

## The Kurds in the Iraq War

By William R. Polk

Among the biggest losers in the war in Iraq will almost certainly be the Kurds. Losing is an experience the Kurds know well. Since long before history was recorded, their neighbors have invaded them, destroyed their villages, carried away their animals, cut down their fruit trees and raped their women. What the neighbors did not do to them, they did to one another. But, somehow, after each terrible bout of rapine, they managed to rise again and go on with their lives. “Indomitable” is the word that comes to mind to describe them although “tragic” might seem to be more accurate. To put what is likely to befall them now, as Turkish troops begin today to invade Kurdistan look over the events that have afflicted them.

The very early people who would become the Kurds were a branch of the Indo-Europeans who were driven out of Central Asia about 4,000 years ago. Some of their cousins went south in India, others moved west eventually to become the Persians, Greeks, Romans, Germans and Spaniards. All speak languages that are related and share genetic traits.

Unlike their cousins who moved into richer lands, the Kurds settled in what turned out to be a trap: the mountainous area of eastern Asia Minor.

Along valleys in that rugged land, little pockets of the original settlers were divided from one another by mountains made almost impassable for much of each year by heavy snows and freezing winds. As they scrambled to scratch a bare living amid the rocks and torrents, the Kurds took on characteristics that we can still see today: they

became a hardy folk, fiercely independent, unable to combine with others beyond their immediate kindred and riven by feuds. They might be called Berbers or Scots of Asia.

Like the neighbors of the Berbers and Scots, no one wanted their high, rocky and cold lands but prized them. The Ancient Assyrians actually hunted them like wild animals, kidnapping the young men to be soldiers, the women to be concubines and the rest to be slave laborers. The Assyrian word for those they enslaved actually meant “walking on all four legs like a domesticated animal.”

But enough survived to form a barrier to Xenophon when in 401 B.C. he led his ten thousand Greek mercenaries out of Mesopotamia. Calling them the “Carduchi,” Xenophon found the Kurds to be the most fearsome warriors he had ever met. That was a national trait in which they took great pride and carefully preserved. The great warrior of Islam, Saladin, was one of them. Selling their lives dearly has always been the essence of their code of honor.

Century after century, they were fought over by the great empires surrounding them. Persians, Turks and Arabs marched back and forth across their mountains, pillaging and raping as they went. In the First World War, nearly a million Kurdish men, women and children were killed or died of starvation. So horrible was their plight that the Paris Peace Conference decided to turn “Kurdistan,” an area about the size of Spain, into a state to be administered by the United States.

When the American Senate refused to join the League of Nations, Kurdistan was broken into pieces with some awarded to French-administered Syria, a part absorbed into Iran, about a third incorporated in British-administered Iraq and the lion’s share taken over by Turkey.

When Mustafa Kamel (“Ataturk”) was struggling for recognition from the Western powers, he promised to give the Kurds a large degree of autonomy, but when he achieved power, he quickly banned the Kurdish language, changed the names of their towns, put them under martial law, kept them out of Parliament and even denied that they existed. To him and later Turkish governments, they were not Kurds but “Mountain Turks.”

When the Kurds tried to rebel, as they did decade after decade and especially in the mid 1980s, the Turkish army brutally suppressed them, scything through farms and villages, destroying irrigation works, closing schools, relocating an estimated 2 million people and imprisoning or “disappearing” (killing) thousands of those who resisted.

Every Turkish government since Ataturk has been violently opposed to movements aimed at Kurdish independence. The dilemma the Turks have faced is evident in the numbers: about one in each five citizens of Turkey is Kurdish and their proportion is increasing. It is one of the lessons history has taught the Kurds that they must reproduce: their birth rate is nearly twice that of the rest of the population. Suppressing the Kurds has been the major task of the Turkish army and has cost about a fifth of the national budget. It is a fight the Turks could not win.

If they could not win, the Turks thought that at least they need not lose. The main danger, they believe, is that for over a decade, the Kurds living in Iraq have been virtually independent under the watchful eye of the United States Air Force. The Turks fear that if the Iraqi Kurds manage to break free, it will become impossible to prevent the Kurds living in Turkey from winning their freedom.

