

# The Kurdish Example

By Jim Hoagland

Sunday, July 27, 2003

SALAHADIN, Iraq -- Isolation in their remote mountain homeland and an intensely nurtured sense that they will inevitably be betrayed by foreigners who pretend to befriend them have formed the Kurds' identity. But that historical seclusion and distrust are both fading rapidly in the wake of -- and because of -- the American success in overthrowing Saddam Hussein.

Bringing Kurdistan back into Iraq and into the modern world is one of the major strategic accomplishments of the second Gulf War. Little noticed in a Washington increasingly consumed with presidential politics, important changes created by Operation Iraqi Freedom come sharply into focus here on the ground.

The Kurds are aware that, for once, history is smiling on them. They are moving carefully to keep good fortune on their side. Local leaders who long have been bitter rivals are cooperating to inch toward joining a federal Iraq in which they will have a share in power and to form a quiet alliance with the United States that could help in the global war on terrorism.

"The Kurds still have mountains, and now they have friends too," Massoud Barzani, president of the Kurdistan Democratic Party, said last week in welcoming American visitors here and updating an adage that holds that the Kurds cannot rely on others to keep their promises to help them.

Roughly 25 million Kurds -- non-Arab descendants of a culture that is Indo-European and Muslim -- inhabit the highlands that straddle the border areas of Turkey, Iraq and Iran. Determined to resist domination by others, the Kurdish tribes have a long heritage of fighting Turks, Arabs, Persians and, most of all, each other. That history will not vanish overnight. It will have to be worn away.

A promising start toward that outcome is being made here among the 4 million Kurds of northern Iraq. Their leaders are cooperating fully with the American forces that landed here in March and have stayed on, among other reasons, to help maintain Iraq's territorial integrity.

One important consequence of the war has been something that did not happen. President Bush was warned by Arab leaders and others that ethnic and religious bloodbaths of revenge would erupt if the Baathist dictatorship was taken down. Moreover, it was said, Turkey was poised to sweep in, pulverize the Kurds and grab the oil fields of northern Iraq if war came. Those predictions have not materialized.

The Kurds have instead shown restraint and, with isolated exceptions, refrained from forcibly grabbing land and houses confiscated from them and turned over to Arab settlers during Saddam's reign. Under gentle prodding from U.S. occupation authorities, Barzani and the other major Kurdish leader, Jalal Talabani, have not sought to extend their presence into disputed areas beyond the informal "green line" that has separated Kurds and Arabs since 1991.

For its part, the United States has leaned heavily on Turkey not to move its troops into Kurdistan or practice subversion here. While Turkish units might be useful in coming into Iraq as peacekeepers and then deploying to the Iraqi-Syrian border as a buffer force, U.S. intentions are to keep them out of the Kurdish heartland. That is an undertaking that Americans, as the Kurds' new best friends, must not abandon.

Iraqi Kurdistan lies at the heart of the 6.4 million square miles of turmoil and trouble in the Middle East and Asia that the U.S. Central Command, the lead military headquarters in the war on terrorism, has been tasked to tame. For once, the Kurds' location may work to their benefit.

A working alliance between Kurds and Americans was foretold by and then denied to Mullah Mustafa Barzani, Massoud's father and the late Kurdish patriarch, who launched the first serious attempt at regime change in Saddam's Iraq 30 years ago this summer.

In a 1973 interview in his redoubt in the Zagros mountains, where he was building a rebel army, the elder Barzani appealed to American leaders for help in fighting the Baathists, who, he rightly predicted, would one day plunge the region into war after war. "We can become your 51st state and provide you with oil," he told me.

Covert U.S. aid was channeled through Iran to Barzani's pesh merga troops but abruptly halted when Saddam gained the upper hand in 1975 and launched a campaign of genocide that was halted only by the 1991 Gulf War. Last March, the pesh merga helped American troops chase the remaining Baathist troops from Kurdistan and usher in a new dawn of hope here.

"My father told me that he would never live to see this day," Massoud Barzani says as he contemplates the free and relatively prosperous Kurdistan that now exists. "But he told me I would. In that way, he was with us as this happened."