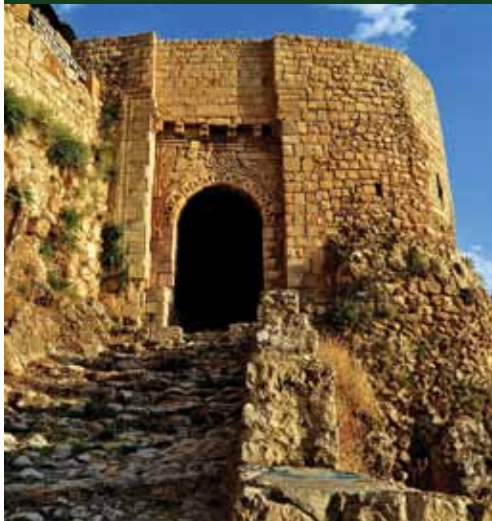




THE KURDISTAN REGION: STRATEGIC U.S. ALLY IN A TOUGH NEIGHBORHOOD



THE KURDISTAN REGION: Strategic U.S. Ally in a Tough Neighborhood

Kurdistan24 (K24), launched in 2015, provides up-to-date, impartial and quality information to an audience of over 30 million Kurdish speakers in the region. It delivers news and opinion across a range of media – television, radio and the web, including television broadcasts in the two major Kurdish dialects, Sorani and Kurmanji. K24 also provides web content in Kurdish, English, Turkish, Arabic, and Persian. The news company is headquartered in Erbil, Kurdistan and has offices in the major cities of the Kurdistan Region; three Turkish cities: Istanbul, Ankara, Diyarbakir; Qamishli, Syria; Baghdad, Iraq; Tehran, Iran; Moscow, Brussels, and Washington, D.C. You can find K24 on the web at: <http://www.kurdistan24.net/>

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Why America should support independent Kurdistan



By Noreldin Waisy

Kurdistan24, in conjunction with The Washington Times, is sponsoring a conference on Capitol Hill, entitled, “The Kurdistan Region: Strategic U.S. Ally in a Tough Neighborhood.”

We are holding this event at a time of major change in the Middle East. A century ago, Kurdistan was divided among four countries against the will of the Kurdish people — despite American promises of self-determination, as embodied in Woodrow Wilson’s famous “Fourteen Points.”

We think that it is time, indeed long past time, for the international community to recognize the right that was denied the Kurds 100 years ago.

The Kurdistan Regional Government

(KRG) will hold a referendum on independence on Sept. 25. We expect that an overwhelming majority of the people will vote in favor of independence.

We believe that this manifestation of the will of the Kurdish people for an independent Kurdistan will work in America’s favor and help promote stability in the region.

We also believe that it will be difficult for Western countries to ignore that vote — or at least to do so in good conscience. After all, if the peoples of Quebec, Scotland and Catalonia are entitled to a referendum on independence, by what legitimate logic can the Kurds be denied the same right?

In the Kurdistan Region, the people do not feel part of a political entity called Iraq. We have not forgotten Saddam Hussein’s brutal repression in which he sought to obliterate our identity as a separate and distinct people. Every year on Anfal Memorial Day, we recall the Baathist regime’s genocidal campaign against us.

For the past 25 years — since the 1991 Gulf War — the Kurdistan Region has been an independent, self-governing political entity. A whole generation has grown up for which the national language of Iraq, that is Arabic, is incomprehensible.

In that quarter of a century, the Kurdistan Region has demonstrated several crucial points.

First, it has shown that it is perfectly capable of self-government. In that same period, four Middle Eastern states — Iraq, Syria, Yemen and Libya — have all

fallen apart amid violent conflict, which was exported to the rest of the world in the form of terrorism.

However, the Kurdistan Region has remained peaceful.

In fact, we have become a haven for others. Nearly 2 million people fleeing the Islamic State have found refuge in the Kurdistan Region. Despite the large number — 40 percent of the indigenous Kurdish population — and our limited resources, we have taken them in.

We are a hospitable and tolerant people, and most of us have been refugees ourselves.

Second, the Kurdistan Region has shown that we are not a threat to anyone in the region. By and large, our borders are quiet. Ironically, the country that has taken the strongest stand against our independence referendum is Iran, even as others, including Americans, would claim that Iran will gain from our independence. Tehran clearly has a different view.

Third, we have demonstrated an enduring commitment to partnership with America. The people of the Kurdistan Region are extremely friendly to the U.S., and with good reason. Between 1991 and 2003, a “no-fly zone,” enforced by the U.S., protected us against Saddam’s depredations.

Rather than fight America and us, Saddam chose to ignore the Kurdistan Region. American protection was a crucial factor in allowing us our first dozen years of self-rule, which have laid the institutional foundations for our independent state. The people of the Kurdistan

Region remain extremely grateful to America for this.

The Kurdistan Region is the only area in the Muslim Middle East where both the government and the people are friendly to America and its values. A country like Saudi Arabia may be a U.S. ally on an official level, but Riyadh keeps its distance because elements of the population are hostile. That dualism does not exist in Kurdistan: The people support the government in its pro-American policy.

Thus, an independent Kurdistan could well prove America’s closest and truest Muslim ally — which would certainly go far in explaining Iran’s hostility to our referendum.

These issues are of vital concern to the Kurdish people. But we recognize that the perspective of the U.S., as a global superpower, is different. The U.S. national security agenda is very crowded, and Kurds are a relatively small part of it.

It is unlikely that U.S. policymakers have rigorously considered all the implications of our referendum and of Kurdistan independence. That is why we are holding this conference: to present crucial information and vital perspectives to an important U.S. audience whose decisions and opinions matter so much to a people, much smaller in numbers, but whose yearnings, including our thirst for freedom, are surprisingly like Americans.

Noreldin Waisy is the General Manager of Kurdistan24 News Network. He can be followed on Twitter @nwaisy



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- The Iraq focal point for the Sphere Project
- Manages (15) refugee and IDP camps
- Reached more than 5 million people in the first half of 2017 .

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Give Iraqi Kurds a nation they can call their own



By Rep. Dana Rohrabacher

The Kurds of northern Iraq have demonstrated their commitment to open and honest government and to their loyalty to the United States and the West. I think they deserve a chance at independence. The U.S. and Iraqi governments should support them.

Kurdish people, who are the largest ethnicity in the world without a state to claim as their own, deserve to be given

what every other people in the world long for and many people have achieved. That is a country that reflects their own people.

The borders of Iraq are not sacrosanct, and in fact are the contrivance of British and French diplomats working behind closed doors at the end of World War I. Just because some fat old British colonialist drew the lines this way doesn't mean that we have to stick with them forever.

At the very least, Kurds deserve, in whatever country in which they live, their own self-governing state — whether it's in Iraq or in Syria or in Iran.

They have every right to self-government, to their own schools, to their own language, and to their own culture.

Having led a congressional delegation to Iraq over the Christmas break in late 2014, I witnessed first-hand the humanitarian crisis caused by the ISIS uprising in the region six months earlier, and I observed the remarkable human compassion of the Kurdish people. Almost overnight, the Kurdish Regional Government's population of 4 million jumped to 6 million, due to the influx of desperate refugees from the Nineveh Plain and from the northern cities of Iraq.

I said then, and I will repeat it now, the Kurdish people deserve our gratitude. The Kurdistan Regional Government and especially Nechirvan Barzani, should be recognized and applauded for their courage and generosity in providing refuge to 2 million desperate and displaced persons, many of whom are Christians. Of the 6 million people living in Kurdistan, close to 2 million are there seeking shelter from bloodthirsty ISIS militants who have committing unspeakable crimes against them. Men, women and children — singled out as Christians — are being brutally driven from their ancient homeland with only the clothes on their backs.

The protection offered by the Kurds is a tribute to their historic benevolence and speaks well of their values as a people. Kurdistan extends this generosity, even while its own resources and infrastructure are severely strained. This humanitarian gesture, itself a drama of biblical dimension, shows Muslim, Yazidi and Christian believers can live in peace and together resist the common evil of religious intolerance.

We may look at this display of common purpose in Kurdistan as an example of how, united with people of other

faiths, we can make this a better world.

Yes, there are dozens of issues to be ironed out — over a homeland for minorities such as Turkmen, Yazidis and Christians, over the sharing of oil revenues and use of transportation infrastructure to ports. Yet, there is no reason to believe that neighboring countries will be less cooperative to the United States if an independent democracy appears in the region. On the contrary, it sends a message to those countries that the United States respects and honors its partners.

The Kurdish government and people have earned our support, both for their generosity and their courageous, bloody battle against an evil that threatens to overwhelm the Middle East and put the United States and other countries in jeopardy. It is long since past time that we recognize the Kurdish people as an independent nation and not a subjugated province of Iraq.

.....
Rep. Dana Rohrabacher, California Republican, is chairman of the House Foreign Affairs subcommittee on Europe, Eurasia, and Emerging Threats.

Kurdish independence will stabilize the region



By Rep. Trent Franks

The Kurds of Northern Iraq will hold a referendum on independence in September, and the question before Congress is whether we should support their dream of self-determination or vote to make it a dream deferred.

When ISIS attacked Iraq, there was one group that stood up to ISIS from the beginning, and they didn't do it because it was easy, nor because they thought they would gain financial support; they did it because they believe in the cause of human freedom. The Kurds are a noble people. In the councils of eternity, their

efforts will not be forgotten.

Let's address the counter-argument first, namely, that the more we support the Kurds in Nineveh and along the disputed areas, the more that we put ourselves against the Sunni Arab community that might otherwise join us in fighting ISIS. This argument contends that only a unified nation centered in Baghdad can broker an agreement between the Sunni Arabs in the west, the minorities in the Nineveh Plain and the Kurds in the north.

The premise of this argument is that Iraq is a pluralistic nation state in a liberal sense. It is not. This ancient territory has many tribal elements in many different respects, and Washington policymakers have erred by clinging to the idea that we must fully democratize a place with deep but divergent historical and cultural roots. In fact, the people in Nineveh and Anbar Provinces that supported al Qaeda in 2003 and ISIS today are opposed to democracy in principle. They will not change their minds regardless of whether the Kurds are independent.

On the other hand, there are compelling reasons to believe that allowing the Kurds of Northern Iraq to have their own nation will hasten military victory over ISIS and bring stability to the region.

First, it will end the absurd

bureaucratic barriers to bringing military aid directly to the Kurdish forces, who are the most proven effective units in the region. Stability can only start after eradicating the forces that threaten the safety of the citizens of Northern Iraq.

The battle of Mosul in Northern Iraq is over, but the war is not. Months of close combat remain for the Iraqi Security Forces and for Western Coalition advisers close to them. We can thank the Kurdish military, that is the Peshmerga, for pushing ISIS back on its eastern flank at the beginning of the drive to reclaim Mosul last year. The Kurdish military did this without access to the heavy arms and medical supplies that were channeled by legal necessity to Baghdad and never made it to Erbil. That is why in the last Congress we pushed an amendment to the National Defense Authorization Act (NDAA) to directly arm the Kurdish military. An independent Kurdish nation will have a stronger military and will give greater support to the anti-ISIS coalition.

Second, an independent Kurdistan can serve as a valuable buffer zone between Iran on the east and an increasingly unstable Turkey on the north. It is well known that the ayatollahs in Iran regard the United States as an enemy, and their goal is to forge a sphere of control extending through Iraq all the

way to the Mediterranean coast. Turkey, once a reliable ally to the West, now has dictatorship government leaning toward Islamism. The reliably secular government in the Northern Iraq is a proven ally the United States needs.

Third, there is reason to believe that minorities will have better protection under a Kurdish government than a Baghdad-based one. One of the largest minorities suffering genocide under ISIS are the Kurdish-speaking Yazidi people, 500,000 in number. Virtually all of the 300,000 remaining Assyrian Christians found refuge in Kurdistan during the last three years. Many are there now and cannot return to their homeland due to the lack of security from the Baghdad government.

We have to support our friends who were there for freedom when the times were most difficult. The Kurds have demonstrated their commitment. I encourage the Trump administration to hold them in partnership in this fight against the scourge of ISIS and jihadist terrorism across the world.

.....
Rep. Trent Franks, Arizona Republican, serves on the House Armed Services and Judiciary Committees.

U.S. and the Kurdish Region: A ‘remarkable partnership’



By Rep. Joe Wilson

In February of this year, I was grateful for a return visit to Erbil, the dynamic capital city of Iraqi Kurdistan, a semi-autonomous region in Northern Iraq that is governed by the Kurdish Regional Government. Throughout my visit, I was able to clearly appreciate the vital role of Kurdistan as a partner to the United States, promoting peace and security in the Middle East. However, recent plans for a referendum of Kurdish independence could put our positive relationship at risk. We can appreciate the successes of the Kurdish Region as a part of a federated Iraq. Iraqi Kurdistan should remain a vibrant and thriving part of Iraq because it works with coalition partners in the fight against ISIL and supports positive reforms in the region. Protected by the American no-fly zone during the Saddam Hussain dictatorship, the region

was secure with a robust economy, in great contrast to the oppression of the other Iraqi regions. I have been so impressed by the leaders and people of the Kurdish region that I served as a founding co-chairman of the Kurdish Regional Caucus.

There is no better example of U.S. cooperation with Iraqi Kurds on combatting terrorism than the liberation of Mosul. In June, the Islamic State was finally driven out of Mosul — the territorial stronghold in Northern Iraq that they have held for nearly two years. This accomplishment was made possible because of the success of the Kurdish Peshmerga and their collaboration with Iraqi forces. While this was one of the most significant victories of the fight against the Islamic State and violent extremists, the Peshmerga have also been responsible for other successful campaigns against ISIS and other terrorist organizations throughout Iraq.

Clearly, security cooperation is one of the greatest ways for the United States to expand their remarkable partnership with the Kurdish government, especially as we face increasing threats in the region.

The Kurdish Regional Government has also been a leader in promoting positive, modern governmental reforms. Under the leadership of President Masoud Barzani, the parliament has made great strides in enacting penalties for violence against women and investing in critical infrastructure. The Kurdish Regional Government has also taken great strides to promote economic development — both by increasing educational opportunities within the oil

and gas industries but also by developing other sectors, including tourism and encouraging foreign direct investment.

Disappointing, though not unsurprising, Kurdistan’s economic advancements have diminished in the past few years, given the rise in ISIS, increase in refugees and deterioration of security. However, I am optimistic that as Kurdistan makes positive advancements that

I am hopeful that as the security and economic situations improve, the region can return to regular elections and uphold our shared democratic principles.

allow them to prosper, they can serve as a model for other regions of Iraq to diversify, stabilize and prosper.

It is important to be clear-eyed about the Kurdish Regional Government’s success in terms of governing because there are still some areas of concern. However, I am hopeful that as the security and economic situations improve, the region can return to regular elections and uphold our shared democratic principles.

While a strong, prosperous Kurdistan benefits Iraq and the region, an independent Kurdistan could threaten the fragile stability of the region. Additionally, it could cause other Kurdish minorities in bordering countries, like Turkey, Syria, Jordan and Iran, to attempt to join an independent Kurdistan,

disrupting the balance of power with extraordinary violence as nations preserve existing boundaries.

Additionally, one of the most significant reason to protect the territorial integrity of Iraq is the fact that this is what the country — including the Kurdish Regional Government — agreed to in the nation’s 2005 constitution. While I appreciate the concerns that the Iraqi government has not fully upheld the agreement with the Kurds, specifically in regards to territory and oil revenue-sharing, I believe the United States could play a greater role in helping to facilitate the renewal and upkeep of the agreement.

Kurdistan has been, and continues to be, a vital partner for the United States in the Middle East, promoting stability, modernization, and economic reforms. However, our partnership in the Middle East is at its best with Kurdistan as a semi-autonomous region of Iraq.

At this point in time, while there still may be opportunity for improvements, ultimately, our meaningful cooperation would be put at risk if Kurdistan were to separate from Iraq. As a senior member of both the House Armed Services Committee and the House Foreign Affairs Committee, I look forward to working with the talented regional government to continue our strong partnership on areas of mutual interest.

Rep. Joe Wilson, South Carolina Republican, is chairman of the House Armed Services subcommittee on Readiness and serves on the House Foreign Affairs Committee. He is also co-founder of the Kurdish-American Congressional Caucus.

Ghastly 1988 attack on Kurdistan must not be forgotten



By Rep. Marsha Blackburn

As co-chair of the Kurdish Caucus here, I think it’s so important that we stop every year and commemorate and remember [the March, 16, 1988 Halabja chemical attack that killed or injured 15,000 Kurds by former dictator Saddam Hussein].

And that we renew our commitment to making certain that such atrocities and such human rights violations never occur again. That should be something that is a shared goal.

We are so fortunate to have the Kurds as allies in the fight against ISIS. And it’s important that we make certain that the

Peshmerga have what they need to go about this fight, rooting out ISIS. And I am so appreciative that President Trump is focused on fighting ISIS, ending these terrorist groups, sending the message that we are going to hunt them down, we’re going to root them out, and we are going to end their existence. That is something that is a very important message to communicate.

I think, likewise, it is so important that those of us in Congress continue our work to get the funding that is necessary for the refugee camps that are in the region, for the Peshmerga that are in the fight, and to support the Kurds as they stand strong in this region. Stand strong

for freedom and against ISIS.

