as a whole: the challenge of breakaway ethnic movements, human rights, treatment of minorities, democracy, cultural autonomy, federalism, and possibly even the creation of new states out of the territorial unity of the old. The Middle East is not likely to be the same again.

The Kurds had largely slipped off the pages of history over the past fifty years: their national aspirations were long suppressed both by European imperial powers, and later by the imperative of modern Middle Eastern states to preserve their own power and territorial integrity. To be sure, various Kurdish guerrilla forces regularly served the purposes of external powers as a handy tool by which to weaken local regimes. The British helped foment trouble in Turkish Kurdistan in the 1920s; the Americans and the Israelis supported the Kurds against the Iraqi Ba'th regime in the 1970s; the Syrians have periodically assisted radical Turkish Kurds against Ankara. Iran—both the Shah and the Ayatollahs—enlisted the Iraqi Kurds in Tehran's geopolitical struggle against Baghdad. And Baghdad in turn has regularly supported the Iranian Kurds against the Islamic Republic. Nearly invariably, however, once the Kurds no longer served the immediate political goals of the external powers, they have been abandoned, left to fend for themselves against the wrath and often brutal reprisals of the state in which they live—and rebel. Is the current international Operation Provide Comfort—that protects a Kurdish safety zone in northern Iraq—just another replay of the old scenario of squeezing the Kurdish lemon for tactical goals and then throwing it
away? Or perhaps this time have the events of the Gulf War unleashed a more permanent but unintended Kurdish dynamic?

The idea of an independent Kurdish state has only once been seriously entertained in modern times. The Kurds are an ancient people in the Middle East who had been divided for centuries between Persian and Ottoman Turkish Empires. Only with the collapse of the Ottoman Empire at the end of World War I—and the international flush of enthusiasm for self-determination of nations at the Versailles Peace Conference—did the Kurds get onto the international agenda. They were in fact promised their own state in the Treaty of Sevres in 1920, which officially carved up the remnants of the Ottoman state. Mustafa Kemal Ataturk turned that treaty into a dead letter when he fought back under a resuscitated Turkish force to establish a new modern Turkish state with new borders in the early 1920s. From that point on the Kurds lost hope of further international support and found themselves divided up among not two but three regional states—Turkey, Iraq, and Iran—with much smaller communities left in Syria and the USSR. Although the Kurds taken together today number over twenty million people\(^1\)—larger than the population of Norway, Sweden, and Finland combined—the concept of an independent Kurdish state of any kind has not been internationally acceptable.

It is not the purpose of this article to make the case for creation of an independent Kurdish state. Indeed, from the standpoint of international stability, the creation of any kind of independent Kurdish state is basically undesirable because of the geopolitical havoc it will wreak upon the region. Nor is the case for Kurdish nationhood to be made by outsiders, but by the Kurds themselves. The dynamic of the Kurdish situation today, however, does suggest that the emergence of some kind of a Kurdish state somewhere may eventually impose itself upon the international order, simply because the process of preventing may

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\(^1\)Population statistics for the Kurds vary, due to the political sensitivity of their numbers in each state. In a conservative estimate, according to 1987 figures, the combined Kurdish population across five states was 19.7 million: Turkey 9.6, Iran 5.0, Iraq 3.9, Syria 0.9, and USSR 0.3. See David McDowall, "The Kurdish Question" in The Kurds, Philip G. Kreyenbroek and Stefan Sperl, eds., Routledge, NY 1992, p.32.
end up being even more unpalatable than accepting it. This article proposes to examine that dynamic and its implications.

Why do the Kurds seek self-determination? The question perhaps is why have they not succeeded in doing so before. As a large ethnic group, they have had a vivid sense over a long period of time of their own Kurdishness, language, and society as distinct from their Arab, Turkish and Persian neighbors. Yet their own ethnic and cultural aspirations (now called rights) have long been systematically ignored, denied or suppressed within the modern state systems in which they live; perhaps only the creation of their own state will ultimately enable the Kurds to fully express and fulfill their own ethnic aspirations. The question posed is difficult for the world to answer: why indeed should the Kurds be denied the right to nationhood that is granted to so many smaller nationalities, including today the Slovenians, Kyrgyz, Georgians, Latvians, Macedonians, Eritreans, etc?

Perhaps an even more pertinent question emerges: Why have the Kurds, with their own distinct culture and ethnicity, been excluded from the ranks of separate nationhood so consistently? First, because it has not been convenient. The international system characteristically does not welcome the breakup of existing states and the resulting turmoil and violence, such as we now witness in the former states of the USSR and Yugoslavia. But the problem lies in part with character of the Kurds themselves, their culture and society. Even if the Kurds possess a strong sense of their own identity in relation to the surrounding nationalities, their own sense of ethnic unity is still poorly developed.

In bluntest terms, the Kurds are simply not a united people—in distinction to other national groups such as Tibetans, Palestinians, Croats and others who have united to fight for national goals. A system of strongly individualistic tribes, clans and communities has always powerfully dominated Kurdish society in the past, regularly poising one clan against another in accordance with the immediate interests of the given group. The Kurds indeed have never in their history united all together in common cause. Even in moments of great national uprisings within one state, Kurdish tribes, clans or elements from another region
or state have often actually fought them, usually at the state's own behest. Additionally, the control of tribal aghas or religious leaders (shaykhs) has for centuries been very powerful. Observers have therefore often been baffled at the apparent absence of "Kurdish patriotism" as a whole, despite their sense of distinctiveness from their immediate neighbors. Kurdish groups have willingly taken up arms against others, sometimes for pay, sometimes for tactical gain in competition for influence—even when one group may be leading the struggle for Kurdish autonomy from the state.

