



A Conversation with Ambassador Peter W. Galbraith

Matan Chorev

Peter W. Galbraith is the author of ***The End of Iraq: How American Incompetence Created a War Without End***. From 1979 to 1993, Galbraith was a senior advisor to the U.S. Senate Foreign Relations Committee and is the author of published Foreign Relations Committee reports on ethnic cleansing in Bosnia-Herzegovina, the Iran-Iraq War, and the Iraqi Kurds. Galbraith served as the first U.S. Ambassador to Croatia and has held senior positions in the U.S. Government and the United Nations.

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What lessons did you draw from your experience in the Balkans that you think apply to moving forward in Iraq?

I think there are two major lessons. The central mistake that we made in Yugoslavia in 1991 was to focus on trying to hold the country together when that was impossible. What we did not do is try to avoid the war which was an achievable objective. We have made exactly the same error in Iraq. Paul Bremer [Administrator of the Coalition Provisional Authority] and the White House put all their efforts into the notion of a non-ethnic, unified Iraq. They insisted on federalism based on Saddam's governorates. It was never going to work. In fact, that American effort hardened the Kurdish position in favor of maximum independence. They didn't get it at

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the Transitional Administration Law because they felt they had to accommodate the Americans but when it came time to the permanent Iraqi constitution, when they were just dealing with other Iraqis, and when they felt more comfortable with their position, they made it clear that unless they get an arrangement that makes Kurdistan law superior to Iraqi law they were not going to agree to this constitution. So the first lesson to learn is that it was a mistake to try to hold the country together and not focus on preventing the violence. The second lesson flows from this: It's a fool's errand to try to hold together a country against the will of a people in a geographically defined area who don't want to be a part of it.

At this point, what step would you take to manage the conflict in Iraq and prevent it from de-escalating any further?

Well, let's deal in the areas where there isn't a lot of violence, which is between Kurds and Arabs. We have events in 2007 that could make for a lot of violence, namely the referendum in Kirkuk and other disputed areas. There are things that we could do, *now*, that could make a difference, such as, negotiating power-sharing within Kirkuk between all the communities, regardless of size, so they all have a role in the future of the city or the province. This would be true regardless of whether Kirkuk is in Kurdistan or not. We should also, for example, be negotiating the borders of Kirkuk. Once the referendum is held, and assuming the Kurdish position won, you could agree that districts that didn't vote to be part of Kurdistan would go to adjacent Arab governorates. Similarly, if the non-Kurdish position won, Kurdish districts of the city could join with Kurdistan. Those are easier things to do before the event than after the event. But so far as I know, nothing is happening. This is an

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Could you comment a bit about the regional dimension? What is the

role of Kurdish minority populations in neighboring countries and how do they factor into the future of Iraqi Kurdistan? And what do you think are the strategic calculations of the Iranian and Turkish governments in particular vis-à-vis the future of Iraqi Kurdistan?

The Iraqi Kurds' aspirations are for a Kurdistan which they define as being a geographic entity bounded by the northern and eastern borders of Iraq and then the border between them and Arab Iraq. They do not aspire for a greater Kurdistan which would include territory in parts of Turkey, Iran, Iraq, and Syria, which is totally unachievable and incidentally has little appeal to the Iraqi Kurds because in that context they would be a minor part. In some sense, this is the Moldova problem where everybody thought that once the Soviet Union broke apart, Moldova would rejoin Romania. But they figured out it was better to be an independent country than the most distant province of Romania.

The Kurdish situation is different in each of these countries. In Iraq, there was the most brutal history culminating in genocide, although the Kurdish identity was recognized. But there it has *de facto* independence and now wants full independence, and that is just a reality. In Turkey, it is principally a civil rights problem. The government defeated the insurgency in 1999 and the Kurdish struggle has redefined itself. It now focuses on the right to use the Kurdish language and to teach Kurdish in schools. The fact that Turkey is on the path to joining the European Union also makes membership in Turkey not only the realistic option but a much more attractive one than independence for the Turkish Kurds.

There has always been a natural affinity between the Kurds and the Iranians because they are the most similar peoples. Traditionally, the Iranian Kurdish agenda has been for autonomy within Iran. Would that morph into an independence movement? That's possible, mostly because the Kurds are overwhelmingly Sunni and Iran is a Shi'a state. If they saw independence as a possibility, I think they might want it. In Syria, the Kurdish population in the west, they are Syrian citizens and are quite well integrated. In the east, the Syrians maintain the

Kurds are migrants from the 1950s, so the Kurds' demands are citizenship, as they are basically stateless.

In terms of the attitudes of neighboring states, none of them of course want to see an independent Kurdistan in Iraq because they all see it as a threat. Syria is not much of a factor. Turkey is the most important and there are people in Turkey for whom the word "Kurdistan" sends up all sorts of red flags. But there is also a widespread recognition in the Turkish military and diplomatic circles that a *de facto* independent Kurdistan actually exists and that there isn't much that Turkey can do about it. So Turkey is focused on two issues. One is the PKK [Kurdistan Worker's Party], which I think is more of a way to have leverage on the Kurds rather than them conceiving of it as a real threat. I think there is some PKK activity but it basically originates in Turkey and not in northern Iraq. Second, there is the issue of Kirkuk and the Turkmen. In 2002-2003 the Turkmen issue was a huge issue but then the elections were held. In the first elections, the Turkmen party received three seats and in the second elections, one seat. This suggests that the Turkmen population was not fifteen million, as some people in Turkey were claiming it was, but actually something much smaller. This is because the election was basically a census. So the number of people who identify as Turkmen was just a few hundred thousand, and that has taken a lot of the steam out of the Turkish effort to play the Turkmen card. I don't know that Turkey is really going to have a great option on the Kirkuk referendum. They can talk about it but there is not much they can do.