It’s important that we recognize the [1988] genocide and remember it. This is something, as you all know, that I have supported with legislation, and continued to push with legislation to support the Kurds. And then also to make certain that we do not forget what happened, and that we appropriately recognize that in our history.

Rep. Marsha Blackburn, Tennessee Republican, spoke with Kurdistan24.net on March 19, 2017. The interview can be seen at <https://youtu.be/wC-ULFE5U3o>

Self-determination will lead to prosperity, stability



By Masrour Barzani

This is a year of regeneration for Iraqi Kurdistan, a time when its people will shed the crippling burden of war and uncertainty and start to shape their future — on our own terms.

Iraqi Kurdistan can no longer mark time. We must all take a stake in our future and redefine the nature of a relationship with Iraq that will confine repeated mistakes of the past to history. That is why Iraqi Kurdistan will take the historic step of holding a referendum on independence later this year.

Iraq was, and is, a forced coexistence of peoples whose identities remain unreconciled a century after the breakdown of the Ottoman Empire, which spawned the modern state. This reality is apparent more than ever: From Basra to Tikrit, from Diyala to Anbar, a Sunni-Shia conflict has edged the country and its peoples towards the abyss. We, as leaders whose ultimate responsibility is the welfare of our people, need to acknowledge that the model is not working.

The upcoming Sept. 25 vote aims to clearly stake out the political terms on which we, the people of Iraqi Kurdistan, would best play a role in the future of the region. If, as expected, a vote for independence passes, the government will move to implement the decision in consultation with Baghdad.

If we stay as we are, muddled together through hope and delusion, we do precisely the opposite — bequeathing danger and dysfunction to future generations who need and deserve far better.

The Kurds of Iraq have endured a long and bitter journey rooted in the pursuit of self-determination — a dignity essential to all communities. It has at times led to mass deportation, war and genocide. Self-determination would have changed the course of the war

with ISIS. If Iraq's Kurds were recognized as a sovereign force and empowered as such, we would have concluded this campaign long ago. Forced unity with Baghdad instead denied us the weapons we needed, which needlessly prolonged suffering and exposed to everyone the folly of pretending that the status quo works.

This historic process will start with an honest dialogue with Iraqi Prime Minister Haider al-Abadi. And on this score, we have been encouraged by our discussions with national leaders. The recapture of Mosul gives both Erbil and Baghdad a strong platform to address a question that has lingered since the turn of the century. We hope and expect that the world will get behind us. We strongly believe that self-determination for Iraq's Kurds will provide certainty in Iraq and beyond.

This referendum will, therefore, give us a mandate to reach a principle agreement with Mr. al-Abadi. It would also start the process that would create the political space for both parties to advance causes of common interest. This issue can no longer be confined to the "too hard basket"; the dangers of defaulting to a broken model are enormous. We have much to gain through peace and understanding, through a common recognition of each other's

place in two newly defined nations.

This move will not alter borders of neighboring states. It will instead formalize the obvious makeup of the Iraqi state today. The Kurds have paid a heavy price for the international community's failed one-Iraq policy. Instead, global partners should now publicly support a dialogue between Erbil and Baghdad to shape bilateral relations on new and binding terms.

We will allow the people in contested areas to determine their own future. In negotiations with Baghdad, Kurdistan plans to include areas only with people who overwhelmingly want to be part the new state. We will remain a refuge for groups fleeing violence and persecution; Christians, Turkmen, Shabaks, Yazidis and other groups have as much to look forward to as fellow Kurds. They will continue to enjoy the same rights in a shared home.

Two independent states living alongside each other as peaceful neighbors will usher unprecedented strategic alliances in trade, energy and security. It will secure a prosperous footing for both communities, Arabs and Kurds, and allow us to determine the best governance for our peoples.

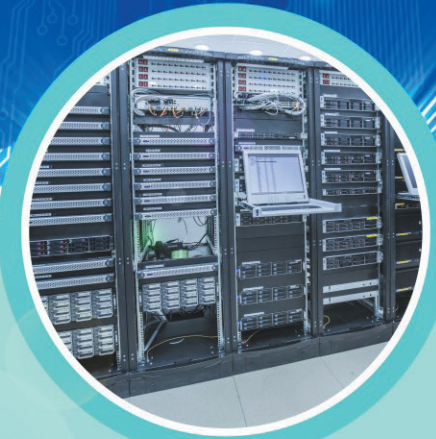
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Masrour Barzani is the Chancellor of the Kurdistan Region Security Council.



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Embrace the Kurdish independence referendum



By Ambassador Nancy Soderberg

This Sept. 25, Iraqi Kurds will hold a long planned referendum in which, as in the 2005 vote, an overwhelming majority will express their desire to become an independent state. How the Kurdish, Iraqi central government, United States and regional leadership handle this foregone conclusion is critical to stability in the region.

For centuries, the Kurds have been on the losing side of historical decisions that have consistently denied them their right to determine their future. Since the Sykes-Piquot lines were drawn by the British and French colonial powers in 1916, the West has played power politics in the region. Kurds were consistently denied the right to decide their own future. As Iraq collapses, Kurds are moving irrevocably towards independence. The region and the United States must accept and manage this new reality.

U.S. policy is to maintain a united federal Iraq and the administration has expressed concern that the referendum will distract from the effort to defeat ISIS. Yet, starting in 1991, U.S. protection of the Kurds in northern Iraq from Saddam Hussein's brutality has led to a de facto independent Kurdish state. And the failure of the Shia-led government in Baghdad to live up to its obligations to the Kurds, including providing basic security assistance, helping cope with 1.6 million people fleeing violence, or reversing its 2014 suspension of its central government's budget allocation, has driven the Kurds to re-assert their aspiration for independence.

Kurdish Regional President Masoud Barzani understands the risks involved and the need to proceed with caution before declaring a de jure independent Kurdistan. He has repeatedly said he grasps the anxieties the referendum will cause in the region, but he also argues, rightly, that a democratic and stable Kurdistan is a linchpin to



ILLUSTRATION BY LINAS GARSYS

security in the region.

The Kurds are America's best friends in the ongoing quagmire following the American invasion of Iraq in 2003 and the Syrian civil war that has raged since 2011. Kurdish Peshmerga forces helped drive ISIS from Iraqi Kurdistan and cooperated with the Iraqi armed forces in liberating the eastern part of Mosul from the horrors of ISIS occupation earlier this month. The U.S. needs security partners in Iraq. Washington can count on the Kurds.

The region should also begin to view the Iraqi Kurds in a positive light. There are 40 million Kurds in Iraq, Turkey, Iran and Syria. Iraqi Kurdistan promotes stability in these countries, and acts as a driver of democracy. The European Union and Russia have major interests in that stability too.

It is unclear how the Kurds will move forward the referendum on independence. One thing is clear: The referendum is a wake-up call for the Kurds and

the international community to adjust to the new reality that Iraqi Kurdistan will no longer work through Baghdad. They all have work to do.

President Barzani must take several critical steps to improve the government. Certainly, no new state is ever fully ready for independence. Kurdistan's democratic institutions must be strengthened. Kurdistan's stalled economy, lack of access to international markets for its oil, and its challenges with cronyism, corruption and governance need to be addressed.

Efforts to finalize a new constitution remain stalled. Doing so must be prioritized, and it must embrace the highest international standards for individual human rights, as well as linguistic, religious, ethnic, women's and national minority rights.

The fight against ISIS stalled Erbil's economic recovery. But so has the lack of transparency and legal frameworks essential to growth. The Kurds must create

a predictable environment and banking system for doing business through a legal system that governs commerce and property rights, as well as taxes and tariffs that are levied in a consistent and transparent way.

Corruption continues to undermine the rule of law. The Kurdish government must prosecute and punish corrupt public officials, and provide the civil service with clear anti-corruption guidelines and a code of conduct, especially on government contracting. Publishing data on oil revenues is an important way to enhance transparency.

To attract international assistance to cope with the humanitarian crisis, the Kurdish authorities must develop a comprehensive post-conflict recovery plan focusing on stabilization during the transition from relief to development. And the international community must fund it.

Baghdad's central government must act too. Conflict around unresolved territories must be avoided, especially around oil-rich Kirkuk. In accordance with Article 140 of the Iraqi Constitution, Iraq should hold a separate referendum on the status of the Kirkuk and other disputed territories, with monitoring by the international community. And it must accept the outcome of both referendums.

The referendum on Iraqi Kurdish independence certainly will raise legitimate questions of the future of these Kurdish areas in neighboring countries. But none have the experience of self-government like the Iraqi Kurds. The Kurdistan Regional Government must affirm that it has no plan for a greater Kurdistan incorporating the Kurds of Turkey, Syria and Iran.

The referendum provides an opportunity to spur Iraqi Kurds, Baghdad and the international community to recognize the contributions Kurds are making to stability in the region — and allow them to determine their own future. Done correctly, a democratic, prosperous and stable Iraqi Kurdistan — whether nominally part of Iraq or independent — will advance the interests of the Kurds, Iraq, the region and the broader international community.

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Ambassador Nancy Soderberg has served in the White House as Deputy National Security Adviser, as an Ambassador to the United Nations, and chair of the 2015 Task Force Report, "State-Building in Iraqi Kurdistan." Currently, she is President and CEO of Soderberg Global Solutions and the Director of the Public Service Leadership Program at the University of North Florida in Jacksonville, Florida. Follow her @nancysoderberg.



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Kurdistan referendum stands on ‘solid legal footing’



By David Tafuri

Two hundred and forty-one years ago this month our Founding Fathers declared America’s independence. When they debated the issue, they could not agree on whether the colonies

were prepared to be self-sufficient, their internal differences could be resolved, or if they were even ready to withstand the challenges of foreign powers. But they knew they had a compelling legal and moral basis for separating from Great Britain. It was rooted in the principle that governments must derive “their just powers from the consent of the governed,” as Thomas Jefferson wrote.

On June 7, Iraq’s Kurdistan Regional Government (KRG) announced plans to hold a referendum on independence across the already semi-autonomous region. The referendum will be a milestone in the more than 100 year struggle of Kurds living in Iraq under governments they did not choose and which at times delivered such violence, oppression and indignity upon the Kurdish population that they make the American colonists’ list of grievances against Great Britain seem trivial.

The referendum is merely a first step on the path to independence and, should it pass, will not automatically signify creation of a new state. It is, however, a momentous exercise of the universal right of self-determination — a right that flowered in the audacious actions of our Founding Fathers in 1776. The Kurds are on solid legal footing as they take this step.

The analysis of whether a territory such as the Kurdistan Region may seek independence must begin, but not end, with the law of the governing country. Iraq’s 2005 Constitution explicitly recognizes the Kurdistan Region as a semi-autonomous region, but is silent



PHOTO CREDIT: KURDISTAN IRAQ TOURS LLC/TOUR GUIDE

on a process for secession. We must therefore look to international law. Self-determination — defined as the process by which a country determines its own statehood and forms its own allegiances and government — is enshrined as a fundamental right under international law by the United Nations Charter.

Article 1 of the Montevideo Convention sets out the most widely accepted formulation of the criteria for statehood under international law. It provides that states should possess the following characteristics: 1) a permanent population, 2) a defined territory, 3) a government, and 4) capacity to enter into relations with other states. Because the Kurdistan Region has been functionally separate from the rest of Iraq since 1991 and legally recognized as a semi-autonomous region with its own government since at least the ratification of Iraq’s 2005 Constitution, it had a head start on meeting each of these criteria. In many ways, it has already satisfied them.

It is worth reviewing each. Unlike some independence movements, the Kurds in Iraq have a permanent population that is demonstrably different from the rest of Iraq. They are a separate ethnicity with their own language and culture. This has made them a target for oppression, but the area they occupy in southwest Asia has been their home for more than 1,000 years. The territory is defined with reference to the three traditional Iraqi provinces that make up the region, Erbil, Dohuk and Sulaymaniyah. There are also “disputed territories,” on the boundary which include large parts of a fourth province, Kirkuk,

whose status needs to be negotiated in the future. But as a base, there is a defined area where Kurds live and which is administered by the KRG.

The KRG developed as a legitimate government over the 17 years since the first Gulf War. It is elected, has separate branches of government, an independent judiciary, its own parliament and other institutions, which though in need of further maturity and transparency, already provide for the basic needs of the people. The KRG has also carved out a highly safe and tolerant area in an otherwise violent country. There is almost no aspect of life in Kurdistan that is touched by the central government of Iraq anymore. Finally, with respect to the capacity to enter into relations with other countries, Kurdistan already engages in diplomacy and foreign relations, has representative offices in 14 countries, and there are 35 foreign countries with consulates or embassy offices in Kurdistan’s capital, Erbil.

In addition to the legitimacy of the group’s claim to statehood (i.e., does the seceding population meet the Montevideo Convention qualifications), it will take actual recognition of Kurdistan’s independence by other countries for Kurdistan to be treated as a sovereign state. Thus far, a few have already indicated they would recognize it as independent. These include Saudi Arabia, United Arab Emirates, Hungary and Israel. More countries, including some in Europe, have expressed general support for the principle of self-determination in Kurdistan, but have not yet indicated they would recognize its independence.

Other nations oppose the referendum and any expression whatsoever of self-determination for Kurdistan. These include Kurdistan’s neighbors: Iran, Turkey and Syria. The views of these countries should be taken into account, but legal scholars would be hard-pressed to find a basis under international law to oppose self-determination for Kurds in Iraq because of issues Kurdistan’s neighbors face in their own countries. Other opponents argue Kurdistan is not ready to be independent and its internal political struggles indicate it cannot govern itself. These are all arguments that our Founding Fathers confronted and, obviously overcame, as they stood on the precipice of declaring independence in America.

The referendum will likely pass overwhelmingly. The KRG has indicated if it does, it will begin negotiations for independence. It has already initiated these discussions with Baghdad. The dialogue will become more intense after the referendum, but there is some possibility to negotiate secession on a timetable comfortable for both Baghdad and Kurdistan.

Whether the Kurdistan will ultimately be successful in becoming independent depends on multiple factors, some political, but it has already demonstrated it fulfills the criteria for statehood under international law.

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David Tafuri is an international lawyer at Dentons and an adviser and legal counsel to the KRG. Follow @DavidTafuri



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Can the Kurds win public — and American — support?



By Dr. Douglas Layton

On Sept. 25, the Kurdistan Region of Iraq has scheduled a “binding” referendum on independence — a clear message the Kurds will no longer tolerate the repeatedly violated promises of Baghdad.

Critical questions: 1) If the Kurds realize their centuries-old dream of independence, could they survive? and 2) Where should America come down on the question of Kurdish self-determination?

The U.S. State Department, Baghdad, and especially Turkey (fearing the aspirations of its Kurds) have voiced opposition to the referendum. Conversely, many have expressed support, including leaders from Israel, Britain, France, Australia, Saudi Arabia and as many as 40 others. Even the U.S. has influential Kurdish supporters in Congress.

In 2006, the Kurds undertook a hugely successful public relations campaign titled, “Kurdistan: The Other Iraq,” centered around a “Thank You America” TV spot that aired on FOX, CNN, BBC, CBS, etc.

The simple ad expressing rare appreciation for American support and sacrifice went viral, and many embraced these little-known people who suffered their own “holocaust” at the hands of Saddam.

But that was 10 years ago, and most Americans today are unenlightened concerning the Kurds. The Kurds desperately need a repeat performance. America will love the Kurds — if the Kurds give them a chance. The Kurds have done a brilliant job winning the admiration of the world in their fight against ISIS, but they have yet to fully capitalize on the respect for which they fought so hard.

The Kurds have fared reasonably well in the more politically sophisticated climate of Europe, but progress is woefully



inadequate in America — an audience more attuned to the “Game of Thrones” than the “Game of Kurdistan.” If they hope to turn the tide for independence, they must win the public relations “war” and thus avoid a potential shooting war with Turkey and/or Baghdad — a crisis that is not unthinkable, as both have invaded Kurdistan in the not-too-distant past.

Only America has the economic and political influence to act as the guarantor of Kurdish independence in this “tough neighborhood,” as it has with Israel since 1948.

It is in America’s national interest to secure the Kurds as a staunch and stable Middle East friend. The Kurds are committed to continuing the fight against ISIS — now a failed “State,” but nonetheless an insurgent force that will not disappear anytime soon. Without the Kurds, the outcome of the battle against ISIS would have ended far differently. Baghdad’s army handed Mosul over to ISIS in June of 2014. ISIS then marched to the very gates of Kurdistan’s capital, Erbil, only to be turned back by the Peshmerga — and this without the sophisticated American arms

The Kurds are suffering economically. However, it is a temporary condition exasperated by nearly 2 million refugees and IDPs now residing within their borders, for whom the Kurds have shown an amazing degree of care and hospitality.

the Iraqi army enjoyed from the start. Without the Kurds going forward, we may well see a resurgent ISIS or worse.

No one, including the Kurds, wants a repeat of the failed 1945 Republic of Mahabad, when Kurds briefly declared independence in what is now Iran. It was a flame extinguished almost overnight by overwhelming opposing forces. However, today a sustainable independent Kurdistan is not as bleak a prospect as some make out. The Kurdish Peshmerga is not the handful of revolutionaries they were in 1945. They field over 100,000 seasoned troops who have proven their mettle against all the odds and will fight for freedom if necessary, as the then-weak America did in 1776.