Kurds furthermore do not even speak one language. Three major dialects exist among them. The differences in vocabulary, pronunciation and even grammar are marked, compared by some to the difference between German and English, or Italian and French. One can readily speak of them as different languages, except that the differences shade off towards one another where language regions meet. But Kurds who wish to are able to accommodate to other dialects—even in the absence of an officially promoted common dialect. Linguistic differences among Kurds are furthermore less sharply differentiated than in Europe where the existence of written languages serve to preserve sharply drawn linguistic borders between one language and another.

All these factors have therefore led a number of observers to conclude that the Kurds therefore are incapable of unity and lack the political development and sophistication to engineer creation of a nation-state of their own. Indeed, there can be very little quarreling

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2 The two main Iraqi Kurdish political movements have periodically fought each other even during periods of national uprising; one of them also attacked fighters from the main Kurdish movement in Iran after the Islamic Revolution. The Iraqi Kurdish movements are also currently opposing with armed force the main Kurdish guerrilla movement in Turkey, largely at the behest of the Turkish government.

3 Kurmanji is spoken by 55% of all Kurds, primarily in Turkey and in a narrow portion of northwestern Iraq; Sorani is spoken by a majority of Iraqi Kurds (some 75%), largely in northeastern Iraq and parts of northern Iranian Kurdistan; and Gurani is spoken in southern Iranian Kurdistan, but is closely related to Zaza or Dilimi that is spoken in two scattered areas of Turkey. See Philip Kreyenbroek, "On the Kurdish Language," in Kreyenbroek, op. cit., and Amir Hasanpour, "State Policy on Kurdish Language: the Politics of Status Planning," The Kurdish Times, Summer-Fall 1991.
with the fact that the Kurds have in fact lacked the national coherence which could have facilitated an effective and successful drive towards some kind of self-determination in the past. To date nearly all Kurdish rebellions and movements have usually only called in practical terms for autonomy, and only for the Kurds within the state in which they live.

But what factors, then, have contributed to this weak political sense of coherent nationhood? First, their physical dispersion among many differing states has sharply impeded the Kurds' practical ability to develop a unitary vision. Divided among conflicting states as they have constantly been for well over a thousand years, the Kurds have been consistently deprived of the opportunity to develop within one political culture or structure. In modern times, the political cultures of Iran, Iraq and Turkey within which the Kurds live also differ markedly, significantly affecting the Kurds political development, outlook, and even attitudes towards each other. Iranian Kurds simply view the world differently than do Iraqi Kurds.

Kurdish linguistic development has also felt the impact of their division among several states. Distinct dialects, separated by political borders, have tended to evolve in differing directions, while the dominant local languages--Turkish, Persian and Arabic--could not differ more radically one from another and in their influence on Kurdish. Indeed, even the opportunities and environment for development of a written Kurdish language have been highly disparate, encouraging linguistic differentiation rather than unity. Because of the long-term ban on the use of written Kurdish in Turkey, for example, the academic development of written Kurmanji has taken place almost exclusively in exile in Syria over the decades.

The governments of the three main states where Kurds live have also differed sharply in character and policy towards the Kurds. Turkey on the one hand has been by far the most democratic of the three states, with the greatest degree of freedom of the press and public debate on most issues--but excluding the Kurds. On the other hand Turkey has been the most repressive in cultural policy towards the Kurds, literally denying even their very existence as a separate nationality within Turkey until very recently. Yet Kurds in Turkey can and do rise to any
position whatsoever in the state—on the condition that they ignore their Kurdish heritage and accept assimilation as a Turk.

In Iraq, by contrast, the Kurds' existence, linguistic and cultural distinctiveness has been freely accepted, but Kurds have died by the hundreds of thousands from the savage depredations of the Ba'th party over decades that sought to crush the least degree of separatism or political resistance to Ba'th power or pan-Arabist policies. Kurds in Iraq have generally also been excluded de facto from the political process. In Iran the Kurds have been permitted some cultural independence, but have largely been isolated from the political process and suppressed militarily upon any attempt at autonomy. Of the three states, life for the Kurds in Iraq has been by far the worst, in Turkey the best. While the political experience of the Kurds in these three states then, demonstrates considerable variation, affecting their own political outlook.

A further hindrance to national unity also lies in the geographical isolation of Kurdish regions within all three states, where most Kurds live in areas far from the capital and centers of political activity. These areas have often simultaneously been deprived of developmental funds relative to the rest of the state (less true in Iraq) and constitute basically neglected and underdeveloped regions. The mountainous nature of much of greater Kurdistan further physically divides and compartments the social and political life of Kurds. Lastly, in their isolation, the Kurds have tended to preserve their tribal and clan structures far more deeply than the peoples in the surrounding areas. Retention of a "feudal" social order, too, in many areas has thus hindered development of pan-Kurdish national impulses and modern political evolution. Only in Turkey, where the reform policies of Ataturk in the 1920s and 1930s destroyed the power of the tribal aghas, the leaders of the religious orders and the large landowners, has Kurdish society moved considerably beyond the stage of feudal and tribal ties and obligations—giving a distinct and unique leftist character to the Kurdish political movements of Turkey.

