

Kurds Keep Iraq at Arm's Length

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As violence engulfs the Sunni triangle, Iraq's northern Kurdish zone is going from strength to strength.

While mortars rained on Americans in Baghdad's "green zone" last Tuesday night, their fellow citizens in a hotel room in the Kurdish city of Arbil were happily belting out Elton John's "Your Song", ignoring the ban on alcohol in the holy month of Ramadan.

There were no concrete barriers outside the hotel or US soldiers with weapons poised. Not even a local armed guard was visible. Journalists, NGO workers, local officials, staff of the Coalition Provisional Authority, CPA, and returning Kurds from the diaspora mingled without even cursory security checks. It seemed a world apart from the rest of Iraq and in many ways it was.

Kurdistan remains as isolated from the rest of Iraq as it was throughout the 1990s, when Baghdad withdrew from three Kurdish governorates, imposed an internal blockade and left them to fend for themselves.

Today's isolation is more voluntary. The Kurds were allies of the US in their war against Saddam Hussein and when Baghdad fell on April 9, hundreds of thousands danced in the streets. "Now we are Iraqis," a young man had shouted in Sulaimaniyah over the celebratory honking of car horns. "I can study in Baghdad. I can travel. I can join the world," he added, echoing others who said they were celebrating not only the fall of a hated oppressor but the end of their seclusion.

Seven months on there has been little reintegration. Prospering from increased security and trade, Kurdistan remains an entity unto itself, detached from the crisis gripping the rest of Iraq.

Though the violence in the south is a topic of conversation, Kurds see it as "their" problem. Though less inclined to conspiracy theories than many Middle Eastern people, they ask if the Americans are stupid, or really want it to go so badly.

"Us" meets "them" only in "newly-liberated" Kirkuk, Khanaqin, and to a lesser extent Mosul and the towns and villages in between. These traditionally Kurdish areas lay outside the "green line" separating the self-governing governorates from the rest of Iraq after 1991. But they were always seen as Kurdish, separated from the rest only by the force of the regime.

Kurdish NGOs, media and political parties have now expanded their activities into these areas, and people and goods flow freely back and forth. Aside from a couple of minor attacks, the area inside the green line remains largely secure.

Kurdish intelligence regularly captures wanted members of the old regime, Turkish agents and members of Ansar al-Islam, a radical Kurdish group that was forced across the border to Iran at the start of the war, but which has recently regrouped, and re-entered Iraq.

Kurdish police officers yawn as they direct traffic in the cities. When US troops are seen on the streets, which is rare, they are more often looking for beer than members of the resistance.

Thanks to increased security, business is booming. The regional government in Sulaimaniyah is selling property in the city centre at rock-bottom prices on the condition investors immediately develop it. Office buildings and small shopping centers jammed with computers, wide-screen TVs, refrigerators, and microwave ovens are popping up.

The government has boosted construction by offering its workers no-interest 4,000 US dollar loans for home-builds. Seven thousand new properties are being built in Sulaymaniyah today. Even small side-streets are being upgraded and asphalted with money from the US.

The construction boom has cut the jobless rate to almost zero in Sulaimaniyah. In the rest of Iraq, up to 70 per cent of workers are without jobs. Iraqi police and university professors are reportedly coming to Kurdistan for work and higher wages.

Few Kurds head in the other direction to study, work or shop. They view the centre as a chaotic place, marred by terrorist bombings and unbridled crime. The bloodshed in the Sunni triangle is watched on Arab satellite channels from afar. It is as distant from the Kurds as it is to viewers in Jordan or London.

But the rest of Iraq is ahead of Kurdistan when it comes to the media. More than 100 publications are produced in the big cities but they are largely party-based, written in Kurdish, and focus on events inside the green line and to a lesser extent the newly-liberated areas.

A few Arabic papers from Baghdad reach Kurdish streets but they are generally a day or two late and are not very popular. The CPA's media outlet, the Iraq Media Network, renamed Al-Iraqiya, is present and as irrelevant to Kurds as it is to other Iraqis.

Politics is business as usual with the two main Kurdish political parties, the Patriotic Union of Kurdistan, PUK, and the Kurdistan Democratic Party, KDP, dominating the scene.

With their leaders busy in Baghdad and abroad, local government works on auto-pilot. City streets are spotlessly clean, while schools and hospitals function as they have done for years. The premier of the Sulaymaniyah-based government says his biggest headache is providing electricity to meet the demand for all the new air-conditioners and electric appliances.

The only new item on the political agenda is increased discussion of the future federal Iraq. Paul Bremer, the US administrator, talks of a diluted, American American-style federal structure comprising 18 units based on the governorates. Kurdish leaders want a tripartite structure based on the Shi'a south, the Sunni centre and the Kurdish north.

The Kurds increasingly wonder why they should bother being part of Iraq and talk of holding a referendum to decide if Kurdistan should remain part of the country or form an independent state.

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