The Kurds are suffering economically. However, it is a temporary condition exasperated by nearly 2 million refugees and IDPs now residing within their borders, for whom the Kurds have shown an amazing degree of care and hospitality. Now that the ISIS crisis is all but past, the economic boom that preceded it will resume, particularly when oil prices rebound, as they surely will.

Kurdistan possesses as much as 25 percent of Iraq’s oil reserves, and this alone could secure its future, but far more meets the astute economic eye. There is also a potential multibillion-dollar tourism industry, as Kurdistan boasts thousands of historical sites nestled within countless lakes, rivers and snow-capped mountains. National Geographic has twice named the KRI in the top 24 destinations in the world.

Kurdistan is also the spillway for all of the water of the region, making it a potential agricultural powerhouse capable of feeding the entire Middle East. There is a Kurdish proverb that aptly states, “When the Arabs run out of oil, they will walk barefoot in the sand to get a drink of water from the Kurds.”

There are unequalled opportunities for those daring enough to stand with the resilient and surprising Kurdish people. Political and economic fortunes are made in the midst of crisis, and both can be made — especially for America — in what could soon become an independent Kurdistan.

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Douglas Layton, Th.D., has lived or worked for over 25 years in the Kurdistan Region of Iraq (KRI). He authored the first and only comprehensive Guide to the region; originated the public relations campaign, “Kurdistan: The Other Iraq”; was one of five experts who testified during the U.S. Senate hearings on Saddam’s genocide against the Kurds; and is co-founder of the KRI’s first inwardly focused tour company, Kurdistan Iraq Tours LLC.

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Kurds: No longer the forgotten people



By Col. Norvell B. DeAtkine

My experience with the Kurds was in December 2003, when I was with a U.S. Army Reserve Civil Affairs unit near Suleimaniya. I had spent many years on active duty in the Middle East as a Foreign Area Officer, but knew very little about the Kurds, as my studies at the American University of Beirut were almost totally focused on Sunni Arabs, Persians and the Palestinian issue.

In my stay near Suleimaniya, I was impressed with the order and security — as opposed to Baghdad, where one was not even safe traveling the road from the airport to the Green Zone. The people were very friendly but reluctant to speak

Arabic. I later learned the core of this reluctance while talking with a young Kurd who pointed to a decrepit, old building upon which a tattered Iraqi flag flew. In passable English, he said the sight of that flag gave him a feeling of shame.

There were some vignettes that brought home to me the spirit and tragedy of the Kurdish people, e.g., the unit bringing musical instruments to the townspeople of Halabja and their sense of joy in receiving them. It brought to mind passages in the Thomas Bois book, “The Kurds,” in which he described the Kurdish passion for music.

I remember the exuberance of the youth crowded around our vehicles; very different from the sullen looks we often received in certain neighborhoods in Baghdad. After visiting the museum of the Halabja chemical attack, it brought on the same sense of revulsion as the Holocaust Museum in Washington, D.C.

I also remember the old Iraqi army tank parked at the entrance of Suleimaniya festooned not with imprecations against an implacable enemy, but with multicolored paintings of flowers.

Returning home, having waded through many books on Kurdistan and the problems involved with support of an independent Kurdistan, I try to reconcile the spirit of the people there with realities on the ground.

Those realities are, to say the least, formidable. The cultural map of Kurdistan encompasses Turkey, Syria, Iran

and Iraq. None of those states want an independent Kurdistan anywhere near them. In addition, the Abadi government of Iraq and, nominally at least, Turkey are allies in the war on terrorism.

Independence for Kurds is not a one-state problem any longer. It is a Middle East problem. During my years of duty in the Middle East, the oft-repeated shibboleth of this half-century was that solving the Arab-Israeli problem was the key to stability in the Middle East. Of course, that was never true. But today we face the spread of political Islam; the imperial ambitions of Iran; and the flashpoint of a Kurdistan or a “greater Kurdistan,” as the suspicious leaders in the Middle East view it.

The problems are easy to point out, but the solutions are well beyond the current diplomatic influence of any great or regional power in the Middle East. Two salient issues among the many are the Kirkuk issue and the plight of the Kurds in Turkey. In the first, facile suggestions that Kurds should be persuaded to give up territory for which they sacrificed a great many lives is a non-starter. In fact, the Kurds can claim credit for stemming the initial ISIS onslaught, giving the Iraqi government breathing space to begin their tortuous counteroffensive. And they blunted the ISIS offensive with inferior weapons, as the ISIS had captured an immense amount of American weapons and ammunition from the Iraqi army fleeing Mosul.

Addressing the second issue: Despite some cosmetic approaches to the Kurds, as long as Turks still maintain that Kurds are “mountain Turks,” and treat them accordingly, no real progress is possible.

The Kurds have been separated by internal divisions, imposed languages, different writing systems, second-class citizenship in four countries, and a host of self-inflicted wounds. Now, however, as the diaspora of Kurds around the world share in their common ethnic identity, their political clout has elevated Western sensibilities to the Kurdish issue.

It would be a mistake to put off recognition of a Kurdish state until all the many disputes, especially borders, are settled. The European case of fragmented communities of Poles and Ukrainians is instructive. For centuries, they were ruled off and on by others, with borders frequently changing, but that never meant they were not Poles or Ukrainians. So it is with Kurds. Their quest for national identity should not be submerged in the morass of great and regional power rivalries or cartographic “abstractions of reality.” They have earned what President Woodrow Wilson promised them 99 years ago.

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Retired Army Col. Norvell B. DeAtkine is a Middle East Area Specialist with many years experience in the Arab world. He has been an instructor in Middle East Studies at the John F. Kennedy Special Warfare Center and School for 18 years.



PHOTO CREDIT: KURDISTAN IRAQ TOURS LLC/TOUR GUIDE

Don't blame the Kurds for Iraq's unraveling



By David L. Phillips

Fighting ISIS created a false sense of national unity among Iraqis. Now that Mosul is liberated, Iraqis must confront their rivalries and decide the country's future. Prime Minister Haider al-Abadi has called for national unity, but Iraq remains deeply divided.

The Government of Iraq (GOI) has no apparent plan for resettlement, reconstruction or reconciliation.

Mosul is a wasteland of rubble and ruin. Without stability and security, displaced people cannot return to their homes. They also need shelter and services, such as water and electricity. Reconstruction will cost at least \$1 billion.

The GOI needs to address the root causes of conflict, engaging Sunnis in the political process. However, it seems unwilling or unable to address the political and economic conditions that radicalized Sunnis and gave rise to the Islamic State in the first place.

Iraq is a graveyard of betrayal and false promises.

The November 2010 Erbil Agreement

established 19 power-sharing principles. It resolved a political crisis between Shiites and Sunnis, dividing leadership positions across a multiparty and multisectarian coalition. However, the agreement was never implemented.

Instead of power-sharing, Prime Minister Nouri al-Maliki harassed and arrested prominent Sunni politicians. He purged Iraq's professional armed forces of Sunni officers and brought security forces and militias under his direct control. Mr. Maliki cut the budget of the Sunni Awakening, which fought al-Qaeda, leaving thousands unemployed.

Iranian-backed Shiite militias — Popular Mobilization Forces — continue to operate independently with government sanction. Their activities create insecurity in provinces with a mix of Sunnis and Shiites.

Mr. Maliki was replaced by Mr. Abadi as prime minister in 2014. Iraqis view him as weak and ineffective. Sunnis have little confidence, despite Mr. Abadi's efforts at reform.

Constitution promised a referendum on the status of Kirkuk. But the referendum never happened.

Failure to address Kirkuk's status exacerbated other core Kurdish concerns, such as Kurdish ownership of natural resources and the sharing of oil revenues. In 2013, Baghdad suspended payments to the Kurdistan Regional Government (KRG) of oil sales from Kirkuk, pocketing the revenue for itself. The U.S. generously supported the Iraqi armed forces, but Baghdad refused to share resources or equipment with Kurdish "Peshmerga."

The KRG plans a referendum on independence for Sept. 25, 2017. The KRG insists it will not move precipitously, preferring a friendly divorce from Iraq.

Where does the U.S. stand on Iraqi Kurdistan's independence?

Though the Trump administration is nominally opposed, it is agnostic about assisting Iraq's long-term recovery. Washington increasingly recognizes that Iraqi Kurds are America's best

partners in the region. They are a bulwark against extremism. The U.S. and Iraqi Kurds share values. Both believe in human rights and democracy. Both adamantly oppose radical Islamism.

have a lot in common. Both are small states surrounded by hostile neighbors. In 2014, Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu endorsed the "Kurdish aspiration for independence," citing "the collapse" of Iraq. According to Mr. Netanyahu, Kurds are a "fighting people that has proved its political commitment, political moderation, and deserves political independence."

The map of the Middle East is changing. States created by the 1923 Treaty of Lausanne, such as Iraq and Syria, are inherently unstable.

The U.S. needs a reality-based approach to the Middle East. Iraq is not viable; Arabs in Iraq do not get along. Fighting ISIS may have temporarily masked their differences. But after Mosul, Iraq is still beset by dysfunctional politics.

When Iraq unravels, don't blame the Kurds. The responsibility for Iraq's demise rests with Iraqis who pursue sectarian agendas, undermining pluralism and inviting meddling nefarious neighbors.

The U.S. should work with its friends, rather than try to placate its adversaries. Iraqi Kurdistan, as a sovereign and independent state, will be a driver of democratization in the region and a reliable ally of the United States.

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David L. Phillips is director of the Program on Peace-building and Rights at Columbia University's Institute for the Study of Human Rights. He served as a senior adviser and foreign affairs expert to the Near Eastern Affairs Bureau of the U.S. Department of State during the George W. Bush administration. He is author of "Losing Iraq: Inside the Postwar Reconstruction Fiasco" and "The Kurdish Spring: A New Map for the Middle East." His most recent book is "An Uncertain Ally: Turkey Under Erdogan's Dictatorship."

Though the Trump administration is nominally opposed, it is agnostic about assisting Iraq's long-term recovery. Washington increasingly recognizes that Iraqi Kurds are America's best partners in the region. They are a bulwark against extremism. The U.S. and Iraqi Kurds share values.

Iraqi Kurds have likewise lost faith in Baghdad's ability to protect their interests.

After the toppling of Saddam Hussein, Kurds bent over backwards to avoid breaking up Iraq. Kurds deferred their demand for independence, opting for a federal, democratic Iraq, with decentralized governance.

Article 140 of Iraq's 2005

partners in the region. They are a bulwark against extremism. The U.S. and Iraqi Kurds share values. Both believe in human rights and democracy. Both adamantly oppose radical Islamism.

In the Middle East, "the enemy of my enemy is my friend." The KRG does not speak loudly about its cooperation with Israel, including oil shipments to the Israeli port of Ashkelon. Kurds and Israelis

'The Kurdish moment has come'



PHOTO CREDIT: ISAAC DARNALL

By Stephen Mansfield

It has been nearly 100 years since the world promised the Kurdish people a nation of their own. That promise came as World War I drew to an end. At a Paris peace conference, the victors in that great war signed the Treaty of Sevres, which guaranteed self-determination for the Kurds and named them specifically as overdue for nationhood.

Tragically, it was a promise that could not withstand the complexities of the Arab world and European dreams inflamed by oil. Instead of nationhood, the Kurds were bundled into a newly conceived entity called Iraq.

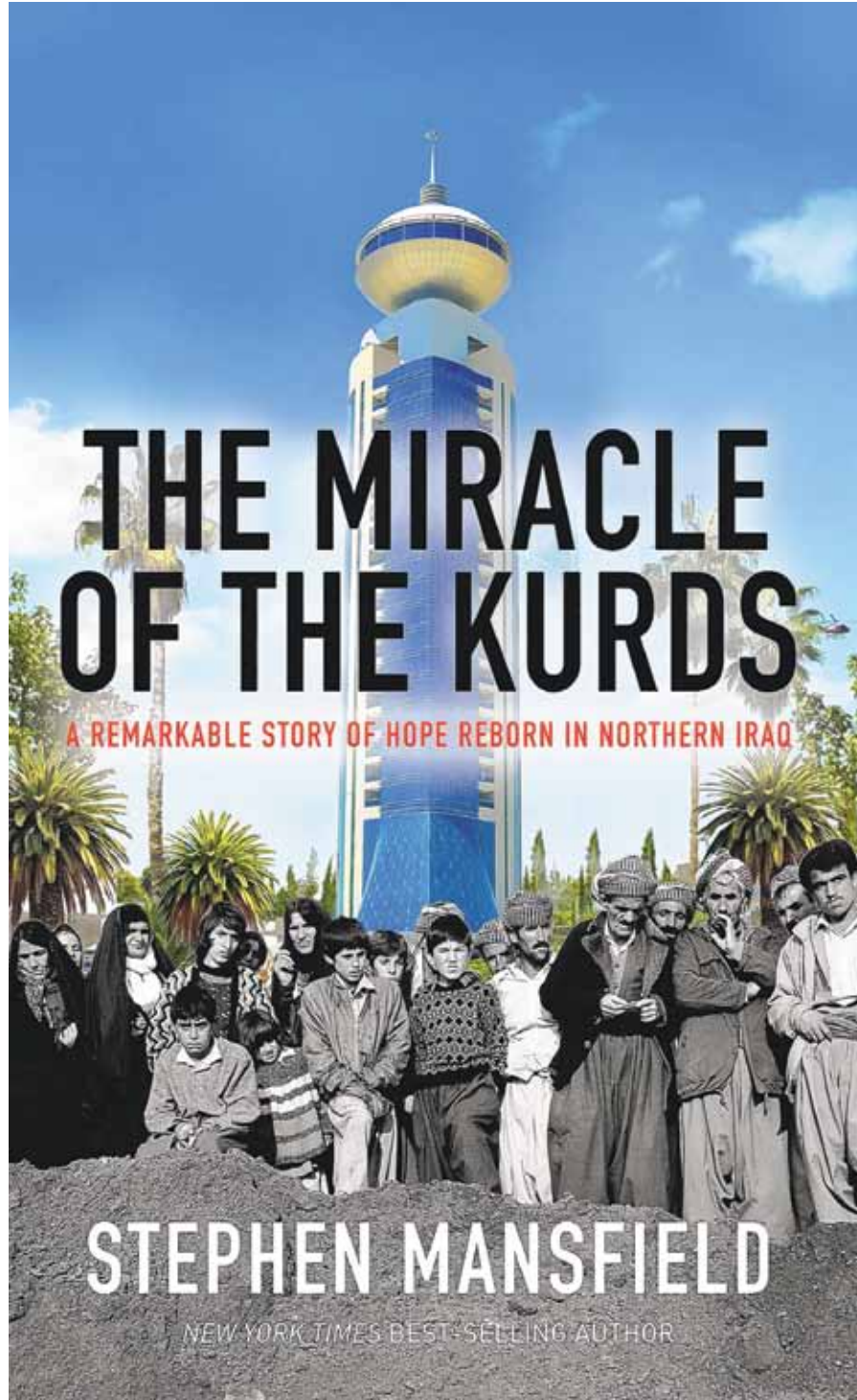
They would suffer much in the next 100 years as a result. Their own government in Baghdad would often treat them as enemies, the Western powers would alternatively ignore and betray them, and for decades Saddam Hussein's Baathist regime would seek to wipe them from the face of the earth.

Now, though, at long last, the Kurdish moment has come. On Sept. 25, the Kurdish Regional Government in Northern Iraq will conduct a referendum on independence. If it passes, as it surely will, the Kurdish people will have made their intentions known to a watching world. We will be free. We will have a nation of our own. We will have a place among the nations of the earth.

When this moment comes, the United States and her allies ought to hasten to support Kurdish independence in every way possible and with every resource available.

This is certainly because a promise was made to the Kurdish people and its fulfillment is long overdue. Yet there is more.

The Kurds are the largest people group in the world — 35 million strong — who do not have a homeland of their own. Denying them a place among the nations any longer



The West should also support Kurdish independence because the Kurds represent what we hope for the future of the Middle East. They are fiercely pro-democracy, Western-friendly, and, surprisingly, positive toward Israel.

would make a mockery of Western declarations about human rights, ethnic self-determination and international justice.

The West should also support Kurdish independence because the Kurds represent what we hope for the future of the Middle East. They are fiercely pro-democracy, Western-friendly, and, surprisingly, positive

toward Israel.

They are also intent upon a free-market society. In the days between Saddam Hussein's atrocities against them and the rise of ISIS, days in which the Iraqi Kurds could take their affairs into their own hands, they put out the welcome mat to foreign investment in a stunningly innovative 2006 investment law; connected the

Erbil Stock Exchange to the NASDAQ; declared war on the vestiges of Baathist regime socialism; and began encouraging entrepreneurship on a vast scale.

The result? In 2013, the Kurds of Iraqi Kurdistan found themselves on the "must visit" lists of National Geographic, Conde Nast and The New York Times. This in a recent war zone. The transformation the Kurds effected was a miracle. Then, of course, ISIS struck. Other priorities rushed to the fore.

The Iraqi Kurds are also what the West should want the Middle East to be in matters of religion. Though the Kurds are 97 percent Muslim, they are moderate and open. There is a Christian department in the Kurdish Regional Government (KRG). There is also a Yazidi department, that religious minority ISIS has so bloodily targeted in recent years. The senior mullah of Kurdistan has said, "I am a Kurd first, a Muslim second. I will not allow the radicalism of other Middle Eastern nations to torment us in Kurdistan."