But over the longer run, Kurdish political evolution may begin to take on a different complexion. Powerful forces are at work—
nationally, regionally, internationally—that suggest transformation of
the Kurds' political environment. Even more significantly, the Kurdish
situation is now in a position to exert broad impact on the Middle East
system as a whole, in ways most states are not yet willing to
contemplate.

First, shackles on the evolution of the Kurdish problem have been
partially released by the end of the Cold War. National and regional
problems can now be treated more on their own merits than during past
decades when every local struggle became a pawn in the grand East-West
game of chess. (The Kurdish issue still remains highly vulnerable to
international meddling, however, and is played as a key card even today
by the Security Council in the struggle against Saddam.)

Secondly, with the demise of communism, international trends have
now swung over to ideals of free societies, support for more pluralistic
political systems, greater sympathy for national self-determination for
peoples subject to totalitarian rule, and greater attentiveness to
gross violations of human rights. These circumstances are objectively
propitious for the Kurds to press their own case. The new realities
cannot readily be ignored by the world, however inconvenient the
unfolding Kurdish quest for independence may be.

Regional politics too, have been convulsed, opening further
opportunities for the Kurds. The Iran-Iraq War, the Gulf War, the
international consensus against Saddam, and internal change in Turkey
have all created fundamental new facts for the Kurds that cannot now be
easily reversed. Kurds, once isolated in their separate regions and
states are now travelling widely, studying abroad, meeting Kurds from
other countries, exchanging views, and developing a more coherent sense
of their own ethnicity than ever before. International Kurdish
conferences in Paris in 1989 and Stockholm in 1991 have brought Kurds
together and focussed greater international attention upon them as a
people. The Kurdish Institute in Paris and its scholarly journal now

4Can anyone doubt, for instance, that oppressed minorities of
China—Tibet, the Turkic peoples of Xinjiang province (Uighurs,
Kazakhs), and probably the Mongols of Inner Mongolia—will not be
seeking full autonomy and even independence the minute the dinosaur
political system of communist China starts to crack?
serves as a overseas clearing-house for Kurdish affairs, as does the
Kurdish Library in Brooklyn, New York.

Then the local realities impinge. In Iraq, a brutal political
reality is now almost surely apparent: the Kurds can probably no longer
be contained within a unitary state of Iraq. First, the Kurds were
never happy with their original inclusion within the "artificial" state
of Iraq.\(^5\) Second, their experience within the Iraqi state has not been
a felicitous one. Even during the moderate days of the Iraqi monarchy,
Kurdish rights as stipulated by the League of Nations were poorly
observed. Under Ba'th Party rule starting in 1968 Iraqi politics took a
particularly ugly turn; increasing violence was visited upon the Kurds
at the least manifestation of resistance to Ba'th Party policies and
rule. In fairness, the Ba'th Party understandably was not about to
preside over the weakening of the unitary state of Iraq, but its ill-
conceived policies and unprecedented violence against the Kurds resulted
in alienating them--along with the Shi'a who constitute the majority of
the country--more than any other Iraqi government had ever done. With
the Gulf War against Saddam, the greatest opportunity yet had emerged
for the Kurds to assert their aspirations for autonomy as their
minimalist goal.\(^6\)

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\(^5\) I say "artificial" because the modern boundaries of Iraq were
imposed by British colonialism; but they were imposed upon the ancient
region of Mesopotamia, one of the oldest centers of continuous
civilization in the world that is no way in itself "artificial." But
Mesopotamian culture basically did not include the Kurds as a cultural
element. Certainly most modern boundaries in the world can be dubbed
artificial to one extent or another, but Kurdish inclusion into Iraq was
particularly artificial, was primarily based on the importance to the
British of oil in Iraq's Kirkuk region, and was resisted by the Kurds at
time.

\(^6\) Both major Kurdish organizations within Iraq insist that Kurdish
independence in Iraq is not realistic given the international context,
the views of the United States, and the disposition of neighboring
Turkey and Iran; hence they claim they seek only autonomy. This
perception of contemporary reality is absolutely accurate. But it is
nonetheless hard to imagine that some kind of independence is not the
ultimate long-range goal of the Iraqi Kurds, even though it is
impolitic, and indeed counterproductive, to state this goal for the time
being. Above all, the realistic requirements of independent statehood
would require careful consideration and long-term planning--a reality
recognized by even the most radical nationalists.
Today the international coalition aiming to topple Saddam Hussein has created a unprecedented situation in Kurdish annals: the establishment of a de facto zone of autonomy protected by international force. Fundamentally open elections in Iraqi Kurdistan in the summer of 1991 lent a legitimacy to the new Kurdish administrative authority there that the Baghdad regime itself lacks. The guerrilla fighters (peshmerga) of the two leading Kurdish movements, the Patriotic Union of Kurdistan (PUK) led by Jalal Talabani, and the Democratic Party (DPK) of Kurdistan led by Mas'ud Barzani, have undergone merger. Talabani and Barzani have become key players in the overall Iraqi opposition movement in exile and have been able to present their grievances and aspirations before the key leaders of the Iraqi Shi'ite and Sunni opposition movements. Iraqi Kurdish leaders are now meeting regularly with international leaders including the US Secretary of State, a variety of European leaders, and—in a stunning departure in Turkish policy—the President and Prime Minister of Turkey. The Iraqi opposition movement held its most unified congress yet on Kurdish soil at which time the Kurds unilaterally declared themselves a federated region of a future federated Iraq—a position acknowledged, but not officially accepted by the broader opposition movement. Turkey has established de facto working agreements with Iraqi Kurdish authorities on the border to maintain border security and stop the infiltration of Turkish Kurdish guerrilla groups against Turkey. The welfare of the Iraqi Kurds has become an international issue, making it difficult for the United States or any other country simply to abandon them to their fate once the goal of toppling Saddam has been attained.