There is a view in Turkey, which I still think is a minority view, but a growing view nonetheless, that not only is an independent Kurdistan inevitable, but maybe it's not such a bad thing. The Kurds are secular, pro-Western, they aspire to be democratic. In short, they are a lot like Turkey. Kurdistan today, in fact, is a dependency of Turkey and therefore there are a lot of opportunities for Turkish companies to expand, including in oil. This school of thought also believes that Iraqi Kurdistan might be a useful buffer against an Iranian dominated Shi'a Iraq.

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The Iranian influence is less than the Turkish influence. They have employed tactics such as assassination and sabotage to undermine the Kurdish Regional Government but their real focus is on the Shi'a south and Baghdad. I think in the constitutional negotiations it became evident that their basic bargain is that if they get the south they are prepared to let the Kurds go.

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Can the United States maintain its strategic

alliance with Turkey while supporting a policy of autonomy for Iraqi Kurdistan? Is this a zero-sum game in U.S.-Turkish relations?

The perception that this is a zero-sum game is based on enormous ignorance of the reality of relations between Turkey and Kurdistan. There are enormous economic ties and there has been a certain amount of Turkish support for Kurdistan. I think the Turks have played this very well, which is to recognize that it's happening and working to make it a dependency of Turkey rather than pushing the Kurds away from Turkey. There is a natural relationship there.

How would you evaluate the United States' policy towards the Iraqi Kurds since the fall of Saddam Hussein? Is there, in your mind, a coherent Kurdish strategy since 2003?

There is a clear Kurdish strategy which is in two parts. First, is to try to accommodate the Americans in any way possible except on issues that are existential to Kurdistan. For example, they fought with the Americans in the 2003 war. Incidentally, they generally supported Bremer in the occupation, even though they didn't think much of him. In fact, one Kurdish politician tells me every time I see him that they will build a statue of Bremer because he did more to break up Iraq than anybody! And to satisfy the Americans they agreed to all sorts of things in the Transitional Administration Law (like that the *peshmerga* [Kurdish militia] would be disbanded and that the central government would control the oil and borders) that they never implemented. When the Americans tried to take down the Kurdish flag at the border, Nerchivan Barzani [Kurdish leader and current Prime Minister of Kurdish Regional Government] told the American general, "You can take it down, and tomorrow there will be six, and if you take

those down, the following day there will be sixty, so go ahead!" The general decided not to do it.

The Americans have not been very smart on this, but they also have not been smart on many things. The Kurds have been their natural allies. The Americans have gratuitously insulted them. The funniest thing to me was that in July 2005, they needed the Kurds to make a constitution. President Bush wanted it by the August 15 deadline. So they kept coming up to Kurdistan to urge them to accept central control of oil and give up the *peshmerga*. The Kurds then decided to invite the Americans to a Fourth of July party. There are no other people in Iraq that would hold a July Fourth party in honor of the Americans. They sent out invitations and so on, and the U.S. embassy in Baghdad, having accepted the invitation, said it would not go because the Kurds would not fly the Iraqi flag. Now, they knew the Iraqi flag would not fly there and that it hadn't flown there in years. It was hardly the kind of issue the Kurds would budge on. The U.S. picked an unnecessary fight and the day before the ceremony the Kurds were forced to cancel the event. Then they had to come back to the Kurds and ask for their help with the constitution. Needless to say, they were not very forthcoming. There was just incident after incident of that nature.

The Kurds, nonetheless, have been reasonably strategic, and their attitude is basically, "we don't want to be the ones blamed for the breakup of Iraq." Of course, they say this with the look of certainty that it will happen. They adopted a fairly shrewd policy of playing an outsized role in Baghdad, but focusing on those ministries that are relevant for Kurdistan.

In your view has Kurdish nationalism changed over the course of the 1990s and into today?

As people have become more confident about where things are heading they've become more nationalistic and more open about the desirability of independence. The referendum was a watershed event. I see no evidence that it is withering – it is wishful thinking on some people's part.

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How economically sustainable will an independent Iraqi Kurdistan be?

Presuming that Kirkuk will become part of Kurdistan, which most people think it will, then you have the control over the region's oil. In addition, they are working to develop their own oil resources. There is also some significant foreign investment. If they are going to maintain their current standard of living they are going to need a share of the oil resources of Iraq. There are three exit routes – Syria, Turkey, and Iraq, and they will need access to these to get the oil out. They are discussing building a new pipeline that goes north through Kirkuk to Kurdistan and straight to Turkey. The irony is that during Saddam's time, Kurdistan was viewed as insecure so they didn't want to put a pipeline there that could be attacked by the Kurds. So the pipeline goes from Kirkuk southwest to Baiji and then up to Turkey and that's because the Sunni area used to be the secure area. Now the situation is exactly reversed.

Are you at all concerned that the breakup of Iraq will have a regional spillover?

I don't see it as spilling over. It will be like Yugoslavia, the Soviet Union, or Czechoslovakia.

It is likely to be contained. The Iraqi Kurds do not have ambitions that go beyond their borders. The situation in the other states is just different. The Kurds are a relatively small population in Syria. In Turkey it is a civil rights issue. Of course they are much better off in a Turkey that is going into the European Union. If Iran can make reforms I don't think it will have a spillover effect there, although that is the most likely place for it to happen.

I think that there has been an enormous strategic shift in the Middle East as a result of the Iraq War. The principle one is the triumph of Iran. Since 1639, the current boundary between Iraq and Iran was between Arab and Persian but also between Sunni and Shi'a. That line has been crossed and now Iran is on the other side. That could have an impact on the eastern province of Saudi Arabia, which has a substantial Shi'a population, or Bahrain. But I don't see a spillover beyond that.

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