This is all the democratic nations of the world might hope for. And the Kurds are leading the way.

A promise has been made, then. A people have prepared themselves. They have proven themselves ready. Their time has now come. We must stand with the Kurdish people as their moment in history dawns.

There will, of course, be birth pangs. Nearby nations will oppose Kurdish independence and blood will likely be shed. The Kurds themselves will understandably stumble along the way. No nation comes into the world fully formed. Yet come into the world as a free and independent nation they must.

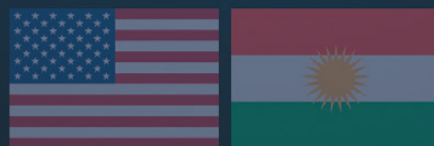
Our destined role is to be vigilant midwives to this historic birth and to hope that one day we may say of Kurdistan, in the words of one of her poets, that

*From this day on
She was a flute,
And the hand of the wind
Endowed her wounds with melodies,
She has been singing ever since for
the world.*

Stephen Mansfield is a faith and culture commentator and best-selling author of over 20 books, including "The Miracle of the Kurds: A Remarkable Story of Hope Reborn in Northern Iraq" (Worthy Publishing, 2014). He is also founder of The Mansfield Group (StephenMansfield.TV), a media training firm based in Washington, D.C.



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5 reasons for U.S. to support an independent Kurdistan



By Brig. Gen. Ernie Audino

Post-Mosul Iraq is no place for negotiators wearing loafers and pin-striped suits. It's a place of dusty boots and bare-knuckle competition, where results on the ground are a function of muscle and not of eloquence. It's a place

where Tehran applauds Washington's polite adherence to a One-Iraq policy, even while substantial Iranian combat power flows insidiously into Iraq to effect a functional annexation of the lion's share of Iraqi terrain. While Washington urges everyone in Iraq to just get along, they don't, and they never have. Continued American supplication is pointless.

Here's the practical reality: Baghdad has become Tehran West. It's the capital of a regime whose ministries are overwhelmingly headed by Shia interests aligned with their co-religionists in Tehran, and it is supported by an Iraqi Army that is 75 percent Shia and augmented by Iran's proxy force of 110,000 Shia militiamen inside Iraq. Tehran dominates over 60 percent of Iraq. It's in Tehran's interest to next dominate Iraq's Kurdish region. It's in our interest to prevent it.

Here's why we must: A strong Kurdistan, independent of Baghdad's chronic dysfunction and Tehran's malevolent influence, materially advances five important American interests.

The destruction of ISIS — will not happen without the Kurds.

Their leading role in the destruction of ISIS as an organization cannot be reasonably disputed. The Kurds stopped, held and rolled back ISIS, and then waited two years while the Iraqi Army re-cocked after running away in 2014. Kurdish forces then isolated Mosul as the necessary precondition to its recent liberation by a revitalized Iraqi Army, albeit one infused with Iranian muscle. Meanwhile, Syrian Kurds lead the operation to seize Raqqa, the ISIS capital. ISIS simply will not be destroyed and kept that way without the Kurds.

The defeat of the jihadi ideology of ISIS — will not happen without moderate Sunni voices.

Destruction of a jihadi army is one thing, and the defeat of jihadi ideology is another. The two are related, of course, but the first is a relatively short-term kinetic effort, and the second is not. Victory against both is in U.S. interest, but the U.S. will not have a leading role in the second. That is the province for moderate Sunni voices, among those the

Kurds. The Kurdish persistent resistance to extreme Islam is well-known and has been since the first outside Islamist groups began concerted proselytizing into portions of Kurdistan as early as 1952. Sixty-five years later and the black flag of ISIS still doesn't fly over Kurdish soil.

Re-establishing a balance of power in the Gulf — means checking Iranian power, not accommodating it.

The recent liberation of Mosul is an important victory, but we must also be honest about a resulting condition — Iran used its sizable proxy participation in that operation to add terrain to the dominant position it gained in the Gulf after the withdrawal of U.S. troops from Iraq in 2012. Iran now strives to control Kurdish soil between Mosul and the Syrian border to enable a physical link from Tehran to Syria's Mediterranean shoreline and to Tehran's Hezbollah allies in Lebanon. While Western eyes shift to Raqqa, Tehran maintains 15,000 Shia

» see **AUDINO** | C21

The Kurds: An excellent example of ‘what can be’



By Gen. Anthony Zinni

I had no idea who the Kurds were until April 6, 1991. At that time I was the Deputy Operations officer at the U.S. European Command. As the Gulf War wound down, we were alerted to an ongoing brutal massacre that Saddam was conducting of Iraqis in the northern provinces of Iraq. We were ordered to immediately deploy to the region and provide support and protection for those victims of his wrath who had defied his tyranny. These were the Kurds. I was to spend the next seven months on Operation Provide Comfort and learn a great deal about these tough, proud and resilient people who tenaciously fought for their freedom. In those months in southern Turkey and northern Iraq, I became fascinated in who these people were — their history, their culture and their character. They fought for centuries to preserve their identity, despite attempts by the shifting



PHOTO CREDIT: KURDISTAN IRAQ TOURS LLC, TOUR GUIDE

powers in the region to swallow them up. What immediately impressed those of us involved in this mission was not only how grateful they were for our intervention on their behalf, but also how much they wanted to do for themselves. From their tough-as-nails fighters, the Peshmerga, to those who wanted to be part of constructing the temporary camps. In today’s environment, where we question allies’ willingness to burden share and assume equal risk, we have never had to question that when it comes to the Kurds. The region and the people that we protected in Operation Provide Comfort have proven themselves to be dedicated allies. They have taken on the challenges

of terrorism and fought bravely against great odds. They have paid a steep price for their commitment to arms and never wavered in the face of the horrors perpetrated by the likes of ISIS and others who have wished to destroy them and their culture. All they asked for was the arms and support necessary to defend themselves and defeat the forces threatening them and the region. Even as the vicious fighting continued over the years, they built a vibrant and democratic society in the area we committed to protecting in 1991. The Kurds are a model for all persecuted peoples of this region. As evil forces such as ISIS are rolled back and defeated, it is clear that a thriving and

prosperous Kurdish society can grow based on our shared values. The fighting will eventually draw down and there is worry about what comes next in the troubled and devastated area that remains. The Kurds provide an excellent example of what can be. By supporting them and investing in their continued development, we can help create a model for stability. Retired U.S. Marine Corps Gen. Anthony C. Zinni is a former Commander in Chief of the U.S. Central Command and former Special envoy for the Middle East in the George W. Bush administration.

AUDINO

From page C20

militiamen near Tal Afar to the west of Mosul, expands a new nearby airstrip, endeavors to co-opt the Yezidis in Sinjar on the Syrian border, and prepares to use the upcoming battle for Hawija, a remaining ISIS snakepit in Iraq, to insert Iranian proxies south of Kurdish-administered Kirkuk. Tehran also plans to spend \$4 billion on intelligence activities inside the Kurdistan Region of Iraq (KRI). The result: Iran is consolidating on three sides of the KRI and will be in position to compel our Kurdish ally’s behavior in the future. **Promoting more democratic allies — is a key purpose of rational U.S. foreign policy.** The Kurdistan Region of Iraq is an imperfect democracy, but so was ours until we figured it out. We won our independence in

1776 and then argued with each other for the next 13 years until we fully ratified the Constitution. The KRI is also trying to figure it out, but it seized the opportunity provided in 2003 by our invasion and lifted itself from the ashes of genocide to produce the most peaceful, the most stable, the most democratic and the most American-friendly region in Iraq. To date, no American has died by an enemy’s hand on Kurdish-controlled soil. **Maintaining access to energy — means keeping it in the hands of allies, not in the clutches of adversaries.** Iranian proxies dominate terrain over two-thirds of Iraqi oil reserves and have recently gained positions on three sides of the remaining third, that lying beneath Kurdish soil in the north. This is no minor matter, as the combined reserves in Iraq are second largest in OPEC. Here’s why this is particularly important: Kurdish energy reserves pumped

north through Turkey have the potential to help undermine Russian energy levers on Ankara and the European Union (EU). NATO partner Turkey relies on Moscow for 35 percent of its annual oil and 60 percent of its natural gas. The Europeans are no less dependent on Russian energy, and are sufficiently concerned of the associated strategic risk that Brussels published an Energy Security Strategy in 2014 purposed primarily to diversify its energy purchases away from Moscow. But the Europeans are not the only ones dependent on Russian oil — the Russians are, too. More than 70 percent of their exports are of energy, which generates 52 percent of the Russian federal budget. Moscow’s largest energy customer, the EU, consumes a full 84 percent of Russian oil exports and 76 percent of Russian natural gas exports. An American strategic reversal in the Middle East cannot be delivered by ISIS, but it can be driven by Tehran (and

allied Moscow), displacing Washington from its interests in Iraq. An independent Kurdistan, strengthened by resolute U.S. support, will prevent that by disrupting Tehran’s territorial ambitions. Our doing so, however, requires courage. Real World geopolitics is the domain of self-interest, and its associated calculus is one of power. That this sounds unseemly to Western ears is human, but it is also immaterial. When stakes are high, great nations make themselves greater not just by exercising remarkable restraint when patience runs thin, but by imposing their will when negotiators in loafers meet smash-mouth in dusty boots. Retired Army Brig. Gen. Ernie Audino, is a Senior Military Fellow at the London Center for Policy Research. He is also the only U.S. Army general to have served a year as a combat adviser embedded in a Kurdish peshmerga brigade in Iraq.

Understanding the Kurdistan Region as a strategic U.S. ally



By Laurie Mylroie

Last May, Lt. Gen. Vincent Stewart, director of the Defense Intelligence Agency, told the Senate Armed Services Committee that Kurdish independence “is on a trajectory where it is probably not ‘if,’ but ‘when.’”

Mr. Stewart also explained that after ISIS is defeated in Mosul, the “greatest challenge” to the Baghdad government will be “to reconcile the differences between the Shia-dominated government, the Sunnis out west, and the Kurds in the north.”

“Failure to address these challenges,” he warned, “will ultimately result in conflict among all of the parties,” which could deteriorate into “civil strife” in Iraq.

Baghdad has now proclaimed victory in Mosul, but there is little indication that it is rising to the task Mr. Stewart described. Iraq’s government remains strongly sectarian.

Baghdad’s failure to address the needs and concerns of Sunni Arabs prepared the ground for ISIS’ spectacular advance into Iraq in the summer of 2014. The Obama administration insisted that then-Prime Minister Nuri al-Maliki step down before it would support Baghdad.

Mr. Maliki was replaced by Haydar al-Abadi, a far less sectarian figure and by all accounts a decent man. However, as in Washington, the mere replacement of one leader by another is most unlikely to change policy fundamentals (just ask Donald Trump!)

Indeed, in some respects, the war against ISIS has increased Iraq’s sectarianism. It has created significant new vehicles for promoting Iran’s influence: the Shia’ite-dominated militias, known as the Popular Mobilization Forces (PMF), which arose to support the Iraqi army in fighting ISIS.

Iran has long experience creating and

directing such organizations. The first and best example is Hezbollah, which Tehran helped found in Lebanon in the early 1980s, following Israel’s ill-fated invasion of that country. Thirty years later, Hezbollah remains an important institution for projecting Iranian influence in the region!

Some Iranian-supported PMF leaders are shocking figures, linked to lethal assaults on Americans. In 1983, Iranian-backed terrorists bombed the U.S. and French embassies in Kuwait. Kuwaiti authorities charged Abu Mahdi al-Muhandis with involvement in the attacks. Mr. Muhandis now heads a major PMF group in Iraq.

Qais al-Khazali is another such figure. He was involved in Iran’s IED campaign against U.S. forces in Iraq before 2012 and

mistake, and Washington is now engaged with Baghdad on reaching agreement for a longer-term U.S. military presence.

Iran, along with its local allies, strongly opposes that. Whether such an agreement can be reached remains uncertain. Moreover, Iraq will hold elections next year and there is no guarantee that Mr. Abadi will remain prime minister. Any agreement reached with his government could easily be undone if someone else wins the elections.

However, in marked contrast to the Arab areas of Iraq, the Kurdistan Region — both people and government — is extremely friendly to Americans. The Kurdistan Regional Government will hold a referendum on independence on Sept. 25.

The U.S., short of allies in that part of

A year after the 1991 Gulf War, coalition air forces, operating out of Turkey, kept Saddam Hussein’s army at bay. Saddam had imposed an internal embargo on the Kurds, who were also subject to the international sanctions on Iraq as a whole.

Of course, the U.S. should not have imposed sanctions meant to keep Saddam weak on the Kurdistan Region (that was the manifestation then of America’s commitment to a “one-Iraq” policy.) Despite the difficulties, the Kurds carried on, relieved that Saddam’s brutal oppression had ended and grateful to Americans for that.

But why defend this region from Turkey? Wouldn’t a U.S. airfield in Kurdistan be nifty? The U.S. could sit at the backs of both Saddam and Iran’s mullahs. I asked the two Kurdish leaders — Massoud



now leads another powerful group.

Iraq scarcely controls its own borders, and Tehran is far advanced in its objective of creating a corridor under the control of loyal militias, from its border with Iraq, on through to Syria and Lebanon.

Nor does Baghdad appear to be doing what is necessary to reconcile with its Sunni Arab population. Human Rights Watch reports that Iraqi forces are engaged in widespread, retaliatory executions in west Mosul, while the Iraqi government does little to stop it. The “revenge killings will haunt Iraq for generations to come,” it warns.

U.S. officials regard the U.S. withdrawal for Iraq in 2012 as a major

the world, should welcome this vote. It could well bring significant advantages. One of the most concrete and obvious is military basing facilities.

An independent Kurdistan would happily provide the U.S. military bases into the indefinite future — and without political conditions that others might impose. Even now, the U.S.-led fight against ISIS in Syria is supplied from the Kurdistan Region — and not from Turkey, which strongly objects to the U.S. partnership with the Kurdish-led Syrian Democratic Forces.

In 1992, when I first toured the Kurdistan Region, I found the vast size and peacefulness of the area very impressive.

Barzani and Jalal Talabani — what they thought of the idea. “You are welcome,” they each replied.

There are other reasons why the U.S. should support the Kurdish independence referendum, including to make the Middle East a better place, where the aspirations of the people more closely align with the actions of their government.

Such a process will be long and slow, but the Kurdistan Region is a very good place for the next step.

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Laurie Mylroie is a Washington, D.C. Correspondent for Kurdistan24, covering the Pentagon and State Department.

The Peshmerga: Fearsome, fearless fighters



By Michael Pregent

My first deployment to Iraq was as an embedded adviser to a reflagged Kurdish Peshmerga battalion in Mosul in 2005.

The 3rd Battalion of the 4th Brigade of the 2nd Iraqi Army Division was a Peshmerga unit from Duhok and would be responsible for conducting counterinsurgency operations in West Mosul at the height of the Sunni insurgency.

We were 10 American advisers embedded with a 500-man Kurdish force commanded by Col. Nooraldeen al-Herki in the heart of al Qaeda's stronghold in West Mosul. We were also the luckiest 10 Americans in Iraq — we had a pro-American force that made American partner units more effective in decimating al Qaeda.

We partnered with LTC Eric Kurilla's Deuce 4 (<https://www.michaelyon-online.com/gates-of-fire.htm>), a Stryker Battalion out of Fort Lewis, Washington. The Peshmerga unit I was with was his go-to partner unit for developing intelligence and conducting raids against al Qaeda High-Value-Targets — military for al Qaeda leadership. This U.S.-Peshmerga partnership was very successful against al Qaeda terrorists in Mosul and oversaw security for parliamentary elections in 2005.

In 2006, we pushed to the east side of Mosul or as the Kurds call it the “left-side” as they look south from Kurdistan. Security improved in Mosul due to the effectiveness of this Peshmerga unit to the point where President George W. Bush touted Mosul as an example of what an effective operation looks like.

Most of the unit was familiar with Mosul's neighborhoods and tribal leaders, and they spoke Mosul's dialect of Iraqi Arabic. They effectively helped U.S. forces protect the 2.2 million Sunnis, Kurds and Christians, and pushed al Qaeda out of Mosul — all without knocking down a single building in Iraq's second-largest city.

With security improving, this unit,

along with its American partner unit, deployed to Baghdad to take part in the operation that decimated al Qaeda — The Surge.

Most Iraqi units at the time were afraid to take on both al Qaeda and Iranian-backed Shia militias, but this unit did exactly that when it was deployed to one of the most dangerous parts of Baghdad. This Peshmerga unit was one of the first units capable of operating as a national force, meaning it could be effective in areas bordering Kurdish areas and as effective in areas where Shia militias and al Qaeda stoked sectarian flames.

The Peshmerga were the chosen force to fill the ranks of the Iraqi Special Operations Forces (ISOF); they partnered with American Special Operators to conduct raids against key al Qaeda and Shia militia targets.

effective Kurdish and Sunni commanders, only to drop the charges once they were removed from command. It was the easiest way to have them removed from their positions and filled with his cronies.

The 2nd and 3rd Iraqi Divisions that operated in Talafar and Mosul were now politicized to the point where they were ineffective in combat — the Peshmerga were no longer wearing the Iraqi Army uniform. Mr. Maliki had successfully purged competent Kurdish commanders and their troops from the two divisions that helped decimate al Qaeda during The Surge.

