

Speech at MINDS

Iraq Today and the Day After - a Kurdish Perspective

By Qubad Talabany

Deputy Representative, Washington Office

The Patriotic Union of Kurdistan

March 7th, 2003

First, I'd like to thank Vance Renfroe, Joe Khare and Bill Squires for inviting me to speak and for arranging the event today. It is a great crowd. Secondly, allow me also to take this opportunity to thank Bill Skipper, Ayal Frank and the entire American Systems team for its guidance and hard work on our behalf. That team has done an excellent job in the past year. I look forward to working closely with ASIC in the future, post-Saddam, as well.

I remember a time, not too long ago, where as a Kurd, I would have to spend so much of my time explaining who we are, and where we are from, I would get responses like, Kurdistan? Is that Pakistan? Turkmenistan? No, Kurd, Kurdistan

During those days we would scour the newspapers with a magnifying glass, to find the word "Kurd", and when we found it, we would be ecstatic, and save that article forever.

Today things are completely different, we are appearing on the front page of all the major newspapers around the world, we are discussed at length on CNN and BBC, and whereas, in the early nineties, our leaders would meet secretly with US government officials in cafes outside their government offices, today our leaders are greeted by the most senior US officials, diplomatic security is provided and they are given the red carpet treatment. How long these luxuries will last remain unclear!

To give you a very brief background, the Kurds are a non-Arab Middle Eastern minority population that inhabits the region known as **Kurdistan**, an extensive plateau and mountain area in SW Asia including parts of E Turkey, NE Iraq, and NW Iran and smaller sections of NE Syria and Armenia.

Our history is one filled with missed opportunities, bad mistakes and betrayal. However, I shall not bore you too much with our miserable past, but hope to shed light on the prospects for our future.

The signing of the infamous Algiers accord between the Shah of Iran and the Baath party in Iraq in 1975 (Brokered by Henry Kissinger – covert work is not missionary work) led to the collapse of the Kurdish struggle. The first official betrayal.

Iraq, while at war with Iran coupled with our continued insurrections against the regime, turned viciously on the Kurdish people.

The GOI carried out the brutal Anfal campaign – razing over 4000 villages, 180,000 disappeared, and CBW used in over 250 villages, Halabja where over 5000 civilians were gassed to death in minutes is our ground zero.

At the end of the Gulf War Kurds Shiites rose-up against the Iraqi regime, only to have this uprising brutally crushed by the Iraqi forces – hence the establishment of Operation Provide Comfort and the safe haven.

Since the establishment of the safe haven, and soon afterward, operation northern watch, the no fly zones, the Kurdish people have lived at a distance – albeit an uncomfortable one from Saddams control. We in effect have been living our ‘day after’ scenario for over 11 years now.

The Kurdish people, elected their leadership in 1992, the first democratic elections ever in Iraq, and later a Parliament was formed.

A glitch in our experiment of self government resulted in the conflict between the two main Kurdish parties, the KDP and the PUK, which ultimately split the administration into two, today there are two administrations in the north, a KDP led one and a PUK led Admin. The two since had since ended their conflict (in

1997), have signed the now famous Washington Accord, and have worked to fully reconcile. On October 4th 2002, the joint Kurdish National Assembly convened for the first time since 1996.

Since then major steps have been taken to further unify their positions, such steps include the formation of a joint higher leadership committee, that is chaired by the two Kurdish leaders, Messer's Barzani and Talabani – this joint committee hopes to lead the struggle in the political, military and administrative fields, as well as conducting national and international relations.

In the last four years the Kurdish areas have flourished like never before. We have in the north today a vibrant civil society, where there is a free press, political and religious freedoms and a bustling technology industry, where cell phones are in effect, and Internet cafes are prevalent. There are as many as one hundred and thirty publications, two satellite television stations, twelve domestic television stations, and numerous radio stations operated by various political and cultural groups and associations in this region of the country. Sights that are very rare in the Islamic world.

From 1921 to 1991, the Gol built 504 schools in the region currently administered by the PUK. Since 1991, the PUK Administration has built 2076 schools in this region.

Despite economic sanctions, the child mortality rates in Kurdistan are the lowest in Iraq's history.

This prosperity has been largely due to the protection by the brave US and British men and women conducting operation northern Watch. To that protection we are grateful.

