



## The Star-Ledger

### Many Kurds support Iraq, not independence

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Turkey's threatened invasion of northern Iraq due to attacks by PKK rebels has again highlighted the status of the Kurds. Will they seek independence or are they committed to a federal Iraq?

A visit to Iraqi Kurdistan makes clear that matters differ sharply from what is often presented in the American media. Talks with Kurds from all walks of life indicate that a large majority seek a federal Iraq and reject partition, whether "soft" or "hard."

While understandably distrustful of the Arab south, many Kurds distinguish between Saddam Hussein's genocidal policies and Iraqi Arabs, remembering that in Baghdad, and elsewhere, Arabs and Kurds lived together peacefully for generations.

Often it is argued that Kurds, separated politically from the south between 1991 and 2003, no longer speak Arabic and that language and cultural differences prevent developing a truly federal Iraq. Virtually every Kurd I met spoke Arabic. As they noted, an estimated 1 million Kurds still live in Baghdad. Kurds still watch Arabic programs, such as soccer matches, soap operas and movies, including the Arabic service on Kurdish television. No longer obligatory, Arabic still is taught in Kurdish schools.

Often neglected are the Kurds' own language problems. Although the Sorani dialect prevails in Erbil and Sulaymaniya provinces, the Kurmangi (Badini) dialect prevails, spoken by about 70 percent of Kurds, in Dohuk province, eastern Turkey and Syria. When a researcher at a Kurdish university recently conducted an attitudinal survey at Dohuk University, all students chose to answer the Arabic questionnaire rather than risk making mistakes on the one in Sorani.

Talks with university faculty, graduate students, professionals and government officials indicate that a new relationship is developing with the Arab south, one, they argue, that must be built on mutual respect and equality.

Kurds no longer accept that while virtually all educated sectors of their society speak and often write in Arabic (a colleague at Salahaddin University recently published a 400-page study in Arabic of the 1961-1975 Kurdish Revolution), Arabs refuse to learn Kurdish.

A little-discussed but important change is the migration of large numbers of professional and middle-class Arab Iraqis to the more stable Kurdish north. There are an estimated 18,000 Arab Iraqi families in Erbil and 38,000 in Sulaymaniya, whose children study in schools established by the Kurdish Regional Government where classes are taught in Arabic. Young Kurdish university students indicate that meetings with children of Arab families have helped them understand them better and even make friendships.

While their parents may not be willing to learn Kurdish, Arab children in the north surely will, creating new ties between the two communities.

Many Kurdish students feel that Arabic is important given the still limited economic opportunities in the Kurdish region, especially for the educated middle classes. Lawyers, school teachers, NGO activists and other professionals often take on second jobs, such as working in hotels, to keep up with rising prices. Many young, educated Kurds envision future employment, perhaps for substantial periods of time, in Arab countries, especially in the Persian Gulf, again suggesting that ties with the Arab world will continue, rather than abate.

While the real estate sector of the Kurdish economy is booming, there is still relatively limited industrial activity. Working together, Kurdish and Arab businessmen are increasingly cooperating to create new opportunities in the construction sector, but are also thinking about industrial projects such as recycling factories and wind power generation plants.

With security still lacking in the south, the Kurdish region has attracted substantial numbers of Arab Iraqi businessmen, as witnessed by the success of the Iraqi- American Chamber of Commerce and Industry's projects in the Kurdish north, and that of the recent Erbil and Sulaymaniya commercial expos (that attracted Arab businessmen from as far away as Yemen). Many of the ties between Kurds and Arabs that existed prior to 2003 have helped promote economic cooperation, e.g., a wealthy Arab Iraqi operates one of the largest automobile dealerships in Erbil with a Kurdish businessman, a former neighbor in a mixed Arab-Kurdish area near the city of Kirkuk.

Known historically for their dairy products, the Kurds now import their milk from eastern Turkey. As Kurdish farmers have migrated to the city, the Kurds have increasingly become dependent on food imports. During the recent border closing by Iran in response to attacks by Kurdish rebels, the Kurdish economy lost an estimated \$1 million per day. Turkish-Kurdish trade is conservatively put at \$2.6 billion per year. Despite abundant oil, it will take years to translate oil revenues into productive industry and sustained employment for Kurdish youth.

With potentially hostile relations with Turkey and Iran always lurking in the background, due to incursions by PKK and PJAK rebels into Turkey and Iran respectively, many Kurds feel more comfortable expanding economic cooperation with the Arab south, which poses no military threat.

Benefiting both Iraq's Kurds and Arabs, such ties are helping to establish a new Iraq based on shared economic goals. As one Kurdish intellectual so aptly put it, "In politics, there are no friendships, only interests."

Kurds from all sectors of society complain, many bitterly, about the lack of democracy and corruption that characterizes the current Kurdish political elite. Kurds point out that they suffer from the same electric shortages as the Arab south. Newspapers such as *Awene* and *Hawlati*, that advocate for democracy and civil society building, criticize the Kurdish Regional Government's policies but frequently encounter subtle threats from government officials. Civil society organizations need government licenses to function.

Arab Iraqi women have begun to join Kurdish women's organizations in the fight to reduce the number of honor killings and suicides by burning that have led to the deaths of Kurdish women accused of "honor crimes." Kurdish women point out that these practices have come out in the open with the development of greater freedom of expression since the 1991 break with the south, but even more so since 2003. Divorce is also a more openly discussed phenomenon as Kurdish women refuse to subject themselves to traditional patriarchal practices.

The positive impact of cooperation between Kurdish and Arab democracy activists on both regions -- where democracy is still more a hope than a reality -- is a topic that is increasingly discussed in Iraqi Kurdistan. Kurds realize that, in the area of civil society and democracy promotion, they have more in common with their fellow democracy activists in the south than they do with the authoritarian policies and nepotism of the two dominant Kurdish political parties, Masoud Barzani's Kurdish Democratic Party and Jalal Talabani's Patriotic Union of Kurdistan.

Many Kurds say that federalism may eventually lead to an independent Kurdish state, but they see that happening far in the future. At the moment, they argue that Kurdish interests call for a strong federated Iraq and not partition. They point with pride to Iraq having a Kurdish president, vice-president, foreign minister and army chief of staff, and the role that 6,000 Kurdish troops in the Iraqi army are playing in bringing stability to Baghdad.

Kurds, especially those beyond the small elites that tightly control Kurdish politics, understand the benefits of a federalism based on shared interests as well as the dangers of partition. Partition would not only cut off needed investment from the Arab south and, more important, from the Arab states of the Persian Gulf, but it would make Iraqi Kurdistan more vulnerable to attacks from Turkey and Iran. The latter consideration is especially important because the problems in Turkey and Iran that created the PKK and PJAK insurgencies will not be solved anytime soon and support for these organizations remains high among Iraq's Kurds.

Instead of focusing on what is pulling Iraq's Kurdish and Arab populations apart, U.S. policymakers should help nurture the important new political and economic relationships that can help unite rather than separate these two communities. If American policymakers are really serious about creating a stable and democratic Iraq, they would do well to listen to the views of Kurds who seek to bring greater democracy and economic prosperity to their region and give them the political and material support they deserve.

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