For all of these reasons, the Iraqi Kurds are now well on their way to a de facto autonomy unattainable in under past Iraqi political systems. They will unquestionably press for guarantees that will perpetuate this autonomy, but those guarantees realistically can only be realized via a federal system for Iraq. Yet, despite occasional tactical concessions on paper in the past, all previous Iraqi Arab leaders have vigorously rejected any kind of federalism, insisting on preservation of the unitary state under tight Baghdad control. But despite Baghdad's resolve, the outlook for preservation of the unitary Iraqi state now
seems poor. Retention of the unitary state can come in only two ways: either maintenance of a harsh totalitarian system—out of the Saddam mold—or else a democratic and federated Iraqi political system that will guarantee Kurdish rights. Under any other non-democratic circumstances, the Kurds claim that continued subjugation to Baghdad is intolerable and that secession from Iraq altogether is the only remaining solution.

Today, Western intervention to force the fall of Saddam Hussein and the Ba'ath party that spawned him is regarded by many Arabs as a step towards the destruction of Iraq itself. Yet ironically, it may now be the only way to save the state. For the maintenance of Saddam in power—or any other subsequent authoritarian—can only accelerate the eventual departure of the Kurds from the entire Iraqi state system and its long-term systematic denial of Kurdish rights. In short, Saddam's war against Kuwait and genocide against the Kurds has cost the Iraqi state dearly, and precipitated, faster than anything else could have, the collapse of the deeply flawed traditional Iraqi order.

The second major regional development has been the extraordinary evolution of politics in Turkey over the last decade—and especially the last two years. The accession of Turgut Ozal to power in Ankara brought profound change, opening up the Turkish economy to the international economic system, and initiating a major process of "perestroika" involving privatization and increased liberalization in nearly all facets of life. Thus a far more democratic order has emerged in Turkey over the past decade. Turkish foreign policy has been further revolutionized by the opening up of politics in the Balkans, the Caucasus and Central Asia—all closed arenas to Turkey for long decades—prompting Turkey to develop its own new extensive "Ostpolitik" and some predictable rising trends towards cultural pan-Turkism.

Within the past two years Ozal has also thrown open the doors to explicit discussion not only of the very existence of the Kurds in Turkey\textsuperscript{7} so long denied, but of ways in which to treat Kurdish political

\textsuperscript{7} The Kurds were estimated conservatively at 9.6 million in 1987, or 19% of the population, probably a higher proportion today given the proportionally more rapid demographic growth of the Kurds over the
demands. The law against the use of the Kurdish language in public was abrogated in April 1991.\textsuperscript{8} Kurdish parliamentarians with scarcely concealed autonomy goals have formed a political party (albeit under legal challenge): parliamentary debate and public political discourse now openly encompass discussion of the Kurdish issue. Ozal regularly and openly confers with the Iraqi Kurdish leadership; Talabani has actually suggested that if the Iraqi Kurds can no longer survive in a non-democratic Iraq, then joining democratic Turkey would be the only serious alternative.

Political democratization, the massive flow of Kurdish refugees from Iraq into camps in Turkey at the end of the Gulf War, and the pressures created by the internationally-sanctioned Kurdish safety zone in northern Iraq—all have thus sharply altered reality for Turkey. Ankara is now in a very difficult position. On the one hand, it strongly desires to continue security cooperation with the West despite the end of the Cold War and NATO's dwindling role. It wishes to see an end to Saddam, his aggressive, expansionist party, and efforts to develop nuclear weapons. Turkey would not spurn in a role of influence in oil-bearing Iraqi Kurdistan either, a region claimed by Turkey until forced to relinquish it to British-mandated Iraq in 1926. Turkey is also concerned over the fate of a roughly one million Turkmen minority in northern Iraq whose welfare Turkey could seek to protect. Ankara in fact would clearly prefer not to see any kind of autonomous Kurdish region emerge in Iraq because of its direct impact on Turkey's Kurds. But if the course of events in Iraq have now destined such an autonomous region to be, Turkey will have to accommodate reality and seek to be the dominant influence there. The pre-Gulf War status quo ante can never again be restored.

At this stage, Turkey is now face to face with its own Kurdish problem. Turkish nationalists may be justified in their belief that if the Gulf War had not taken place, there would not be a de facto

autonomous zone in Iraq today, and that Turkey's own Kurds would not have emerged so clearly as an independent element in national politics. The Gulf War indeed did precipitate the immediate Kurdish crisis. But ultimately the inexorable evolution of Kurdish dissatisfaction, nationalism, and talk of separatism could not have been staved off forever in Iraq, Turkey, or Iran. Turkey's own broad process of democratization and political liberalization over the past decades had already created the preconditions; wishful thinking could not make the rising Kurdish sense of ethnicity go away, especially as other peoples of the world also move towards separatism, often with grudging UN acceptance. Renewed international interest in human rights too, complicate any Turkish attempt to further deny overt political rights to their Kurds.