The US forces, remember well the hospitality shown to them in 1991. and we welcome them again in 2003. We are a proud people, and we are warm to our friends, and the Kurdish people, and the Arab Iraqis for that matter will look upon the US forces as liberators and not occupiers.

You will find that unlike some of the US's other 'allies' in the region, we are not shy about saying thank you America, we give credit where credit is due.

12 years of self-rule has taught us many things. Mainly the limitations of nationalism. People have argues, incorrectly, that if a war broke out in Iraq, then the Kurd would secede and create their own state. Today ladies and gentlemen, we have our own state. We have our own military forces, our own language, and our own relations with countries worldwide. We know that this is not sustainable. If we were to declare independence, we would live a lifetime of misery, fighting wars on many fronts and isolated from the international community, we would lose the few friends we have.

So we have taken a new path, if geography and fate necessitates us to live within the boundaries of Iraq, as we know it, then so be it. But with this comes some conditions. If we are to be Iraqis, then we must be first class Iraqi citizens; we must have full rights within the society. We must have a seat at the decision making table in Baghdad. Not be confined to our mountains and to our cities of Suleimani and Irbil.

We have been at the forefront of Iraqi opposition politics for many decades, ironically the Kurds, for so long the 'problem in Iraq', may turn out to be the savior of the country. For we have been playing an instrumental role in unifying the Iraqi opposition, and by showing the world, that with very little resources, and assistance from the international community we have created an environment of tolerance and democracy in what has been traditionally the least developed section of Iraq. We have to offer a post Saddam Iraq, many things, including the establishment of democratic institutions and the transition towards a tolerant society.

One would ask the question, the Kurds have never had it so good, this is the golden age for the Kurds, why would you be willing to risk what you have for an outcome that is unknown.

The answer is simple, what we have is unsustainable, more so if Saddam is still sitting in Baghdad. We cannot expect the good will of the US forever; ONW will not be there forever. In a neighborhood where we are not welcome, this experiment of ours could be overrun in hours.

Rest assured that in the Kurds, the US has a valuable ally on the ground.

As far as the military planning is concerned, there is an increasing dialogue between the US and the Kurdish parties on the ground. We see our immediate task as preserving the security of our people, as well as of our US guests.

Being a close ally of the US has its dangers, clearly, we are the weakest in the theatre of operations, our forces are the least armed, and our population is the least prepared for an attack by Saddam.

We see others in the region stocking up on gas masks and other protective equipment, we lack the resources to prepare in the same manner.

Our administrations are preparing their own emergency contingency planning, and we are in discussion with the US government, in order to bolster our planning methods and techniques.

Given Saddams weakening and deteriorating inner circle, we do not anticipate a long prolonged conflict. We certainly do not foresee the urban street-to –street combat that is being discussed. That does not mean that one must not prepare for it.

The messages we are getting across the front lines, is that of a weakened and depleted army, that is low on moral and has little desire to fight to the death for Saddam.

In Iraq, people will fight, unwillingly, because they fear the regime, because they know they have no option but to accept orders. This will be true, only until the power structures that put these fears into the Iraqis start to fall. Once there is a crack in the failing armory of the Iraqi regime, the whole system will fall and control will be lost.

Defections will be plentiful, as was the case in 1991. The simple truth is that the Iraqi people are not willing to sacrifice themselves for Saddam.

The strength of Saddam's regime is only based on a hard-core inner circle. His growing suspicion of others has made that circle smaller over the years. Those outside this circle have terribly low moral, they are underpaid if paid at all, and they are not well armed.

Iraq has a three-tiered military structure. At the bottom, you have the regular armed forces of the Iraqi regime. These are weak; they have been drastically neglected over the years, leading to low morale, high defection rates and increased frustration. You then have the Republican guard, a once feared wing of the Iraqi military. Our intelligence indicates that dissent is growing within the regular republican guard forces. The regime is beginning to neglect these forces, therefore corruption is setting in, and high-ranking officers are preparing for defection.

The highest level is the special republican guard, this force remains a formidable component of the Iraqi military, and however, its strength is by no means a match for the strength of the US.

The PUK is in contact with hundreds of would be Iraqi defectors, many that command units; these are all anxiously awaiting a signal that indicates strong military action, with an end goal of regime change.

Iraqis feel that the day of liberation is near; they hope that the international community will soon understand both their readiness for change, and the price that they are willing to pay for it.