With the purge complete and Mr. Maliki's cronies in place, ISIS saw an opening. Two short years later — Mr. Maliki's politicized force abandoned the citizens of Talafar and Mosul and left U.S. tanks and Humvees to ISIS.

john-allen-isis-war-obama-2015-9) — I told him that ISIS cannot hold territory against a capable ground force with U.S. air support and cited the Peshmerga's role in retaking the Mosul Dam as an example. It was this example that was used as model for our U.S. strategy.

The Peshmerga stopped ISIS from spreading into Kurdish territory in Iraq, partnered with U.S. Special Operators to bring combat power to the Syrian Kurds fighting ISIS in the Syrian city of Kobane, and sealed off Mosul for two years while waiting for Baghdad to mobilize against ISIS and begin the Mosul offensive.

The U.S. relies on Kurdish intel and weighs it higher than what comes out of Baghdad's intel agencies; we rely on our trusted Kurdish allies and proven brothers in combat against al Qaeda and now in this fight against ISIS. The fight is not



PHOTO CREDIT: KURDISTAN IRAQ TOURS LLC/TOUR GUIDE

Paintings on a Kurdistan wall pay tribute to the bravery of the Peshmerga.

The Peshmerga were so effective that Iraqi Prime Minister Maliki saw them as a potential threat and brought the ISOF under his direct control — and purged the predominantly Kurdish force and replaced them with Shia Party loyalists. He took a counterterrorism strike force and made it a countercoup force — he politicized it and, as a result, made it ineffective.

Mr. Maliki didn't stop there: He purged effective Peshmerga and Sunni Arab Iraqi commanders, prompting my return to Mosul in 2008 to assess the situation on behalf of United States Forces-Iraq (USF-I) Commander Army Chief of Staff Gen. Raymond T. Odierno. Mr. Maliki brought false charges against

There is no doubt that if those effective Sunni and Peshmerga commanders had remained, ISIS would not have been able to roll into Mosul and Talafar — evidenced by the wall ISIS faced when it tried to push into Kurdish territory. The Peshmerga held their own, despite Baghdad's decision to push U.S. arms and equipment to Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps-backed Shia militias, but deny them to the Peshmerga.

The Islamic State's first loss of territory was to a Peshmerga force with U.S. air support — the Mosul Dam, north of Mosul, Iraq. I later had a chance to brief Gen. John Allen upon his appointment by President Barack Obama as the ISIS czar (<http://www.businessinsider.com/>

over and continued success against ISIS will remain dependent on our continued relationship with our Kurdish allies.

When Iraqis — all Iraqis — are worried about security, they go to Kurdistan. There will always be an answer to emerging terrorist threats in Iraq — and the answer will come from the north. From “those who face death” — the Peshmerga.

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Key factors beckon support for Iraqi Kurds



By Lt. Gen. Jay Garner

Once the war with ISIS is concluded in Iraq, the Arabs — both Shia and Sunni — will demand our removal; only the Kurds will want us to remain. It is also certain that Iran will exert far more control over Baghdad than they have in the past.

Prior to the invasion by ISIS in 2014, the Iranians had loosely knitted a strong “Shia Arc” extending from Tehran through Baghdad, Damascus and Beirut. Today, with the strong alliance of the Hezbollah in Lebanon, the Russians and the expeditionary arm of the Hezbollah in Syria, and the presence of the Iranian-led Shia militants in Iraq, the arc is being consolidated into a “thoroughfare” that will control the Levant and significantly increase the horrible attacks on the Israeli population. In a recent op-ed, Charles Krauthammer said the Shiite Crescent is “stretching from Iran through Iraq, Syria and Lebanon to the Mediterranean. If consolidated, it gives the Persians a Mediterranean reach they have not had in 2,300 years.”

We have unwittingly accommodated the Iranians by maintaining our “One Iraq” policy, which guarantees that their proxy government in Baghdad will continue to marginalize the Kurds because it allows Bagdad to block aid, material and revenues for the Kurdish Regional Government and prevents direct assistance. If we continue to aid the Iranians with this senseless policy, no matter how much blood or money we waste, we will not be able to change the outcome.

Consequently, we should develop a strategy that will allow us to continue to have leverage in the region. This must start with the abandonment of the “One Iraq” policy, followed by strong support for the Iraqi Kurds and for their impending referendum. The referendum is not a declaration of independence; it is a proclamation of self-determination. This is the only

win that we can achieve in the region ... but it is a strategic win.

Iraqi Kurdistan provides us with several strategic and economic options. There are significant factors that favor our support of the Iraqi Kurds:

- They are pro-United States and intensely loyal because Operation Provide Comfort in 1991 saved them from starvation and annihilation and Operation Iraqi Freedom in 2003 liberated them from Saddam Hussein.
- They have a freely elected democratic government that willingly receives and protects Christians — in fact, all faiths — throughout the region. (Pictured: Kurdish Peshmerga forces return the cross to a

Considering the above, we should, in conjunction with the Kurdistan Regional Government (KRG), develop a policy that embodies support for KRG independence. For all practical purposes, the old boundaries of Iraq have been destroyed and will not return. The Kurds essentially have been semi-independent since 2003 and almost completely independent since 2014.

We should also establish a continuing U.S. military footprint with 90-day to 120-day training rotations though the deployment of an USAF Air Wing, an Army Brigade Combat Team or a USMC Marine Expeditionary Unit. The training rotation removes the specter of occupation. We should analyze the

is important to us and we will remain involved, and it would signal to our Sunni allies in the Middle East that we are challenging the Iranian domination of the region.

Iraqi Kurdistan not only has large oil reserves, but it also has immense gas reserves — projected to exceed 2 trillion cubic feet. We could, in partnership with the KRG, develop these reserves and pipe gas into Europe; this would, in the future, provide for us tremendous economic leverage to counter Vladimir Putin’s economy.

Finally, such a strategy provides the Kurds who, next to the Israelis, are our most loyal allies in the Middle East, with freedom from the Iranian puppet



IMAGE COURTESY OF LT. GEN. JAY GARNER.

Kurdish Peshmerga returned a cross to a church after a battle.

local church that was destroyed by ISIS).

- They occupy one of the most strategic locations in that part of the world: Our enemy Iran is to their east; their puppet Iraq is to their south; our enemy Syria is to their west; and Turkey, a NATO ally, is to their north, which would give us excellent lines of communication.
- They have abundant natural resources in oil and gas, which are among the largest remaining hydrocarbon reserves in the world.

potential of deploying a Navy ground-based Aegis or Army THAAD System to engage Iranian ballistic missiles that would be launched toward Europe or the U.S. This would not only catch the Iranians off guard, it would also serve to counter the Russian footprint that is being established in the region. These rotations serve as a trigger for any incursions into the area. They provide a secure force projection platform that allows rapid deployment of forces into the area. They serve as a signal to both our allies and our enemies that the area

government in Baghdad and noticeably aligns them with us. It would establish a dominant U.S. military footprint that serves to notify the world that we remain committed to the region. Lastly, it provides hydrocarbon assets that can be used to reduce or eliminate Europe’s economic dependence on Russia ... another strategic win.

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Retired Lt. Gen. Jay Garner, former Assistant Vice Chief of Staff of the Army, directed humanitarian efforts in the Kurdish Region after the 1991 Gulf War.

The Kurds: Potential strategic partners the U.S. deserves



By Dr. Dlawer Ala'Aldeen

The journey was a tough one, with many successes and failures, but U.S.-KRI relations grew stronger and developed into a mutually rewarding partnership.

The U.S. continued to protect the Iraqi Kurds from Saddam's regime in the years leading up to the regime change in Baghdad in 2003, and ensured that the Kurds would have their fair share in the new Iraq. The U.S. once again came to the rescue of the KRI in the face of the Islamic State (IS) onslaught in 2014 and continued its support to date. The Kurds have reciprocated with unreserved loyalty and solid support for U.S. policies in Iraq. Peshmarga forces became indispensable partners in the U.S.-led global coalition and instrumental in the ultimate military defeat of IS in Iraq.

Some consider this KRI-U.S. partnership a tactical and temporary one, not only because IS is being defeated and the U.S. will ostensibly not need the Kurds for much longer, but also because the U.S. will ultimately stop relying on the Kurds due to their inability, like the rest of Iraq

For a start, the U.S. continues to need strategic partners in the ever-changing Middle East, where its vital interests will remain at stake.

In a region that is in turmoil, there are numerous local, regional and global actors engaged in complex power dynamics and zero-sum games. Terrorism is on the rise with many failed states in the region. The U.S. and Europe face a much-reduced space and leverage for driving and shaping events. Regional state and substate (like KRI) actors have grown in influence across borders. A multitude of non-state actors, legitimized or not, have become increasingly influential in driving events.

The KRI, lying in the heart of the Middle East, is just what the U.S. needs, where it is most needed. The Kurds have proven themselves skillful and dynamic survivors in a conflict zone that is overwhelmed by powerful rivals. They have strong and historic collaborative (love-hate) relations with the Shia political elite of Iraq. They share a long border with the previously IS-occupied Sunni Arab territories, where the challenge of stabilization is greatest. They accommodated the majority of the displaced Sunni Arabs

to KRI, and have maintained relatively good neighborly relationships with both. Finally, being a Muslim-majority country and having been part of Iraq, the KRI leaders have had unhindered access to most of the Arab countries.

On the issue of KRI's internal governance challenges, the U.S. can help a great deal via constructive engagement. KRI leaders have always appreciated the value of a strong partnership with the U.S. The KRI, as a small, emerging nation, remains vulnerable in the world's toughest neighborhood and continues to need the U.S. for political and security support. This gives the U.S. plenty of leverage that it has never used effectively. In fact, the U.S. has the same kind of leverage with all of its allies in the Middle East but was never willing to use it in fear of negative reactions. On the contrary, the previous U.S. administration chose to almost totally disengage with the region, particularly Iraq, and virtually abandoned its obligation to spread the values of liberty and rule-of-law in the Middle East. The consequences were disastrous, forcing the U.S. to return and face a war against the most radical of terrorists.

It might be rare for politicians to request or accept conditional help, but the KRI leaders do when such requests come from trusted friends. They are, and have been, responsive to terms and conditions that are linked to good governance, designed to help their country become a better, stronger and more prosperous place. Only last year, the U.S. offered \$415 million in aid to the Peshmarga and included strict provisions in their contract, demanding measurable steps towards institutionalization of the force. KRG leaders viewed these conditions as "incentives" and "opportunities" to reform. Many used them to convince their fellow leaders to endorse change.

In short, tough love works with the Kurds and the U.S. should help the KRI become the partner it deserves, and the partner KRI deserves to be.

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This year is the 25th anniversary of the election of the first parliament and government of the Kurdistan Region of Iraq (KRI). Thanks to the "Safe Haven" that the U.S. and its European allies



ILLUSTRATION BY GREG GROESCHG

created in 1991 to protect the displaced Kurdish population from Baghdad's brutal attacks, the Kurds turned a crisis into an opportunity to build a forward-looking nation with democratic aspirations.

and other Middle Eastern countries, to promote rule-of-law and good governance and to control corruption, which runs unacceptably deep. However, the U.S. and the KRI can prove otherwise.

and ethnic and religious minorities during the IS war.

Internationally, despite the complexity of the region's political and security dynamics, the KRI political parties have actively engaged with both Iran and Turkey, two rival powers and tough neighbors



Kurdistan referendum is legitimate



By Dr. Walid Phares

Since the Kurdish Regional Government of Northern Iraq, backed by its local legislative assembly, decided to organize a referendum on self-determination, both positive and negative reactions were fielded in Iraq, the Middle East and internationally. Baghdad and the two main neighbors of Iraq — Iran and Turkey — expressed opposition to the

Kurdish popular consultation, each one for different political reasons. Beyond the region, Western European governments expressed concerns yet not irreversible opposition. Europe's major powers have at the same time opposed separatism within their own borders (as in Northern Ireland, Basque and Corsica) yet have supported it in the former Yugoslavia twice.

In the United States, many members of Congress support the Kurdish referendum and a few openly support the rise of a separate Kurdish state in northern Iraq for historic reasons. As during the presidential campaign, the Trump administration continues to commit to solidarity with the Kurds fighting ISIS, but has not yet developed a direct policy regarding the referendum or separation.

The most recent polls do show that a majority of Kurdish political parties in northern Iraq support the move while non-Kurdish communities are divided on the issue. These are the present geopolitical realities engulfing the projected vote in September. Such complex positioning is not unique. In every similar past ethnic territorial crises, all parties involved reacted to

self-determination requests based on their own interests, the geopolitical context and negotiating abilities. And each case dealt with its own particular conditions within the country and region.

The right for self-determination has been consecrated in the founding charter of the United Nations, and since its founding in 1945, via several General Assembly resolutions recognizing that right for nations to decide their future. However, international law during the Cold War narrowed self-determination to decolonization for realpolitik reasons. Separatism, especially violent separatism, was not encouraged. Hence, long or catastrophic civil wars, such as seen in South Sudan, Nigeria, Eritrea or Kashmir — or even in the case of the Kurdish uprising in Iraq — never ended happily with an emergence of a new state.

With the end of the Cold War, however, international relations allowed for wider acceptance of the principle of separatism, as long as they were peaceful or presented as a solution to human tragedies. Czechoslovakia split smoothly into two republics, both welcomed by the U.N., and later into

NATO and the European Union. The disbanding of Yugoslavia into several independent countries was endorsed by the West, though criticized by Russia. South Sudan got its own state in 2011, and around the globe a number of national and ethnic communities have been striving to achieve statehood. Sovereign statehood is not illegal. Many countries we know, including ours in America, somehow separated from another power in order to exist. But in other cases, instead of separation, nations like Germany reconstituted their national identity by reuniting in 1989. Most countries want to maintain intact borders, and very understandably. Reconstructing frontiers is dangerous and could trigger chaos if not well organized and accepted by all parties concerned.

Separatism has traditionally been seen as a last resort, and thus the world has always demanded justification. The party seeking separation has always been asked to demonstrate that it is indeed different and seeking an identity of its own and that it is suppressed or has experienced tragic and cataclysmic

» see PHARES | C27

events. But what has become a relatively new accepted procedure, a sine qua non condition, is the necessity of holding a referendum. Regardless of the outcome, a referendum is a license to claim statehood. The international community must see the will of the people before recognizing any outcome. Hence we've seen many referendums taking place and not always leading to new borders: Quebec in Canada, Scotland in the United Kingdom, East Timor, Southern Sudan — and requests for such exercises in other countries such as Belgium. In short, referendums are a form of a democratic expression. They are legal, legitimate, and a peaceful tool to help a people move forward or affirm the status quo.

Iraqi Kurdistan has long presented many conditions justifying its right to hold a referendum, even if the results may not automatically lead to a state. The painful history of oppression under Saddam, and the most recent bloody campaign by ISIS against the Kurds and other minorities in northern Iraq since 2014, constitute the tragic elements of the equation. The Kurds of Iraq have already obtained, from their own co-citizens, Arab Sunnis and Shia, a right to form a federative entity in the north, demonstrating the country's recognition of local self-determination for the Kurds. Iraqis have agreed that they are diverse in their constitution, and referendum is not an alien concept to them. In short, the Kurds have a perfect right to organize a referendum to consult their own population regarding their future. But that right is not theirs alone. The new norm of acceptance is to then engage in negotiations with Baghdad after the vote. Scotland and Quebec, for example, were ready for that international norm and prepared to negotiate with their central governments.

The U.S. and the international community know all too well that the Kurds have suffered and that they wish to move forward with their destiny. But four conditions should be met in order for the referendum to be accepted by the outside world:

- (1) It must be peaceful and transparent.
- (2) Non-Kurdish communities, such as Assyrians, Yazidis, Chaldeans, Syriacs, Turkomen, Shabak and Mandeans, should be granted full minorities rights within Iraqi Kurdistan.
- (3) Should the outcome lead to full separation, the new entity should vow not to serve as a springboard for destabilizing neighboring countries by supporting guerillas in these



PHOTO CREDIT: KURDISTAN IRAQ TOURS LLC/TOUR GUIDE

The Sheikh Allah Bazaar is one of the most famous and dynamic markets in Erbil, Kurdistan.

The most recent polls do show that a majority of Kurdish political parties in northern Iraq support the move while non-Kurdish communities are divided on the issue. These are the present geopolitical realities engulfing the projected vote in September.

countries, including (primarily) Turkey.

- (4) Representatives of the northern Iraqi entity should be prepared to engage in full-scale negotiations with the Iraqi government regarding what comes next. Any negotiated and agreed upon settlement between the two parties will be the real guarantee for future stability.

The results of this referendum could simply maintain the status quo, set up a modified and more advanced federal system in Iraq, develop a confederal system of two states within one Iraqi country, or may lead to a Czechoslovak-like peaceful model. What is important for the populations of Iraq and for the Kurds and other minorities is that any move be peaceful, democratic and



PHOTO CREDIT: KURDISTAN IRAQ TOURS LLC/TOUR GUIDE

Korek Mountain Resort near Erbil, Kurdistan.

civilized. After ISIS, Iraq needs calm and stability, secured against a new ISIS, and freed from Iranian domination. The referendum in northern Iraq will be one benchmark in Iraq's evolution. It will demonstrate a political maturity in which ethnic communities can exercise their fundamental right to express themselves without endangering their partners in the state, the minorities among them, or their neighbors in the region. The Kurds of Iraq

will exercise that right and the world will watch them move forward into a more tolerant 21st century.