But if the Kurdish situation has deteriorated almost irredeemably in Iraq, is the same true for Turkey? Is ultimate Kurdish separatism in Turkey a foregone conclusion? Probably not, because many factors differ there. But at a minimum Turkey will face the need of establishing some kind of federal system in which the Kurds would enjoy some autonomy. In past decades such an idea in Turkey has been literally unthinkable, and constitutionally treasonous. Ataturk viewed the ethnically Turkish-centered unitary state as a rock-bottom sine qua non of Turkey's modern existence, and the Turkish military is sworn to uphold the Ataturkist vision. For this reason the Turkish government is engaged in a harsh military struggle in its southeast (Kurdish) region to crush the principle separatist Kurdish movement in Turkey, the Kurdish Workers Party, or PKK (in Kurdish).

The PKK is unique among Kurdish movements in that it openly espouses a separatist goal of complete independence--unlike other organizations in Iraq and Iran that coyly see only autonomy as "realistic." The PKK is also the only major organization with a pan-Kurdish vision, seeking not just independence for Turkish Kurdistan, but the creation of a greater united Kurdistan. The PKK is also purely ideological in character--an idealized Marxist "socialist" vision that criticizes the inadequacy of all previous communist experiments in the
world. The PKK has enjoyed the freedom to develop an entirely independent political agenda beholden to no local Kurdish authority—unlike Kurdish organizations in Iraq and Iran—because there is no longer any local feudal or tribal leadership in Turkey whose de facto power on the ground must be factored into political calculations. Iraqi and Iranian Kurdish movements must still very much accommodate the reality of local tribal power structures. For this reason many Kurdish intellectuals from different states see the PKK as the only "modern" Kurdish political movement, based on ideology rather than tribe, and possessing a more sweeping nationalist vision.

But the PKK has also pursued an unabashed policy of violent guerrilla warfare in southeastern Turkey, at one stage attacking even women and children to demonstrate its implacable nature. It has intimidated large numbers of villagers into at least tacit cooperation, and actively hunts down all those who cooperate with the government against it, Viet Cong-style. It is driven by a cult of the personality under its elusive and doctrinaire leader Abdullah Ocalan ("the Avenger") who has sworn not only to liberate Kurdistan, but also to bring about a socialist revolution in Turkey as the first step in liberating the fundamental social order of the entire Middle East. Yet the PKK also enjoys the support—even if only tacit—of a considerable proportion of Turkey's Kurds, especially in the southeast. In some areas many young Kurds go off routinely to serve in PKK ranks, describing it as "their military service."

Despite the PKK's violent, extremist, almost utopian leftist philosophy, it profits from what might be called the "PLO syndrome": not all Palestinians have approved of PLO leadership and tactics, nonetheless it is the only political organization the Palestinians have; it has become the sole vehicle of their aspirations, and they will back it in principle against all who attack it. Given the rising violence in Turkey's Kurdish zone, harsh Turkish army operations against the local

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See Balli, op. cit., for a fascinating one-hundred page interview (in Turkish) with PKK leader Abdullah Ocalan in his training camp in the Bekaa valley that reveals a great deal about Ocalan's psychology and vision of the overall Kurdish problem.
population are rapidly alienating the broader population in what sometimes resembles an almost intifada-like environment. In short, even if the Turkish army's military operations can severely hinder PKK guerrilla operations, can it bring an end to the PKK as a political movement?

This problem is at the heart of Turkey's dilemma. The PKK's greatest strength lies in the alienation among Kurds created by broad-scale Turkish army operations, and in the fact that the PKK is "all the Kurds have." The Turkish government therefore needs to reconsider its political strategy. Widespread and sometimes reportedly indiscriminate army violence, the use of tanks, helicopters and fighter aircraft in villages and towns, the assassination of "unfriendly" journalists and political activists in the region under mysterious circumstances, violent harassment even of Kurdish members of Parliament in the region, and other tactics may all actually come to limit PKK operations, but cannot win over the support of the population.

To have any chance of limiting more radical or separatist trends among their Kurds, the Turkish government must quickly permit a serious political alternative, the one thing Ocalan fears. Indeed, Ocalan angrily states without the specter of the PKK the Turkish government would never have allowed any Kurdish political activists to emerge at all in the Turkish Parliament--moderates whom he sees as traitors to the cause. Ironically, the very creation of a de facto autonomous Kurdish zone in northern Iraq unexpectedly facilitated the greatest blow ever to the PKK: taking advantage of the vacuum in northern Iraq after the UN established the safety zone there for the Kurds, the PKK beefed up its presence there. That sparked a massive cross border operation by the Turkish military in October 1992 against PKK bases and camps in northern Iraq, dealing a devastating blow that nearly decimated the PKK infrastructure there and thousands of its personnel. The Turkish operation was augmented by support from the military "peshmerga" forces of both Barzani and Talabani, who declared the PKK an outlaw element even inside Iraqi Kurdistan.

Iraqi Kurdish support in the destruction of the PKK represents a major calculated risk by Barzani and Talabani: they did perhaps the one
thing that could win the goodwill of the Turkish military, that otherwise seemed dedicated to prevention of any Kurdish autonomy—even in northern Iraq. At the same time many Kurds, especially in Turkey, view Iraqi Kurdish participation in the crippling of the PKK as a classic act of self-serving betrayal to the overall Kurdish cause. But the Iraqi Kurdish leadership responds that the PKK is radical, lawless, terrorist, and unwilling to recognize the new Kurdish political authority in Iraq; that it provokes the implacable hostility of Turkey against anything Kurdish, and serves as the instrument of Saddam. The calculations of the Iraqi Kurdish leadership are probably correct: it has done the one thing that may have enabled the Iraqi Kurdish administration to turn a crucial political corner with Turkey in gaining the tacit acquiescence and acceptance of the Turkish military—cooperation in the destruction of the PKK. Turkey now seems to be coming to the recognition that a moderate, stable and autonomous Kurdish administration in northern Iraq is preferable to the chaos and rebellions that characterized the last thirty years of Baghdad’s leadership there.

