

Letter from Iraqi Kurdistan

Gerard Alexander

Landing in Iraq triggered in me an unattractive self-centredness. Instead of wanting to immediately strike out by foot and car to learn everything possible about the country, the very prospect of walking the streets – even in the Kurdish north – induced shyness, and an acute concern with what passers-by were thinking about *me*. In some parts of the country, of course, such anxieties would hardly be a sign of neuroticism. But, I soon learned, things are different in Iraqi Kurdistan, and by the first evening I was walking the streets with hardly a concern about violence of the political sort. I did remain worried that I was a juicy target for petty criminality. Credit cards are effectively useless in much of Iraq because of anaemic banking connections to the rest of the world, so foreign visitors can be expected to carry around the hundreds or even thousands of dollars in cash needed to pay for their hotels and other expenses. But within hours even my self-consciousness about my bulging wallet had faded.

Iraqi Kurds, not habituated to foreign faces, stare at you, not always politely, with expressions neutral enough to conceal their emotions. I responded by smiling and, if in a vehicle, by waving. The reaction was almost always the same: all but the most elderly Kurds broke into wide grins and waved back. Beneath a surface of caution and concern lay a deep reservoir of friendliness and welcome. That first night, I ate kebabs for dinner in a tiny, working-class restaurant and, when exiting, the owner pointedly and repeatedly refused to be paid. After a back-and-forth, I left money on the counter anyway, but his smiles, refusals, and gestures – placing his hand over his heart – made clear that a Westerner's (or perhaps all I can safely say is that an American's) money was no good there. This dynamic recurred again and again over the next ten days.

This was, after all, not Anbar province. Iraq's Kurds had been brutalised by Saddam's regime, and unambiguously welcomed relief from the Ba'athist sword that had hung over their heads for nearly 35 years. Free now to memorialise the tens of thousands killed by Saddam's security forces, rebuild their economy, and attract foreign investment, Kurds have good reason to appreciate the Western presence. And while most Iraqi Kurds are devoted to their region's eventual independence, they have repaid their liberation with strenuous efforts to make *Iraq* work. Iraq's President,

Jalal Talabani, a Kurd, has sought stable and effective governance in Baghdad. The same can be said of Kurds serving as ministers and sub-ministers in the national cabinet. And there are thousands of Kurdish members of Iraq's armed forces who daily risk their lives patrolling the streets and back-alleys of Baghdad.

If anything, Kurds have provoked hostility from other Iraqis not for their steps in the direction of separatism but for their extensive cooperation with other national parties. This has attracted the rage of insurgents and al-Qaeda extremists who badly want to see the post-2003 political order fail. So despite the tight security provided by the Kurdish fighters, the Peshmerga, the north has suffered from such events as a double suicide bombing that killed over 100 people in February 2004 and bombings that left more than 70 dead in May and June of 2005.

A car bomb in Erbil left 19 dead on the morning I landed in May. That afternoon, at the blast site, I found myself alongside Kurds who have not been made blasé to such events by sheer repetition. But unlike many other parts of Iraq, there is scant sociological basis for home-grown political violence here. A substantial minority of Kurds are Shia, yet there is essentially no sectarian strife in the region, because sectarian affiliations are easily trumped by a unifying Kurdish identity. Iraq's Kurds hold out an image of what the rest of the country might aspire to.

Until then, though, Kurds have pervasive concerns about violence-prone infiltrators from other Iraqi provinces. Soldiers or police are positioned with astonishing frequency and check passing cars and trucks with great professionalism. In a week and a half on the ground, I passed through perhaps 100 checkpoints and never had an officer even drop hints that I should bribe my way out of some contrived trouble. On previous research trips, I could not have passed through five checkpoints in central Africa without several of them demanding a 'gift.'

This commitment to Iraq was evident in most of the senior Kurdish officials I was in Iraq to interview – whether they were serving in the regional government or the national one in Baghdad. Almost all lamented what they considered ill-advised Coalition policies in the first several years after the invasion, including the failure to establish security in the streets much earlier and to challenge Moqtada al-Sadr's politics of Shia chauvinism (which they generally believe to be orchestrated from Teheran). But most were optimistic that Washington and London were getting it far more right in the recent 'surge,' in terms of both higher overall troop levels and more aggressive approaches to the bearers of sectarian as well as ideological violence.

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Like commentators elsewhere, they were above all struck by the switch of many Sunni Arabs in Anbar from what had been a relatively explicit alliance with al-Qaeda and other Islamist radicals, to a tacit alliance with the U.S. military and an Iraqi national government that is (inevitably, given the demographics) dominated by Shia and Kurds. If this switch reveals an acceptance by Iraq's Sunni Arabs that they cannot shoot their way back to power and privilege, then it represents a momentous shift in the political as well as the military conditions inside Iraq. And it testifies to the success of new political as well as military strategies that anti-extremist forces in Iraq have developed to combat both insurgency and terrorism.

Perhaps surprisingly, the officials I interviewed generally guessed that the United States, Britain, and their Coalition partners would not abandon Iraqis through an abrupt withdrawal. They know that Western publics and decision-makers are perfectly free to choose to withdraw, and that Western publics are averse to wars in general and impatient about this one in particular. But while they expect troop levels to decline and in-field tactics to be adjusted, most simply cannot believe that the leaders of Coalition countries would make a decision that runs so catastrophically against the interests of – as they insisted – both Westerners and Iraqis alike.

Iraqis are eager for Western help. University students in Erbil and Sulaimaniya grasp at contact with the outside world. Businesspeople and political leaders are hungry for engagement with the global economy. Average citizens are desperate for foreign investment because of the employment they know it can bring. If anything, they are frustrated that Western countries have appeared shy to get more involved, or to show moral support to a people under siege from thugs who place nail-bombs in public marketplaces.

To be brutally honest, some of those who call for an immediate withdrawal from Iraq would quickly move on to other issues if they got their way. Once Iraq is out of their sights, it will be out of their minds and cease to exert a moral pull on them. The Kurds are not going anywhere. What they want above all is a well-grounded, long-term relationship with the United States and Western Europe. One Kurd I spoke to said that Kurds will reach out to whoever extends a hand to them, and smile back at whoever smiles at them. They know it is they who will face the violent chaos that would fill the vacuum created by a precipitate withdrawal. We should keep smiling back.

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