

OTHER NATIONS

IS THIS WHERE WE PART COMPANY?

THE SOURCE: “The Birth of Kurdistan?” by Martin Fletcher, in *Prospect*, August 2013.

REMINDEES OF SADDAM HUSSEIN’S GENOCIDAL oppression of Iraq’s five million Kurds are everywhere in the country’s three northernmost provinces. Gone are 4,500 towns and villages, their buildings razed and replaced with concrete-block eyesores, writes reporter Martin Fletcher in *Prospect*. Minefields and memorials

to dead loved ones dot the mountainous landscape. In Sulaimaniya, Saddam’s intelligence headquarters still stands, tanks rusting in the courtyard; inside are the rooms where prisoners were tortured, raped, and killed. The cemetery of a town where 5,000 civilians were gassed to death on March 16, 1988, contains three mass graves. “To this day, mustard gas—being heavier than air—lingers in the odd cellar, making it inaccessible,” Fletcher writes.

And yet, since the U.S. invasion of 2003, Kurdistan, a semi-autonomous region of Iraq, has become an oasis in



NEWSCOM

This is Iraq? Families celebrated the Persian New Year last March at a downtown park in the Kurdish Iraqi city of Erbil.

an otherwise anarchic and dangerous country. The veteran journalist describes celebrations marking the Kurdish New Year in Sulaimaniya: “Never before had I, a Westerner, been able to walk safely through a vast throng of Iraqis, or experienced such tolerance, friendliness, and absence of fear or religious stricture. Women with uncovered heads wore makeup and golden jewelry. Teenagers discreetly flirted. A few obviously gay men, and the odd drunk, wandered uncensored through the crowds.”

Kurdistan already has its own flag and national anthem.

With life so good for so many Kurds today, and so bad in the rest of Iraq, might Kurdistan secede?

Kurdistan already has its own flag and national anthem. Its government, though fractious, corrupt, and imperfectly democratic, has a provisional army and a judiciary, and issues its own visas. The economy is experiencing double-digit growth. Underground are vast oil reserves, and foreign investors have flooded the region with billions of dollars. Erbil, one of its major cities, flaunts several luxury car dealerships. “From

next to nothing, Kurdistan now boasts 20 universities, 60 hospitals, and 13,000 schools,” and the region’s airports “probably receive more flights from Europe and the Middle East than Baghdad.”

Some might wonder why Kurdistan would remain part of the country that has treated it so cruelly, but it has its reasons.

The autonomous region is allotted 17 percent of Iraq’s \$119 billion national budget—more than it pays in. Also, breaking away from Iraq would force a decision on disputed territories south of the border, including the city of Kirkuk. “The U.S. has strongly opposed the breakup of a country where it expended so much blood and money,” Fletcher notes. “So, at least in the past, have Turkey, Iran, and Syria who feared their own sizable Kurdish minorities would rise up if their Iraqi kinsmen gained independence.” He quotes Bayan Sami Abdul Rahman, Kurdistan’s High Representative in the United Kingdom, who observes that “at a bare minimum, you would need the support of one regional power and one international superpower” for her landlocked homeland to secede.

And yet.

With the development of its oil fields, Kurdistan is poised to send more cash to Baghdad than it receives,

an imbalance bound to stick in the Kurdish crowd. And after a new pipeline to Turkey begins operation later this year, Kurdistan won't have to depend on the ones running south.

Unrest in the Middle East, particularly in Syria, is pressing the issue of a Kurdish state.

Meanwhile, Iraq's Shia-dominated government has been growing more authoritarian, even as the United States has continued to beef up the Iraqi military, outfitting it with tanks and F-16 fighter jets. This trend alarms the country's Kurds, who are moderate Sunnis. They also "fear that Iraq's Shia and Sunni communities are sliding toward war."

Unrest in the Middle East, particularly in Syria, is also pressing the issue of a Kurdish state. Many of northeastern Syria's two million Kurds, who are aligned with the rebels fighting the Shia-backed regime of Bashar al-Assad, are pouring into Iraq's Kurdish north. Meanwhile, Kurdistan is enjoying "dramatically improved relations" with predominantly Sunni Turkey, which has bridled at any

notion of a Kurdish state and brutally suppressed its own Kurdish population in the past, but is now loosening its hold on the ethnic group. Finally, U.S. influence is waning with the withdrawal of American troops from Iraq.

As various cultural, economic, and political puzzle pieces snap in place, some analysts believe the picture emerging looks a whole lot like an independent Kurdish republic. ■

THE ONCE AND FUTURE CHIEF

THE SOURCE: "The Roots of Resilience" by Carolyn Logan, in *African Affairs*, Summer 2013.

ONE DAY LAST YEAR IN A VILLAGE IN SOUTH Africa, a court heard two different cases. A man whose wife had run off demanded that her father return the cows he had provided as a bride price. Another man stood accused of letting his cows graze on public land marked for conservation. Presiding over the court was not an official magistrate but Chief Luthando Dinwayo and a tribal council of four women and five men. This arrangement was no anomaly. The council's word was law, and the villagers paid it heed. Similar stories could be told in much of Africa, where traditional authorities wield considerable power in some areas of life.