The extremely unattractive character of the PKK’s ideology and methods makes it difficult to condemn outright the Turks' use of military means to crush what is a paramilitary guerrilla organization. But domestic and foreign support for Turkey's strong arm methods is likely to crucially depend upon indications that force and repression are not the sole Turkish response to the aspirations of Turkey's Kurds. Those aspirations must essentially be met by political means within a democratic and pluralistic framework that already exists in other areas of Turkish political life..

At present, Kurdish policy appears to be primarily the purview of the military and security apparatus rather than civilian politicians. In the end, only a moderate but credible alternative Kurdish political movement in Turkey—one that will most likely espouse strong elements of Kurdish cultural autonomy, perhaps within some kind of federated state—will eventually be able to supplant present sympathy among many Kurds for the violent and radical PKK. Unfortunately, Turkish government and society have not yet reached this stage of acceptance of the Kurdish
reality, but may rapidly be forced to do so, given the even more unpalatable alternatives.

Persistence in the military option sets a very unattractive course that will severely damage Turkey's standing in the West. Turkey's relationship with the European Community and eventual entry into it rests to a considerable extent on its human rights record; if Turkey wishes to be received as a European state, its human rights must also meet that standard. While that human rights record is low by most West European standards, it is still high by any regional standards. Even Kurdish opposition leaders in exile, from Iraq, Iran, and Turkey, acknowledge that Turkey will be the first state in the region to grant the Kurds most of what they seek. While condemning past Turkish policies that denied even the existence of the Kurds in Turkey, and the harsh methods applied to crush the PKK, these exile leaders note Turkey's advanced state of democratic practice, widespread freedom of the press, dramatic recent steps towards partial recognition of the Kurdish reality, economic advancement, relative prosperity, secularism, and close ties with Europe and the United States. These factors convince them that Turkey is the most promising state to lead the way for a better future for all Kurds.

Liberal thinkers in Turkey recognize too, that Turkey can even draw some benefit from the new realities. Turkey has the largest Kurdish population in the region; approximately half of Turkey's Kurds do not even live in southeastern Turkey but are scattered around Turkey and in its major cities. Millions of Kurds are well assimilated into Turkey and occupy the highest places in government, society and the arts. Whatever kind of "Kurdistan" eventually emerges anywhere in the region, Turkey will exert greater influence over it than any other state, and should enjoy positive relations with it. Few Kurds will wish to break altogether with the immense benefits of life in Turkey once the passions of the military campaign recede and a more civil order can take its place. Indeed, even Ocalan says the Kurds realistically today could not remotely establish a functioning independent Kurdish state—even if Ankara granted it. But he wants to lay the groundwork for the long process.
Failure by Turkey to pursue some kind of accommodationist policy with their Kurds, even without Ocalan, almost inevitably will lead to ugly civil conflict that for Turkey is a no-win situation. Turkey's enemies in Iraq, Iran and Syria, perhaps factions in Greece and Armenia, could continue to play the "Kurdish card" against Ankara. Western European public opinion to a major extent sympathizes with the Kurds. Indeed, even a far more accommodationist policy on Ankara's part may already be quite late, with no guarantee that it will be possible to keep the Kurds indefinitely in Turkey; it almost surely is too late in Iraq. For the reasons noted above, however, the chances are good that Turkey can, if it wishes, still seize the initiative in helping shape the new Kurdish reality and move it towards a new political relationship. Denial of the problem can only pose disaster.

Geopolitically, the future evolution of the Kurdish situation creates many regional dilemmas. First is with Iran. Iran and Ottoman Turkey had been keen ideological rivals for centuries as respective capitals of the Shi'ite and Sunni worlds. With the creation of modern Turkish and Iranian nation states in the 1920s the pattern of hostility was sharply reversed and nearly fifty years of cordial bilateral relations began. That period now seems destined to end with reversion to a new and perhaps deadly rivalry. Turkey is entering a new phase of geopolitical expansion of its interests into Central Asia, the Caucasus and northern Iraq. Iran senses a geopolitical threat to its own integrity, especially as the pan-Turkic overtones of some of Turkey's new political horizons give Ankara greater clout, not only in Central Asia but Azerbaijan. Independent Azerbaijan today is politically close to Turkey; it provocatively calls for Iranian Azerbaijan to break away and join it in a greater Azerbaijani union. Turkey and Iran could also end up facing each other on opposing sides of the Azerbaijan-Armenian military struggle over the Armenian enclave of Nagorno-Karabakh in Azerbaijan. If Turkey also moves to gain influence over northern Iraq, and over the Kurds as a whole, Iran's Kurdish region also falls at risk. Iran is therefore almost certain to develop significant anti-Turkish policies to meet this major challenge to its own position and influence.
in the region—indeed, to its very territorial integrity. Armed conflict between the two at some point cannot be ruled out.