Walid Phares, Ph.D., is a professor of political science and Middle East expert. He served as foreign policy adviser to presidential candidate Donald Trump in 2016.

The threatened future of Christianity in Iraq

By Archbishop Bashar Warda, C.Ss.R.

I write on behalf of the remaining Christians of Northern Iraq, a threatened and persecuted population, which looks warily to the coming years.

In the three years since the onset of the crisis, when over 100,000 displaced Christians fled Nineveh with death at their heels and arrived at our doors in Erbil, in the Kurdistan Region of Iraq, our Archdiocese has played the lead role in providing care and hope for the vast majority of these people. In this ongoing crisis, we remain always grateful for the solidarity with our friends worldwide, whose generosity has kept us in a position of viability, albeit a tenuous one.

How important has this solidarity been to us during this time? In brief, it has been everything. For without the solidarity of humanitarian outreach from our friends in private, faith-based organizations around the world, we would not have survived these past three years. While the established institutional aid structures ignored us, our friends from the private aid community, large and small, kept us in their hearts and took action to save us.

In looking back on this time, we must note as well the critical support of the Kurdistan Regional Government (KRG) in opening the borders to the displaced Christians during their flight, and for providing us with the space and security to house our people in safety over the past three years. We are grateful, as well, for the moral support that the leaders of the KRG have shown to us by publicly participating in the celebration of our most Holy days, and granting us the practical support necessary to open our medical clinics, schools, and our new university, the Catholic University in Erbil.

Overall we pray that this solidarity may continue, for we are in a time in which Christianity itself will continue to be threatened and persecuted throughout the Mideast — indeed, throughout much of the world — until the minds that have been taught violence and hate can come to see the greater truth of mercy and love, which is inherently common to us all.

In saying this, I wish that I could tell you that our crisis in Iraq has passed, that our people can safely return to their homes, and that our problems have now been resolved. But that is not the case. This coming year may yet prove to be the most dangerous for us since the beginning of the crisis.

While it is true that the Christian lands have been liberated from ISIS, what is left in the wake of the war presents us with still enormous problems to overcome. Our towns in many cases



In saying this, I wish that I could tell you that our crisis in Iraq has passed, that our people can safely return to their homes, and that our problems have now been resolved. But that is not the case. This coming year may yet prove to be the most dangerous for us since the beginning of the crisis.

have been destroyed. This includes homes, and also the power and water systems. Many of those who wish to return have no houses left to return to. Those homes left standing were in most cases looted and stripped of even their wiring and plumbing.

Nineveh, our ancient Christian homeland, remains a disputed territory, caught between the governments in Erbil and Baghdad, along with all the other foreign powers who seek to intervene and control Iraq, whether directly or indirectly. Meanwhile, especially in the Iraqi-controlled sector, the security situation remains uncertain, with rival militias seeking power over each other, often acting as proxies from outside powers. If these powers enter into new conflict, we Christians know only one thing — that we will be the collateral damage once again.

What then can we, and those who

support and value our continued existence in Iraq, do during this time of transition to take care of our people?

The immediate and greatest priority must be to return the displaced Christians to their homes wherever it is possible to do so. A world whose conscience feels for us at all must support these efforts and do so now, while the demographic future of Nineveh is so clearly at risk. We must be clear in this: The future of Nineveh will be decided by the action or inaction that is taken in these next few months. Absent support for the right and ability of Christians to return to their homes, the makeup of Nineveh — and with it, the plurality of Iraq — may be changed forever.

At the same time, we must not abandon those who cannot yet return to their homes. As much as we seek to encourage our displaced people and help them in returning, we must make

sure they have a livable home to return to. It would be wrong for us, and the world, to force them now into a homeless situation, for these people will then decide to leave Iraq for good. As such, we will remain in a time of transition over the coming months, and in this we will continue to need support.

In terms of the threatened church, which is facing violent external, even existential threats, how can we work towards a viable future? In the Middle East, we see a Christianity that faces ongoing violent persecution, even genocide. Very little of this persecution is now happening in secret. In this day of instant communications, this violence is shown to all of us almost immediately. And yet it seems so often that our governments and our institutions are unable, or refuse, to truly act.

In Iraq, we Christians faced a persecution that not only sought to destroy our church, but also to destroy us as a people by forcing us, under threat of death, from our historic homelands, after which they sought to remove all traces of our culture and heritage. Our present efforts and hopes to return to our homes have received sympathetic words from Western governments, but so far little else.

We learn now, with great sorrow and pain, that lawyers at the United States State Department have begun taking quiet moves, in the dark, so it would seem, to rescind the Genocide declaration made over one year ago by former Secretary of State John Kerry. Once again, the Christians of Iraq find themselves on the receiving end of yet another ruse. One can only wonder what those behind this effort contemplate in terms of the irreparable damage being done here to the diminishing credibility of their government's word.

As for our future, we look to rebuild where we can, and contribute as full citizens with equal rights under a legitimate sovereign government, as chosen freely by the people. We urge the governments of Kurdistan and Iraq to resolve the issue of the disputed territories of Nineveh now, and we implore the West to ensure that this takes place in a peaceful fashion.

Beyond all this, we ask those in power in the West to not turn their eyes from us. Iraq first embraced Christianity almost 2,000 years ago. Our population, 1.5 million in 2003, is perhaps less than 300,000 today. We are an ancient people on the verge of extinction, seeking only to live our lives in peace. Today we live our days in extremis. We did not arrive at this place on our own.

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Most Reverend Bashar Warda, C.Ss.R., is Archbishop of the Chaldean Catholic Archdiocese of Erbil, Kurdistan Region, Iraq.

Kurdistan: A proven sanctuary and ‘safe haven’ for refugees

By Robert A. Destro and Carole A. O’Leary

The people and regional government of Iraqi Kurdistan have long played a vital role in protecting Christians, Yazidis and all religious minorities. Muslims and non-Muslims alike are free to practice their religion openly in the Kurdistan Region of Iraq.

Of equal importance, since the Islamic State (ISIS) took over large areas of northern Iraq in 2014, the Kurdistan Regional Government (KRG) has provided vital security and assistance to almost 2 million internally displaced Iraqis and Syrian refugees — mainly Christians, but also Yazidis, and others.

Reflecting on the important role of the KRG, His Excellency Bashar Matti Warda, the Chaldean Archbishop of Erbil, stated that: “During the darkest points of the crisis, the KRG, and in particular the leadership, showed great solidarity with us, attending Christmas Mass with us, stating publicly that we would live here together or die here together.”

His Excellency added that: “The most important thing the KRG did for us during the crisis was to respect us and show that our people had value in the fabric of the social community.”

Currently, the KRG is providing



PHOTO CREDIT: THE CATHOLIC UNIVERSITY OF AMERICA

sanctuary for an estimated 1.8 million refugees and IDPs:

-- Some 250,000 of these are refugees from Syria, and the rest are IDPs from within Iraq.

-- One in five people in the Kurdistan Region are IDPs or refugees.

-- In Dohuk, the smallest province in Iraqi Kurdistan and the most affected, the ratio in some villages between locals and IDPs or refugees is 1:1.

According to the World Bank and the KRG Ministry of Planning, as of September 2015, the KRG spent approximately USD \$1 billion to meet the needs of the internally displaced population, including health services, water, electricity, security and protection, education



and camp management and camp monitoring.

Prior to 2003, the Christian population of Iraq is thought to have been as high as 1.5 million. Today, their numbers are between 300,000 and 450,000, with most of the population, according to Christian sources, residing or seeking refuge in Iraqi Kurdistan.

In summer 2014, some 120,000 Christians fled in terror from the biblical lands of Mosul and the Plains of Nineveh, as ISIS threatened them with “conversion” or death. On August 7, 2014, they arrived in Ainkawa, the Christian Quarter of Erbil. Exhausted, fearful and hungry, these Christians turned to their churches and to the KRG for medical

care, shelter and food.

Of Iraq’s 600,000 Yazidis, today more than 400,000 have found shelter within the borders of the Kurdistan Region.

Now engaged in the final battle to liberate Mosul City, the Kurdistan Region’s military — the Peshmerga — which includes Christian and Yazidi units, has been continuously fighting the Islamic State since 2014.

To be clear, the only way to effectively protect Christians and other religious minorities from ISIS and like-minded groups is for the U.S. and international community to support the KRG in its continued efforts to protect religious freedom and provide vital services to 1.8 million IDPs and refugees.

Therefore, members of Congress and the Trump administration should:

i. Declare that the Kurdistan Region of Iraq is a “safe haven,” where all religious minorities targeted by ISIS are protected;

ii. Designate other areas of Iraq — such as the Nineveh Plain — as “safe havens,” where religious and ethnic minorities targeted by ISIS can return to their homes, be protected and, if they wish, begin their lives anew;

iii. Witness and record the evidence of genocide perpetrated on the Yazidis, Christians, the Shabak and other religious minorities;

iv. Visit Iraqi Kurdistan to see what the KRG has accomplished to protect Christians and other religious minorities who have sought refuge in Iraqi Kurdistan from throughout Iraq and Syria.

v. Recognize that the KRG cannot do this alone. The continued protection and welfare of IDPs and refugees in the Kurdistan Region — including Christians and other religious minorities — depends on the support of the American people and their representatives in Congress.

Today, the Kurdistan Region of Iraq is truly a “safe haven” for religious minorities, internally displaced Iraqis and Syrian refugees threatened by the Islamic State and other extremist groups.

The people of Iraqi Kurdistan have proved their resilience in the face of extreme challenges since 2014. 2017 will be no less difficult, and Kurdistan needs its American friends now, more than ever. The KRG cannot continue to do this alone.

Robert A. Destro and Carole A. O’Leary are the co-directors of the Iraqi Kurdistan Religious Freedom Project, a joint initiative of Michael Moran & Associates and the Interdisciplinary Program in Law & Religion of the Columbus School of Law at The Catholic University of America.



PHOTO CREDIT: KURDISTAN IRAQ TOURS LLC/TOUR GUIDE.

Yezidi girls.

'We must seek the most promising scenario'



By Medlum Merogi

When Kurdistan is discussed as a haven for the Christians and all minorities in Iraq, one must first recognize that they are currently a Region of Iraq.

On Sept. 25, the people in this region will vote on independence. That alone brings problems, as they have sought their independence for many years now for many reasons: Monies from the Iraqi government are not received as expected, and shipments of goods through Iraqi airports are either very slow or do not arrive at all. This, of course, presents problems for the paying of Kurdistan Regional Government (KRG) workers and Peshmerga forces. I was recently informed that Peshmerga have not received payment since May of this year. The retirees have received no funds from the Government of Iraq since November of 2016. The equipment needed to defend Kurdistan is either beyond their means or does not ever arrive when donated. Still, they stand and defend.

The point I make above is to show that the further influx of displaced persons, including the Christians of Nineveh Plain, brings about further costs and responsibilities. Still, they took them in. They defended them and fought for their homes. Were there problems? Undoubtedly. Kurdistan itself was not under attack, but the Plains needed to be protected from an outright genocide of all those not in the same religious mindset as ISIS.

Only days ago, I was in Kurdistan on a tour of the Christian towns, villages, camps and medical facilities. In this lies the truth. With me were journalists from Canada who wanted just that — the truth. Without hesitation, Mr. Noreldin Waisy of Kurdistan24 media company and Mr. Khalid Talia, the KRG Minister of Christian Affairs, supplied us with vehicles, hotel assistance and protection to allow us to roam with free will to speak

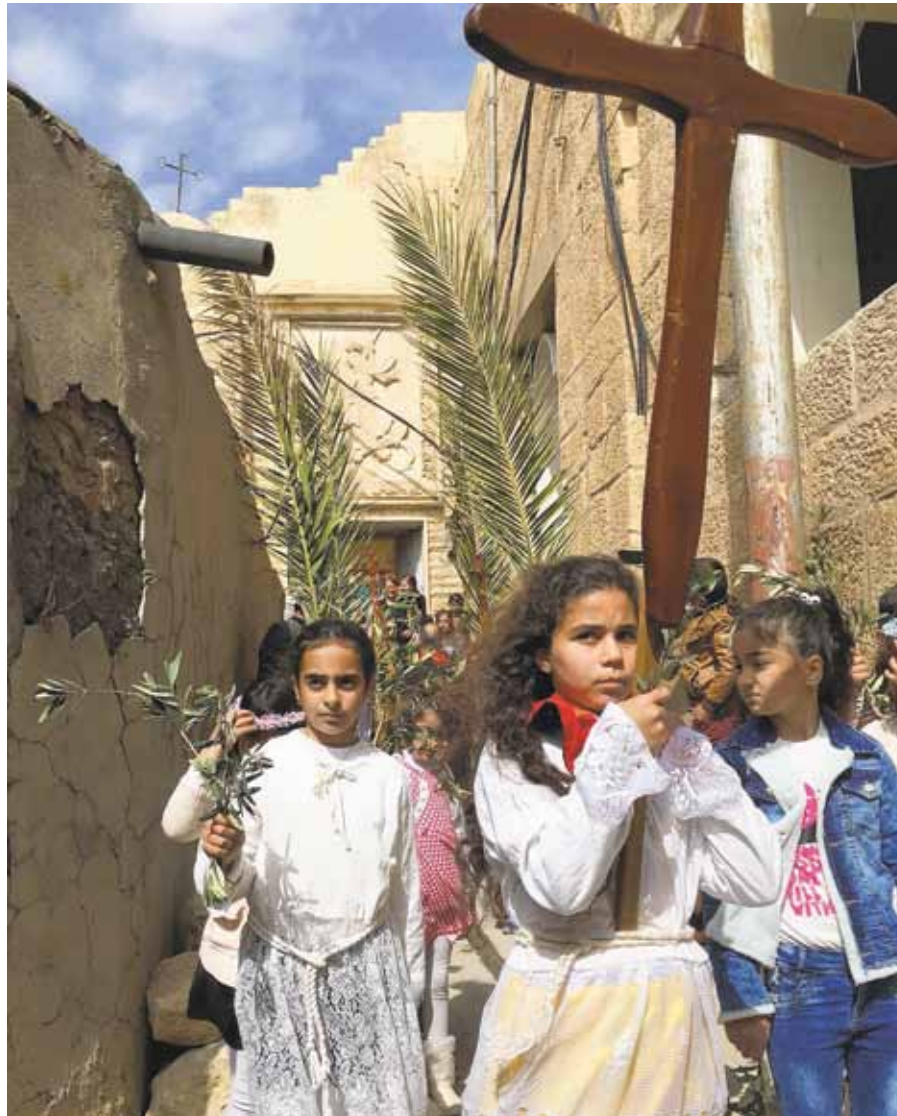


PHOTO COURTESY OF CHALDEAN CATHOLIC ARCHDIOCESE OF ERBIL, KURDISTAN REGION, IRAQ

Palm Sunday procession, Teleskov, Nineveh Plain, Northern Iraq, 2017. This was the first Palm Sunday celebrated in Teleskov since 2014 when the town was overrun by ISIS. The town was liberated in the fall of 2016.



IMAGE COURTESY OF MEDLUM MEROGI.

Medlum Merogi, the Canadian Representative for the Chaldean Syriac Assyrian Popular Council, visited with children in a Christian camp in a recent visit to Kurdistan.

with the people and see for ourselves what is happening.

On the boarder of the Peshmerga

defenses is a town, now deserted of its all-Christian population, called Batnaya. It is a ghost town. The once-beautiful

church is strewn with rubble, riddled with bullet holes, and graffitied and desecrated beyond my description here. We were told by Peshmerga leaders that 48 troops lost their lives and over 100 more were wounded in retaking this once-lovely town.

While here in the West, I heard many comments about the Peshmerga not allowing people to go home. That is a fact in some cases. Teleskof is now free for the people to return home. On the other hand, Batnaya is a different situation. First, many of the homes present a danger, as they are structurally unstable. But in addition, there are hidden bombs and various traps left behind by ISIS. It is for the people's own protection that the Peshmerga have asked them not to return as yet. Yet another problem is ISIS soldiers trying to pass themselves off as "typical" population by shaving their beards, etc., in order to escape. Many people have been detained until the military is sure that they are not the enemy.

We also visited a clinic with Archbishop Bashar Warda and visited Archbishop Yohanno Petros Moshe. The clinic was founded by those with Christian faith, yet it opens its doors to everyone — and has already treated over 2,700 chronic cases among the seniors' population without prejudice.

While in Erbil, Kurdistan, we also witnessed people freely and without concern attending their individual places of worship. Kurdistan seems to be the only area of Iraq where such freedom exists. Life for Christians and minorities has not been easy in Iraq. There is no perfection or utopia available anywhere on earth. We must seek the most promising scenario. With Kurdistan, the people can stay in their known areas and practice their faith and raise their children without fear.

Kurdistan has spoken openly of wanting to join the economically developed countries of the world rather than staying in the Third World scenario put forward by the various governments surrounding them. That in itself is an enormous step forward for all the population.

We are requesting an Autonomous Region to be part of Kurdistan when it is independent. This must be voted on by the people of Nineveh Plain. The new Charter would include us if the vote is a positive one; I very much doubt that the terms of such an agreement would be denied by the people. It would make the world at large a happier place for everyone involved. It is the safest and most promising alternative for the Christians and minorities of Iraq.