Is this a real possibility?

The Kurds have a traditional saying that sums up their despair: “We Kurds have only two enemies, ourselves and everyone else.”

“Ourselves” is always a clear danger. Time after time, the Kurds have effectively destroyed their own independence movements and today they are still split into two major and several minor factions. These factions go under impressive names – the Kurdish Democratic Party (KPD) and the Patriotic Union of Kurdistan (PUK) -- but it is personal loyalties, kinship ties, neighborhood and traditional feuds rather than ideology that separate them. So hostile have they been to one another that it was easy for foreigners to foment civil war among them and even to enlist them in the task of oppressing or killing one another.

The record of “everyone else” has always been worse. Outsiders time after time have made of the Kurds pawns in their strategies. Back in 1975, American Secretary of State Henry Kissinger assured the Kurds that America valued their friendship and would arrange for the Shah of Iran to become their protector. They could push ahead with their aim at autonomy. They did. Then when the Shah made a deal with Saddam Husain resolving a long-festering frontier dispute, America stood aside and, as the Kurds said, “sold them down the river to Iraq.”

Saddam took his revenge a few years later, in 1988. Armed with American weapons and poison gas made possible by American and British help, the Iraqi army razed thousands of Kurdish villages, herded hundreds of thousands of Kurds into government-controlled relocation centers and virtually wiped out the village of Halabja in deliberate attempt to panic the Kurds into a mass exodus from Iraqi territory.

At that time, American policy was to support Saddam Husain so the Kurds were left to their fate. In 1991, to the contrary, when America turned against Saddam, a CIA “black” radio in Saudi Arabia encouraged the Kurds to revolt even after a cease fire had been arranged between the Americans and the Iraqis. For that the Kurds paid a heavy price.

In the immediate aftermath of the Gulf war, President George Bush Sr. stood by while Saddam Husain’ helicopter gunships mowed down the American-encouraged Kurdish resistance. Then, again reversing course, the American government afforded the Kurds at least partial protection from the Iraqis with its “No Fly Zone”) while acquiescing in Turkish suppression of them.

Then, in the build-up of hostility to Saddam Husain, the Americans encouraged the Kurds to think, once again, that they had won foreign support for independence. American officials, including Vice President Dick Cheney and Defense Secretary Donald Rumsfeld encouraged the Kurds to believe that America stood behind them. It turned out that the Americans stood far behind them.

Turkey was the problem. In its attempt to get the Turks to allow American forces to use their facilities, ports and air space for the invasion of Iraq, the Americans apparently agreed not only to give or lend Turkey up to \$32 billion but also, at least informally, agreed not to oppose a Turkish invasion of Iraqi Kurdistan and promised not to allow its Kurds to create a separate state. Assembling 54 Kurdish leaders, American envoy Zalmay Khalilzad warned them that they would have to accept a large Turkish military presence.

As I write, Turkish troops have actually crossed into Iraqi Kurdistan. And so, today, the Iraqi Kurds are bracing to try to salvage the little that remains of their distressed land. We can expect a spread of the fighting to the north, not between the Americans and the Iraqis but between the Kurds and the Turks. Many have said that they would, as usual, fight and, as usual, be defeated. The dream of an independent Kurdistan remains just that, a dream.

© William R. Polk 2003

March 22, 2003

William R. Polk is a director of the W.P. Carey Foundation. A graduate of Harvard and Oxford, he taught Middle Eastern politics and history and the Arabic language at Harvard University until President Kennedy appointed him a Member of the Policy Planning Council of the U.S. Department of State. He was in charge of planning American policy for most of the Islamic world until 1965 when he became professor of history at the University of Chicago and founded its Middle Eastern Studies Center. Later he also became president of the Adlai Stevenson Institute of International Affairs. Among his many books are *The United States and the Arab World*; *The Elusive Peace: The Middle East in the Twentieth Century*; *Neighbors and Strangers: The Fundamentals of Foreign Affairs*; *Polk's Folly, An American Family History* and *The Birth of America*.