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The Arab world itself is hardly immune to the far-flung implications of the evolving Kurdish problem, since it constitutes an assault on the concept of pan-Arabism. For most of the Arab world, the vision of Arab unity, or pan-Arabism, has represented a near sacred belief. It has served as the ideological engine for such diverse Arab nationalist leaders as Gamal Abdel Nasser, Mu'ammar al-Qadhafi, Hafiz al-Asad, and Saddam Hussein. Arab nationalism as an ideology has been transnational in character, emphasizing the unitary nature of the Arab world and denigrating the legitimacy and authority of the individual Arab state. Arab unity has likewise always represented an "ideological bulwark against imperialism", and has claimed to represent the necessary power to confront and stand down the external imperial threat. But the Arab world has now moved into a new stage of ideological crisis, in which the traditional commitment to Arab strength through Arab unity is now challenged by the ideology of liberalism. This new, but still modest vision turns the problem around: it perceives that the traditional sources of Arab weakness and crisis stem precisely from those very authoritarian mechanisms that have upheld pan-Arab ideology. To this small but growing group, only liberal-democratic and reformist philosophies will overcome the dinosaur structures of pan-Arab authoritarianism that have so often dominated the Arab world, and led it into its worst hours and most disastrous military adventures.

To those still committed to pan-Arabist impulses, Saddam Hussein may indeed be harsh, but he is a cherished pillar of Arab power. The unity of Iraq, representing an indispensable Arab power-house against Western threats, must therefore be preserved at all costs. It is precisely on these grounds, goes the reasoning, that the West seeks to destroy Iraq, for it is the main state still capable of standing up to Western imperial interests. These thinkers therefore view the unity of Iraq as absolutely essential; even a move towards autonomy by the Kurds represents the beginning of the dismemberment of Iraqi-Arab power that cannot be contemplated. In many Arab eyes, Turkey is using the Kurdish
instrument to expand its power at Arab expense in a new and dangerous stage of "neo-Ottomanism."

In this vision, the threat lies not only in the weakening of Iraq, but even more in the potential ideological threat to the unity and integrity of the entire Arab world. A democratic Iraq would come to be dominated by the Iraqi Shi'ite majority of some 55-60% of the population; Shi'ites have rarely shared in the pan-Arab vision which is inherently Sunni in character and flavor. Democracy and liberalization imply federation—weakening the power of the central state, spreading a cancer that can then proceed to consume the centralized power of other Arab states as well. The West is perceived as masterminding this evisceration of Arab and Muslim power.

This dark Arab nationalist vision, a mirror-image of current Iraqi events, is not utterly bereft of rationale. The Arabs have long suffered under external domination: several centuries under Ottoman rule, only to be liberated and then fall into the hands of Western colonial powers for several more decades. Western intervention, either through military force or subversion, has been frequent. Israel, linked intimately to the West, has also dealt repeated military setbacks to Arab military power. The West has sought to dominate the oil pricing structure of the region; indeed possession by the Arabs of a strategic commodity such as oil represents a de facto loss of sovereignty through the loss of the right freely to dispose of this commodity as they see fit. Lastly, the West dominates the very economies of the region through influence over international capital and control of the economic reform programs via the IMF. Arab nationalism thus is not entirely inventing a chimera in perceiving a persistent threat of external control or intervention extending into the Arab world over several centuries—even if their vision is selective and ignores a multitude of other international factors and causalities. More to the point, this rationale must be understood as the foundation of Arab nationalist thinking that is now coming under new pressure. This very article will be seen by many Arab thinkers as yet another elaborate rationale for weakening the Arab world.
Many Arab nationalists thus view with deepest suspicion concepts of democratic reform and minority rights that seem to be the latest Western device designed to divest the Arabs of independent power. This traditional thinking is now directly challenged by a growing liberal movement aimed at introducing democratic reform into Arab politics and society; these thinkers and activists probe more deeply into the primary roots and causes of contemporary Arab political and social weakness and malaise. The evolution of the Kurdish issue in Iraq encapsulates these very contradictory visions.

Is the Arab world prepared to revise its traditional pan-Arabist political thinking in the light of the Kurdish case in Iraq? The problem of pan-Arabist thought lies not in its cultural manifestations—recognition of a common intellectual and cultural heritage, and a strong sense of a rich shared cultural interchange—but in its political manifestations, where it is exploited by the most authoritarian, most externally aggressive, and domestically least liberal elements of Arab politics. Just how does the Arab world propose to deal with problems of a multi-religious and multi-ethnic society—typified by Iraq, but commonplace in so many Arab states? Surely not through perpetuation of pan-Arab policies that tend to exclude non-Sunnis and non-Arabs. What is the future of Iraq if only force and violence can keep the state intact? What is the future of democracy if it brings greater power to formerly oppressed ethnic and religious groups and a shift in the political order unacceptable to old ruling elites? What happens when freedom of speech gives vent to the dissatisfactions and grievances of oppressed elements, as is now happening in Iraq and Turkey, and will surely happen in the rest of the Arab world too?

Areas of potential crisis are numerous in the Arab world. Several states face the problem of rule by religious minorities that will prove increasingly untenable: Iraq and Bahrain exclude their Shi'ite majorities from power; the Syrian 'Alawites exclude a Sunni majority from power. In other states large minorities (religious or ethnic) are second class citizens: large Shi'ite minorities in Kuwait and Saudi Arabia are denied significant political and social status; a large non-Arab Christian and animist population in southern Sudan likewise seems
destined for separatism; a large Coptic Christian majority in Egypt is problematic if not separatist; large Berber populations in North Africa pose potential political demands in the future. Outside the Arab world, Iran is dominated by the Persians who are barely a scant half of the population; Afghanistan has been dominated by the ethnic Pushtuns who are not a majority of the population, yet have controlled the political destiny of several other ethnic and religious groups within the country. And yes, there should not be a double standard: Israel has harshly treated its Palestinians under military occupation for over twenty five years, invoking collective punishment, extra-legal detention, death squads, and denial of the civil liberties enjoyed by Israelis. All of these problems will increasingly come to the fore as the new era of self-determination weighs in heavily on the international scene, coupled with lessening international tolerance for absence of democracy, political repression, and gross violation of human rights.