Medlum Merogi is the Canadian representative of the Chaldean Syriac Assyrian Popular Council, which is based in Duhok, Kurdistan in Iraq.

What is next for refugees in Kurdistan?

By Awat Mustafa and Mariette Hägglund

In recent years, as the war with ISIS has raged, the relatively stable Kurdistan region has been hailed as a “safe haven,” “beacon of democracy” and “the other Iraq.”

It has earned these labels by welcoming almost 2 million refugees and internally displaced persons (IDPs) — many of whom are ethnic and religious minorities from Iraq’s provinces of Nineveh, Anbar and Saladin. Assyrians, Yazidis, Turkmen, Shabaks, Christians and other minority groups were targeted by ISIS for their religious beliefs, cultures or ethnicities, despite having lived in the region for thousands of years.

ISIS inflicted unspeakable cruelties on these populations with murders, lootings and sexual slavery, as well as destruction of their homes and their cultural and religious heritages. For example, the Yazidis, the biggest internally displaced group in Kurdistan, suffered heavily from ISIS atrocities, with



recognized the genocide against ethnic and religious minorities by ISIS, set it as a priority in the fight against ISIS, and laid out even stronger support for what the Kurdistan region is doing. There is the right approach toward the humanitarian situation in the Kurdistan region — which deserves more international support.

The Kurdistan region has provided safety and security for religious and



provided for IDPs and refugees in the Kurdistan region.

What should happen next?

The work of civil society and charity organizations in the Kurdistan region has been crucial since the beginning of the ISIS attacks. Nonprofit agencies and nongovernmental organizations, including the Barzani Charity Foundation, have worked selflessly with the people

of refugees and IDPs — which has put an enormous economic pressure on the region — and also help the reconstruction of the destroyed areas.

While some have argued that a simple solution to the question of refugee and IDP minorities would be their exodus to safe countries elsewhere in the world, this is, in fact, in nobody’s interest: It would decrease and undermine the cultural, historical, symbolic and religious values of the Kurdistan region. Also, a mass exodus would ignore the problem, and undermine the minorities’ rights to return to — and stay in — their ancient homelands and preserve their cultures. We must ensure them a safe return — and a safe future upon return.

Kurdistan Region President Masoud Barzani has already declared his support for this, saying that religious and ethnic minorities have lived and prospered together for thousands of years, and the people should instead fight to bring safety and security back to our community.

Going forward, violent extremism and cycles of oppression have been issues in the past and will continuously be unless radical changes are taken. To tackle them will require political will, leadership, sufficient finance, eradication of poverty and corruption, and also good governance and trust.

The Kurdistan region is committed to remaining a sanctuary for persecuted minorities and refugees. In the last decade, Kurdistan leaders made several changes that take the various religious and ethnic minority groups into consideration. For example, the Ministry of Islamic Affairs is now the Ministry of Endowment and Religious Affairs. It gives the right to all religious groups to have their own directors and manage their own religious affairs. Kurdish law gives equal rights to all ethnic groups to take senior positions in the government. It also takes steps to guarantee a voice for everyone in the government decision-making. Thus, in practice, Kurdistan has already worked hard to transform the judicial and administrative system, and to guarantee the traditionally Muslim-dominated senior positions are also open to religious and ethnic minorities, such as Yazidis and Christians.

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Awat Mustafa is Director of Operations and Public Relations at the Barzani Charity Foundation (info@barzanifoundation.org), which provides education, health care, food, shelter and other services to Kurdistan populations, including orphans, refugees and IDPs. He can be reached at awat@bcg.krd. Mariette Hägglund, recently a Visiting Scholar at the Center for Transatlantic Relations at Johns Hopkins University, contributed to this article.



PHOTO CREDIT: KURDISTAN IRAQ TOURS LLC/TOUR GUIDE

U.N. Refugee tents in Kurdistan.

450,000 displaced people in 16 camps in Kurdistan. The U.N. estimates that 3,200 Yazidi women, girls and children are still held captive by ISIS, and the Yazidi community, the Kurdistan Regional Government (KRG) and others are working to rescue these abductees.

In March 2016, the U.S. Congress

ethnic minorities and guaranteed them freedom for practicing their religious beliefs, even though the Kurdistan region is going through financial difficulties and its austerity measures have limited the services for host communities. Despite this, medical help and shelter, as well as other needs, are continuously

and the U.N. Refugee Agency, and their efforts will continue.

Moreover, the tasks of reconstructing Christian and Yazidi towns and villages must begin very soon, but this cannot be done by the KRG alone. The international community must assist the KRG to deal with the massive influx

Independence will open doors to investment in Kurdistan



By Bayan Sami Abdul Rahman

The liberation of Iraq in 2003 brought with it economic opportunities that the people of Iraq had never before imagined. In Kurdistan, we seized upon this chance to grow our society in the ways we had long dreamed — in the first 10 years annual per capita GDP grew from around \$500 to \$7,000. Although the past few years have tested our resiliency, Kurdistan remains a safe investment environment focused on diversification and reforming for better governance.

In 2006, Kurdistan's Parliament passed the Investment Law, setting out highly favorable conditions and protections for international investors. Already many international companies had made substantial investments in Kurdistan, and we recognized the steady flow of capital as essential to growing our infrastructure and giving to our people the society that they deserve. A decade later, around 3,000 foreign companies — Turkish, Iranian, Emirati, European and American — are registered and operating in Kurdistan.

Our achievements in building Kurdistan's economy have been significant. After years of neglect under Ba'athist rule and with the help of international energy companies, we grew an oil and gas industry from scratch, and today dozens of these companies work to extract Kurdistan's natural resources. The Kurdistan Regional Government (KRG) successfully negotiated revenue-sharing agreements that have kept Kurdistan afloat since former Prime Minister Nouri al-Maliki cut our share of the federal budget in February 2014. Eight years ago, Turkish troops were massed at our border and threatened by our prosperity. Through diplomatic engagement, today we have a strategic energy-sharing agreement and export 600,000 barrels of crude per day through a pipeline to

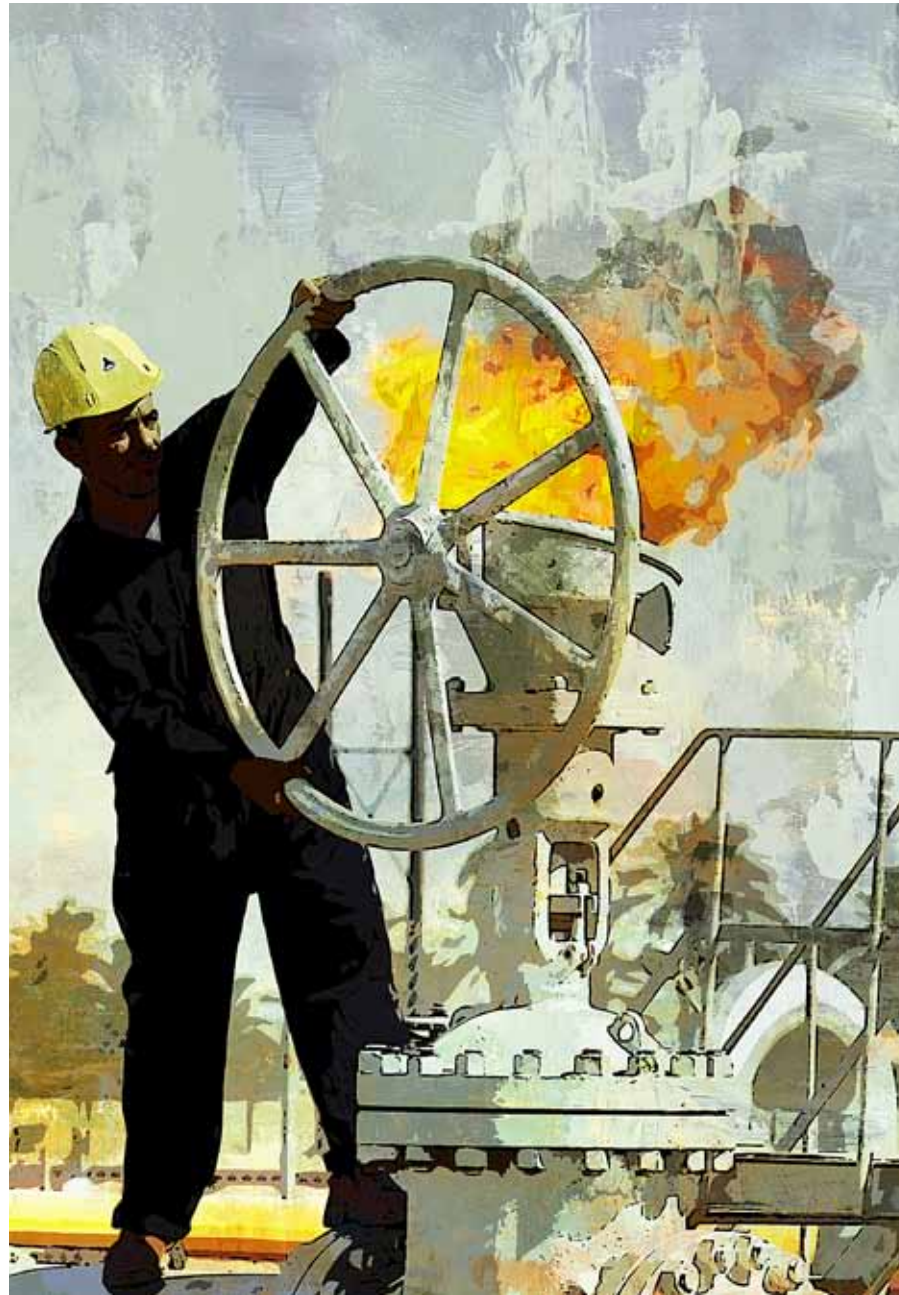


ILLUSTRATION BY GREG GROESCHG

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the Turkish port of Ceyhan. A parallel natural gas pipeline is currently being constructed.

Saddam Hussein's campaigns of genocide destroyed 4,500 villages and broke the backbone of agriculture in Kurdistan. Supported by international investment, we are working to rebuild and continue to increase production in a diversity of crops, including wheat, barley and vegetables. This has been

possible through public and private investments in research, irrigation and harvesting equipment, storage, and more. International and local companies are steadily growing their operations to import seed, pesticides, herbicides and other inputs.

Kurdistan has long been a hub for regional tourism, particularly for Iraqis seeking a safe environment and respite from the heat of southern Iraq. In 2013,

some 3 million tourists visited Kurdistan, and in the following year, Erbil was named the Middle East's "2014 Arab Tourism Capital."

With the war against ISIS and 1.8 million displaced Syrians and Iraqis sheltering in Kurdistan, tourism in recent years has taken a hit. However, we are already seeing a resurgence — our statistics show 1.6 million tourists had already visited Kurdistan by May 2017. They come to visit Kurdistan's Jewish, Christian and Islamic religious sites; hike in snow-capped mountains; and explore bazaars in cities throughout the region. Despite sharing a border with ISIS for nearly three years, Kurdistan remains stable and secure for Western visitors.

It is difficult to be optimistic about a Middle East that has been ravaged by war for more than a decade. Still, the future of Kurdistan's economy is bright. Our population is more educated than ever before, with nearly 40 universities and technical institutes, including two American-style universities and one that follows the British system. The Human Capacity Development Program, a \$100 million program providing scholarships to Kurdistan students at leading universities around the world, has helped hundreds return to Kurdistan with graduate degrees.

In the past two years, the KRG has taken major steps to increase transparency in government, reduce waste and reform the economy. This includes a full audit of the oil industry by Deloitte and Ernst and Young, the implementation of a biometric registration system aimed at eliminating "ghost employees" in the government, the introduction of austerity measures to decrease government spending, and the reforming of the Finance Ministry with the help of regional and international financial experts.

On Sept. 25, there will be a referendum on independence to determine the will of the people to move toward full sovereignty. Our desire to be independent is deeply emotional — we have for generations struggled toward this dream. But independence is also a pragmatic solution to problems that have beleaguered Iraq since its inception. As an independent country, we will have access to international credit markets and control over monetary policy. In an independent Kurdistan, we will better be able to stabilize our economy in times of crisis. I firmly believe that an independent Kurdistan will be an even better place for international investors.

Bayan Sami Abdul Rahman is the Kurdistan Regional Government Representative to the United States.

Kurdistan Region: Untapped economic potential



By Dr. Sasha Toperich

There is no doubt that the economy of the Kurdistan Region will experience significant growth as early as next year. There are several reasons why.

After ISIL overtook Mosul in August 2014, the Peshmerga, Kurdistan's defense forces, showed immense bravery in their fight, preventing the terrorists from taking Erbil and moving deeper into Iraqi Kurdistan territory. The news was all the more devastating considering that the U.S. and its allies had previously trained and equipped hundreds of thousands of Iraqi soldiers and policemen, who fled the 1,500 ISIL fighters, handing over expensive U.S. weaponry, while the Peshmerga defended the Kurdistan Region with decades-old rifles.

Before the emergence of ISIL, the Kurdistan region of Iraq experienced an economic "golden period," with investments pouring in from all sides. Erbil, Sulaymaniyah and Dohuk looked to diversify their local economies, investing in the cement industry, tourism and the real estate industry. The Kurdistan Regional Government-Iraq (KRG) was referred to as the "next Dubai." In 2011, FDI magazine ranked Erbil fifth in terms of opportunities for direct foreign investment and one of the most business-friendly cities in the entire Middle East.

The ISIL attack on Kurdistan coincided with a dramatic drop in oil prices, forcing a rebalancing of budgets in most of oil revenue-driven economies, including Kurdistan. To make matters worse, 2.2 million refugees, mostly from Iraq and Syria, looked for a safe haven in the Kurdistan Region. The Iraqi central government's payment of 17 percent of total revenues to the KRG, required by the Iraqi constitution, had not been honored by Baghdad due to internal political rifts. Moreover, the KRG struggled to meet its monthly obligations, which exceeded \$1 billion. During the golden period, the KRG hired one out of

six Kurds to work for the government, creating a monthly payroll obligation of more than \$700 million.

Progressive investment laws

In the midst of it all, the KRG launched a comprehensive set of reforms to modernize its economy.

To bring transparency into its oil sector, the KRG hired Deloitte to audit its oil production, exports and revenues. In partnership with the World Bank, the KRG committed to reforms in the electricity sector, with a goal to privatize electric providers and reduce domestic production costs by 40 percent. It installed meters for electricity usage both to stabilize the system and collect revenue, as many people were exploiting Kurdistan's electric grid, adding to a significant deficit in the electricity balance sheet.

In an effort to curb corruption and enhance transparency, the KRG, again with the World Bank, introduced an electronic payment system to its employees, accounting for about 65 percent of the labor force in the Kurdistan Region. The

capital, the ability to repatriate profits in full, and a 10-year non-custom tax break after the beginning of production, among numerous other incentives.

Abundant natural resources

The Kurdistan Region has been divided into seven blocks for exploration and investment on the bases of suitable target areas: Blocks 1 and 2 in Duhok governorate; blocks 3 and 4 in Erbil governorate, and blocks 5,6 and 7 in Sulaymaniyah Governorate.

Mineral exploration and development are investments. They hold forth the promise of rewards for private companies, governments and local communities. In June 2016, the Ministry of Natural Resources of the KRG invited expressions of interest from qualified international mining companies for the "Mineral Exploration & Investment in the Kurdistan Region-Iraq." More than 10 regional and international mineral companies showed their interest to submit a proposal to invest in the mining sector in Kurdistan Region.

plateau export of 10 bcm annually by 2020, with the option of increasing export capacity to 20 bcm per year.

Baghdad's efforts to undermine Kurdistan's direct oil exports are proving to be ineffective. Every barrel of oil exported by the KRG has found a buyer. Actions to prevent the Kurdistan Region — which passed its own oil and gas law in 2007 — from selling its oil directly are of pure political nature. Article 115 of the new Iraqi constitution states that "all powers not stipulated in the exclusive powers of the federal government belong to the authorities of the regions and governorates that are not organized in a region. With regard to other powers shared between the federal government and the regional government, priority shall be given to the law of the regions and governorates not organized in a region in case of dispute."

In an ever-complex and changing Middle East, one thing is clear: nothing will remain the same after Sept. 25, when the Kurds are expected to vote overwhelmingly in favor of independence for the Iraqi Kurdistan Region. Although



PHOTO CREDIT: KURDISTAN IRAQ TOURS LLC/TOUR GUIDE

process included the registering and issuing of biometric cards for government employees, including the Peshmerga forces. This task was completed recently, creating a fiscal order for about 1.4 million employees while also eliminating so-called "ghost employees" and those that were registered (and paid for) twice. The KRG also began to reduce salaries, remove subsidies on gasoline and eliminate various allowances that were draining the budget.