While some degree of logistical and political cooperation may be required from Iraq's neighbors, it is imperative that Iran, Syria and Turkey be told not to

interfere militarily or enter Iraqi territory, under any pretext, during international efforts to liberate Iraq. Such intervention will lead to regional chaos.

Let's all stick to the same sheet of music: Iraq's territorial integrity must remain intact; this applies to everyone.

In addition to the endless debates at the Security Council there appears to be dissent in the ranks of the US's coalition. On Saturday the outcome of the Parliamentary vote in Turkey, 'nullified' the deal between them and the US. A deal that would have provided Turkey with a significant financial package as well as, more curiously, allowed for a substantial role for the Turkish military in Iraq.

It was suggested that as part of this package, Turkey would be allowed to station a large military presence inside Iraqi Kurdistan – in order to a) provide humanitarian assistance, b) prevent an influx of refugees into Turkey and c) prevent the establishment of an independent Kurdish state. Concerns that we as Iraqis respect but have answers to.

The Kurds of Iraq greatly appreciate the role of Turkey in allowing the US and British forces to carry out operation northern watch from Incirlic. For it has been this No-Fly-Zone, which has given the Kurdish people the security and the ease of mind that has allowed them to flourish and prosper. The Kurdish people are also appreciative of the fact that Turkey wishes to provide them humanitarian assistance in the event of an emergency situation.

However, today in Iraqi Kurdistan, as I have mentioned, there are two – not one – functioning administrations! With ministries that are working around the clock with International NGOs' and other civil society organizations to prepare for any emergency situation. While Turkey's assistance is appreciated, we do not believe that its military would be the best vehicle to provide such assistance. In opening its borders to international NGOs, and aid workers, turkey will be providing the Iraqis sufficient assistance to prepare for, and respond to any humanitarian crisis.

We do not foresee an influx of refugees to the borders of Iran and turkey this time around. Because as opposed to 1991, we have built almost all the villages that were destroyed by the Baath regime, and we have emergency measures that – provided there is US assistance - can deal with mass population migration.

The population fleeing an attack would seek refuge in the nearby villages and towns, where they would have access to shelter, water, food and electricity, rather than camp out on the mountainous borders of Turkey and Iran.

We have made every effort to accommodate Turkey's stated concerns regarding Iraqi Kurdistan. We have repeatedly said that we want to be citizens of a democratic Iraq, and that we are committed to supporting the territorial integrity of Iraq. Further, we have pledged to cooperate with Turkey to assure the security of her borders.

It must be clear, that the large scale presence of Turkish troops, coupled with an unhappy population, skeptical political parties, terrorist organizations and nervous neighbors will be a recipe for disaster.

Many Kurds, including Arabs are concerned that Turkey's real agenda is to crush our experiment in democratic self-government in Iraqi Kurdistan.

Rather than crush our experiment, it is imperative that the United States preserves and builds on the democratic achievements of Iraqi Kurdistan, as lessons could be learned from the Kurdish experiment that could be transcended to the rest of the country.

Let this not become yet another betrayal. This time we would not recover.

Anyone thinking that the Kurds will just willingly turn over what they have achieved to a centralized tyranny is extremely naive. It is imperative that the US, and the international community understand the importance of what has been created in Kurdistan. To roll these advancements back would be inhumane, and furthermore impossible, without the use of force.

Our people have tasted freedom, they revel in it and they will be very reluctant to let it go.

Iraqis in Government controlled territories look with envy at the standard of living in the north and the freedoms available there, this envy can become a reality – but this can only come to be, if what is happening in the north is preserved.

Once Saddams regime falls, the real work will begin. In order to seek ways to rebuild Iraq, along modern and democratic lines, we must first evaluate where the state of Iraq went wrong.

Iraq has been a failed state, in every sense of the word, since its inception. From the onset, the twisted product of British colonialism. Brutalized its Kurdish minority and excluded the Shiite majority.

The transition from the status quo to a democratic state is a process in which the U.S. and the international community will have to play a pivotal role.

The U.S.-led coalition will be instrumental in ridding Iraq of this despot and the U.S. military will undoubtedly be central to stabilizing the security environment and offering the Iraqis the space within which they can develop a democratic system.

But peace in postwar Iraq, much less democracy, cannot be established without the full participation of the nation's secular democratic movements and other indigenous political groups. It must be the Iraqis that have the first and last say in deciding and managing the affairs of their country.