Ironically, we have Saddam Hussein to partly thank for bringing these problems to the international level in the Middle East; his invasion of Kuwait, mass violence against the Kurds, and efforts to develop nuclear weapons raise larger issues of democracy, federalism and minority rights. The Kurdish question thus challenges the region with these critical taboo issues that have been avoided in the past. No one in the Middle East should believe that "if it wasn't for Saddam" or Operation Desert Storm these questions of ethnic breakup would have remained conveniently buried. They represent structural problems are deeply rooted within Middle East society and politics--as well as elsewhere in the world--and they cannot be avoided.

No one can predict whether the Kurds will or will not attain a nation-state of their own anywhere in the next few decades. But as the fourth largest ethnic group in the Middle East, the answer to this question will be extremely important--either way. If the answer is yes, they will have their state, then the region must be prepared for dramatic change in the borders and geopolitics of Iraq, Turkey and Iran. And what kind of a state might it be? Based only on former Iraqi soil, with special ties to Turkey? Or a united Kurdish state that will recast the traditional balance of power among all the states of the region?
The problems of adjudicating new borders and population rights will be extremely complex and dislocating——although hopefully they might resemble the more benign Soviet model of partition rather than the Yugoslav. And what of the Turkish Kurds who live outside of the traditional Kurdish area of south-eastern Turkey? What kind of citizenship and citizenship rights would they maintain if they opted to stay in Western Turkey and not to live in a Kurdistan? Will the Arabs accept the loss of Kurdistan by Iraq, and acknowledge the lesson that gross mistreatment of minorities can have very dangerous consequences to the integrity of the state?

But perhaps the answer may be "no," the Kurds are not destined to attain an independent Kurdistan in the next few decades. This answer is no less revolutionary in its implications than a "yes" to the creation of an independent Kurdish state. For a no answer suggests only two possibilities. First, that the Middle East has either opted for extreme violence and repression designed to crush dissatisfied minorities in every state, almost certainly at the cost of any kind of democratic order and observation of human rights. This option will be extremely costly for the region and for the world, for it guarantees that the region will remain unstable, highly volatile, and inclined towards arbitrary and intolerant regimes that are the raw material of conflict, aggression, war, and frequent external intervention—all a recipe for an ugly state of affairs for everyone involved.

But there is a second variation by which there might also not be a Kurdish state in the next few decades. That answer suggests that the key states of the region are able to develop a political and social order in which the Kurds are able to find an environment satisfactory to the fulfillment of their ethnic needs. This would imply almost certainly a federal arrangement in which the Kurds could freely and satisfactorily develop their ethnic aspirations. It would imply reasonably open borders that would allow the Kurds of one state to travel to the Kurdish regions of another state. It would suggest that the Middle East was on the road to developing the kind of state systems that do not require force, violence, authoritarianism and suppression to retain the unity of the state and the loyalty of its citizens. And
federalism implies a sorely needed decentralization of the bloated centralized bureaucracies that have long stifled and distorted regional economies.

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And how should the US policy-maker approach this welter of conflicting interests? Washington would do well to begin by recognizing that the release of long-repressed forces for change lie at the heart of the next decade or so. This guarantees that some element of instability will surely characterize the region. No one welcomes instability, but it may be more tolerable because it is far less strategically dangerous than it was during the Cold War, and because deeply needed structural change can be put off no longer without yet greater cataclysm when old systems explode or implode.

It is preferable that the Kurds should be able to achieve their national aspirations without taking apart three nations to create their own. But if the nations involved are unable to make the necessary political and cultural changes then some borders will inevitably face change. American efforts can most fruitfully be devoted to working out with other nations and the UN a series of approaches to the generic problem of ethnic separatism: what measures can be developed which provide alternatives between a repressed, oppressed minority existence within a country, and total separation? International "marriage counseling" should be able to offer a range of potential solutions including international monitoring, international guarantees of human and civil rights, sanctions, cultural autonomy, regionalization, federalism, and confederalism. Washington can use its influence, preferably multilaterally, to impress upon afflicted countries the need for creative approaches early on to ethnic and sectarian problems that threaten to explode. American interests, of course, embrace more than assurance of human rights around the world, but the violation of human rights is nonetheless integrally linked to larger problems of dictatorship, aggression, and internal insurrection. More complex is American determination of the priority to be accorded to human rights concerns as opposed to other interests and relationships with foreign states. There can be no fixed rule for this--except that human rights
and gradual movement towards democratic governance should rank very high indeed in our national priorities. Measures used to encourage movement in this direction will depend on the particular state and circumstances involved; those states most egregiously violating international norms and the international order--such as Iraq and Serbia--deserve the toughest approaches. Levels of repression and the potential explosive effect of local repression provide additional criteria for action. Under any circumstances choices will be difficult. But the issue needs to rank high for it lies at the forefront of the international agenda in the new post-Cold War era.

In this sense, then, the Kurdish issue lies at the center of the Middle East in the new world order. What means can be found to satisfy their legitimate aspirations? If the world wishes to avoid the specter of massive redrawing of international borders in the Middle East, then the states of the region have their work cut out for them. The Kurds stand as symbol at these crossroads. They will not wait much longer.