The investment law that the KRG launched in 2006 was one of the most progressive laws of its kind in the entire Middle East. The law treats foreign and local investors equally, allowing them to buy and own land for investment purposes, accommodating full ownership of

Kurdistan's oil is sold to markets in Europe, the Middle East and Asia. Last month, the KRG signed an agreement with Russian oil giant Rosneft to develop its exploitation and production. They agreed on the monetization of an export oil pipeline along with several production sharing agreements, as a result of Rosneft's direct purchase of Kurdistan's crude oil for its refineries in Germany. In 2016, pipeline oil exports from the KRG to Turkey reached 500,000 barrels per day, while truck exports of heavier crude oil to Turkey currently average around 38,000 barrels per day. Kurdistan has proven natural gas reserves of 703 bcm and an estimated 5.6 tcm of unproven reserves. The KRG-Turkey Gas Sales Agreement signed in 2013 foresees

the time of the actual proclamation of Kurdistan independence is not set yet, the referendum, in spite of internal political rifts, will strengthen KRG's position, and there is little doubt that investors will take notice. The road to recovery has begun, and with the ongoing reforms, there is a general feeling that Kurdistan has turned the tide.

Sasha Toperich, Ph.D., is a Senior Fellow and Director of the Mediterranean Basin initiative at the Center for Transatlantic Relations, SAIS, at the Paul H. Nitze School of Advanced International Studies at Johns Hopkins University in Washington, D.C. He is also a Fellow at the Soran University Research Center in Iraqi Kurdistan.

Confronting the current Middle East alignment



By Adm. James A. Lyons

With the imminent defeat of the Islamic State in Mosul, Iraq and in Raqqa, its declared capital in Syria, one of the Trump administration's key objectives is about to be achieved.

With the collapse of the Islamic State as a functioning entity, however, there are clearly new dynamics coming into play which will complicate the post-Islamic State period. What is actually taking place is a realignment of the regional balance of power between Shiite and Sunni power brokers. How it eventually evolves will have a major impact on U.S. security interests, and those of our allies, Israel in particular. The problem is that we have no clear strategy to deal with the evolving dynamic situation or its long-term impact.

Clearly, an immediate problem is that Iran, backed by Russia, seeks to further expand its influence by solidifying a land bridge from Iran through Iraq and Syria to the eastern Mediterranean. Such a move would put a jihadi Shiite regime on the southern shores of the Mediterranean Sea. Iran's domination of regimes in Baghdad, Beirut and Damascus, along with its play for Yemen, puts it in position to surround the Arabian Peninsula and threaten strategic waterways, including the Strait of Hormuz and the Bab al-Mandab. Backed by Iran and Russia, Bashar Assad's control of Aleppo and the anticipated fall of Raqqa will likely embolden him to retake eastern Syria, too.

Preventing expansion of the Shiite Crescent must be a top U.S. objective, fundamental to restoring not only credibility with our key allies, but critical to restoring stability to the region as well. Key to achieving this objective without a massive influx of U.S. ground forces is maintaining the viability of pro-Western Kurdish and Syrian

Democratic Forces (SDF). It is also possible that elements of the Syrian Free Army (SFA) can be reconstituted.

The recent downing by a U.S. Navy F-18 fighter aircraft of a Syrian bomber that had been attacking a pro-Western Kurdish force and an SDF unit highlighted Mr. Assad's recognition of the importance of these forces in preventing reassertion of his control in eastern Syria. Perhaps just as important was Russian President Vladimir Putin

While both Russia and the U.S. want to avoid a direct confrontation, we need to make it very clear we will not be intimidated.

Developing a strategy to address the current regional realignment should be based on U.S. core vital strategic interests. Further, the strategy should be based on the underlying principle that it makes no sense for the United States to inject itself into a 1,300+-year old Shi'ite-Sunni sectarian war. It is

autonomous Kurdish entity, they are aligned with the Muslim Brotherhood/Hamas — and now also with Iran and Qatar. At this point, Turkey must be viewed as a questionable Western ally.

Fundamental U.S. strategy must be based on preventing Iran from establishing a Shiite land bridge from Tehran to Lebanon. Therefore, a key element of our strategy should be to support the binding independence referendum for Iraqi Kurdistan to be held on Sept. 25, 2017. U.S. Secretary of State Rex Tillerson officially opposes it because of a misguided objective to keep Iraq intact. But Iraq is already fractured, as is Syria, and neither one will be reconstituted in its pre-WWI artificial geographic boundaries. Clearly, the 1916 Sykes-Picot nation-state arrangement has collapsed.

Our strategy should also support Syrian Kurds carving out their own sphere of influence (Rojava), which could eventually unite with Iraqi Kurdistan. Control of the vast Syrian Sunni interior that spans the border into the former Iraq remains unresolved. Damascus cannot control a federalized Syria, even with Iranian and Russian support. Therefore, our strategic plan must back Sunni forces that have shown themselves to be both anti-Damascus and non-jihadist. The only group that falls into that category is the Free Syrian Army, which will need to be reinforced. U.S. policy should concede that Damascus will hold the Alawite heartland that includes the Russian bases at Latakia and Tartus.

With the eight years the Obama administration squandered, plus the transfer of over \$100 billion to Iran (which it is now using to finance Shiite militias fighting to secure a land bridge across the Iraq-Syria border), we must shift from a reactive defensive strategy to a proactive one.

Accordingly, the Trump team must first define a national security strategy for the region. Such a strategy must be predicated on reconstitution of U.S. military capability and demonstration of the will to project power and influence, specifically by supporting Kurdish-FSA-SDF forces and, together with our allies, Saudi Arabia, Egypt and the GCC, block further Iranian expansionism. Elimination of Iran's nuclear infrastructure will also be an imperative at some point.

Bottom line: there is no substitute for American leadership.

Retired U.S. Navy Adm. James A. Lyons was commander in chief of the U.S. Pacific Fleet and senior U.S. military representative to the United Nations. This article first appeared in The Washington Times Commentary section on July 2, 2017.



ILLUSTRATION BY LINAS GARSYS

likely using Syrian resources to test the Trump administration to see if it would support our allies on the ground if attacked. Fortunately, we did, which sent a clear message to both Russia and Syria as well as our allies that there are lines that cannot be crossed. The "strong horse" is back.

The Russian threat to target with surface-to-air missiles any U.S. aircraft flying west of the Euphrates is a further test of the Trump administration.

actually what the current realignment is all about.

The al Qaeda/Muslim Brotherhood militias rose up against Syria's Bashar Assad, who was then defended by Iran, Hezbollah plus assorted Shiite militias and now Russia. Turkey is also an increasing problem: President Erdogan and his AK Party are jihadis trying to reestablish some form of the power and glory of the old Ottoman Empire. Dead set against any sort of

Negotiating an amicable split: It's time for Kurdistan and Iraq to go their separate ways



By Falah Mustafa Bakir

Iraqi security forces with the support of coalition forces are finally getting close to defeating ISIS in Iraq, which begs an important question: What comes next? More to the point, what governmental structure would best protect the many ethnic groups that live there?

Part of the answer will be provided this year by a referendum scheduled for Sept. 25. The Kurdistan Region will ask its people if they support Kurdistan's independence. We expect that the answer will be over-

the critical role of an honest broker. America can ensure that the negotiations are fair, productive and deliver the best possible outcome for both sides.

A stable Iraq is in everyone's best interest. An independent Kurdistan would share hundreds of miles of border with Iraq, and our economic ties are deep. Iraq would be one of Kurdistan's most important trading partners, and no one outside of Iraq would have a greater incentive for peace and stability in the country.

The challenges of achieving independence for any country are great but not insurmountable. Negotiating an amicable divorce with Baghdad will be difficult, but there are no cardinal rules against it and many successful examples of peaceful secessions.

For decades, Iraqis have seen cycles of genocide. Under Saddam Hussein's fascist state, Kurds, Shia and others suffered decades of terror, oppression and numerous attacks on civilians with the most deadly chemical weapons.

In Kurdistan in the 1980s, the state conducted a dedicated, sustained campaign to break the back of our economy, destroy our way of life and,

Iraqis, like the Kurds who have suffered under regimes that failed to protect its citizens from persecution and, in some cases, violence, should be given their say about what form of government provides them the best security. Self-governance is clearly the right answer.

whelmingly "yes." President Masoud Barzani has also made it clear that the referendum will include areas that have long been disputed between Baghdad and Irbil, giving people in those territories an opportunity to decide their own future as well.

Iraqis, like the Kurds who have suffered under regimes that failed to protect its citizens from persecution and, in some cases, violence, should be given their say about what form of government provides them the best security. Self-governance is clearly the right answer.

To be sure, the referendum won't be the end of the story. Other actions would need to be taken before Iraqi Kurdistan can declare sovereignty. Negotiations are required between Baghdad and the Kurdistan. In those talks, the United States will play

ultimately, exterminate our people. The Baathists called the campaign "Anfal," a Koranic term for the "spoils of war."

The departure of Saddam did not end of the suffering. Militias and criminal gangs kidnapped wealthy elites, assassinated academics, and ethnically cleansed areas with impunity. In 2014 the Yazidis, Christians and others again suffered genocide, this time at the hands of ISIS. Our economy has suffered both from the war against ISIS and the humanitarian crisis, but also from Baghdad cutting off our share of the federal budget.

When Iraq's constitution was drafted in 2005, we in Kurdistan envisioned a federal system that could have led Iraq to realize its potential for prosperity for all Iraqis.

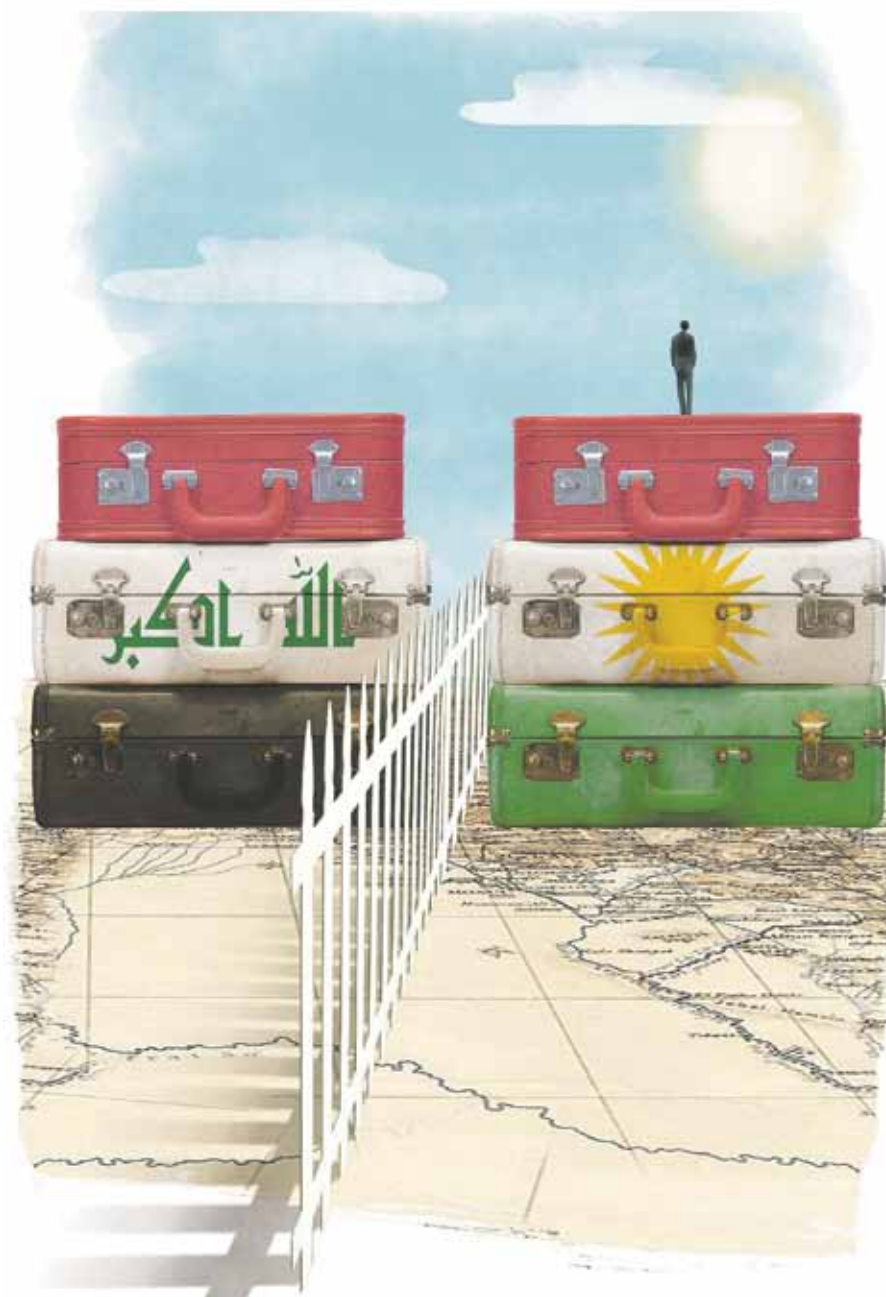


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Kurdistanis voted overwhelmingly in favor of the Iraqi constitution on that basis. But over the past 12 years, leaders in Baghdad have centralized power. Our initiatives to develop our region, particularly in growing an oil and gas industry from scratch, were treated as liabilities rather than assets. Despite our worries about the direction of the country, our friends in America and the West encouraged us to remain part of the country and participate in government, which we did.

But now it is time for the people of Kurdistan to determine their future, knowing all that has happened in the past century since Iraq was created

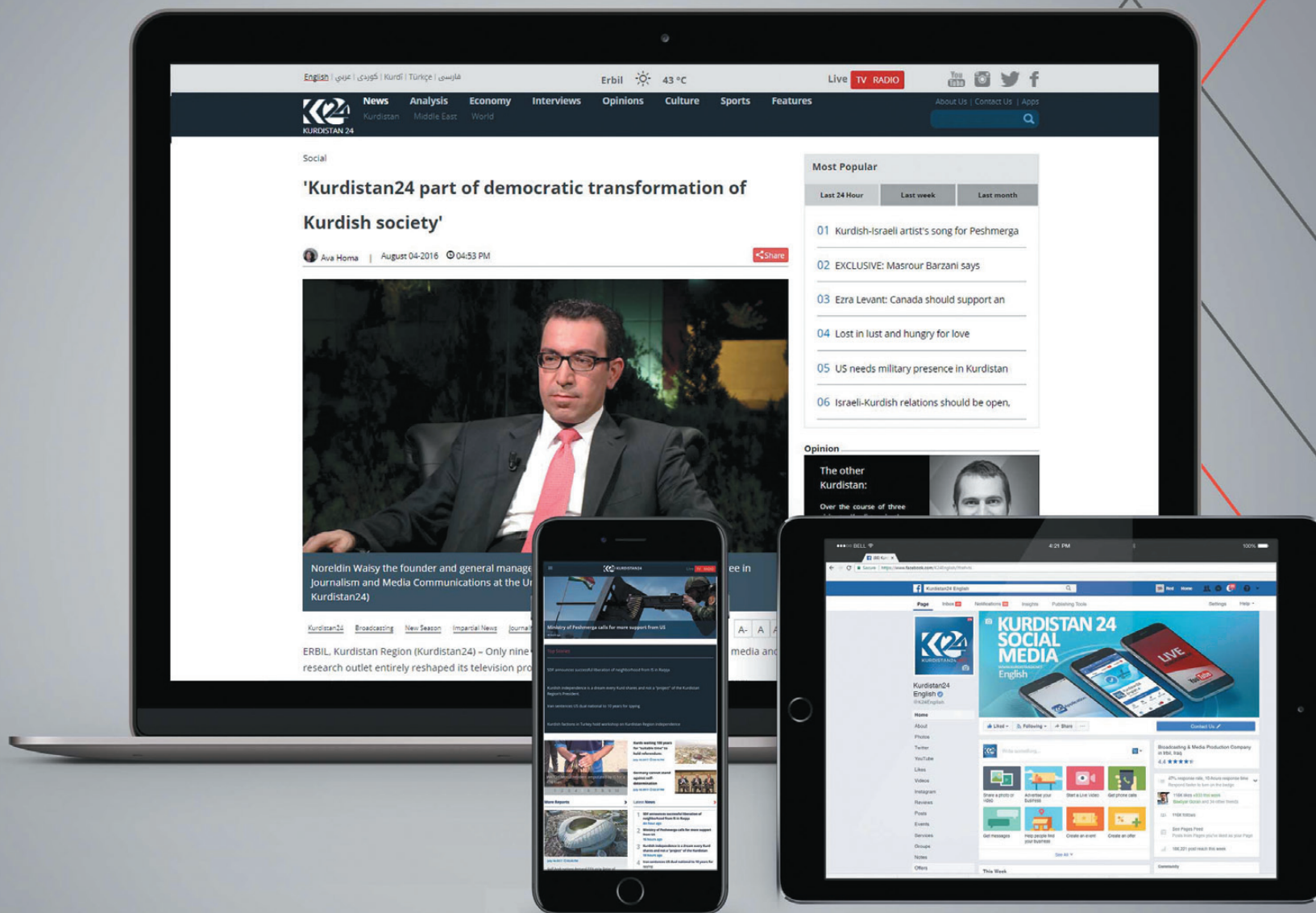
and all that has passed since 2005.

Like the United States, we have invested blood, time, energy and treasure to make Iraq work. Now it's time for Iraq and Kurdistan to be good neighbors with good fences rather than be under one roof and a thorn in each other's side. The United States can play a pivotal role in that effort.

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• Falah Mustafa Bakir is the head of the Department of Foreign Relations of the Kurdistan Regional Government. This op-ed first appeared in *The Washington Times' Commentary section* on July 12, 2017.

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