Therefore, upon liberation, it is imperative that power be handed over to a national transitional authority, consisting of the domestic political movements and aided by a U.S.-led coalition. Delay in handing over power to a national authority

will play into the hands of undemocratic anti-Western forces, not only in Iraq, but also in the wider Islamic world.

During the transition period, we must have a similar process to the De-nazification in Germany post WWII, this time we call it De-Baathification.

The Baath regimes security and intelligence apparatus (what will be left of them) will have to be totally destroyed, and its army reduced substantially.

The highly centralized Baath structures control the political, economic and social spheres of Iraq and must be dismantled. New decentralized and accountable institutions with proper checks and balances must be set in place.

De-Baathification also means reforming the economy. State control and centralization foster corruption while millions live in poverty. The oil industry needs to be de-monopolized and its revenues devoted to the well being of the population and the economic revival of the country.

This Baath mentality will take a while to eradicate, but the process must begin immediately. This will require reforming the educational systems and establishing methods of identifying and rewarding talent, merit, ability, independent thinking and service to the community in newly constructed institutions.

The top leadership of the Baath party must be tried for war crimes and crimes

against humanity.

The 40-year ethnic cleansing campaign that has displaced hundreds of thousands of Kurds, Turkomans and Assyrian Christians from Kirkuk, Khanaqin and Sinjar and other parts of Iraqi Kurdistan must be reversed. Successive Iraqi governments have sought to alter the demographic characteristics of these parts of Kurdistan through a violent policy they have called "Arabization." For the new Iraq to be peaceful and stable, it must facilitate returning victims to their homes if they choose and they must be compensated for their loss of businesses, property, jobs, homes and farms.

We must not set our goals to include superficial events such as early elections. We must put in place the correct institutions, and provide a good level of civic education to the Iraqi people, before we embark on national elections.

The centralized rule, by one man in Iraq, has been key to the countries demise, and to the strengthening of dictatorship. Given Iraq's demographic make up, comprising of Arabs, Kurds, Turkomans, Assyrians, Chaldeans

Centralized rule, has not, will not and cannot succeed in Iraq.

Eliminating one man, in this case Saddam Hussein, will not end this cycle.

Without a comprehensive transformation, a new dictatorship could emerge, and we could be here, in ten years time, going through the same motions!

A decentralized, federal democratic framework, therefore, is the only system that can accommodate the needs of Iraq's diverse society.

Recently, the Kurdistan National Assembly, the only elected body in Iraq today, completed a draft constitution for a Kurdistan region within a federal Iraq. This is not dissimilar to the American model of non-ethnically based federalism, where states prepared their own constitutions before sending delegates to a constitutional convention to establish a federal government.

Federalism, based on geography, will bring the relevant checks and balances required that would prevent the creation of yet another dictator. The devolution of power to the local 'federal' states would limit the authority of the central government over local government affairs while it will be a critical way to safeguard the great achievements made in Kurdistan.

Federalism would give all the Iraqis a safeguard of their political rights and crucially unite Iraq as today Iraq is divided.

Federalism is supported by most, if not all, elements of the Iraqi opposition. It has been endorsed at every opposition congress and was reaffirmed Salahaddin meeting of the Iraqi opposition just last week. Each of these Iraqi opposition meetings has taken place with U.S. support and participation. It was most welcome to hear President Bush's envoy to the Iraqi opposition, Zalmay Khalilzad, affirming to delegates at the Iraqi opposition meeting in Salahaddin

last week that the U.S. will respect the choice of the Iraqi people for a federal democratic system of government.

Let us not kid ourselves, the transition towards democracy will not be easy, it will not be swift and it will require patience.

This will be a war for liberation; it will bring hope to the enslaved Iraqi people, and justice for those that have suffered under this regime.

The liberation of the Iraqi people, will give hope to other oppressed people in the Middle East, and regardless of what AL-Jazeera tells you, will not, raise anti US sentiment in the Arab world. What the real Arab Street, aspires for is better schooling for their children, clean water, uninterrupted electricity, economic development and stability not what is happening in Gaza, the West Bank or Baghdad, but in fact, it is the values and rights that you and I in the west take for granted.

The Iraqi people, are ready to work with the United States, they are ready to forge a lasting partnership with the US, a partnership based on the values of freedom, justice and democracy.

We have worked tirelessly to get to where we are today, our D-day is nearing, and we feel our partnership with the US strengthening.

We are confident that together we will bring about the liberation of millions of Iraqis, and install peace and stability into a turbulent Region.

Thank you very much.