

Don't Delay Democracy in Kirkuk

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Postponing a vote on making the city part of Kurdistan could imperil the U.S. mission in Iraq

EVEN AS THE battle for Baghdad continues to rage, the United States must begin considering the future of another Iraqi city: Kirkuk.

Here are two critical things to know about Kirkuk: First, it is surrounded by Kurdish towns and villages and has a population that is majority Kurdish -yet it lies just outside the boundaries of the autonomous region of Kurdistan to the north. Second, although it is a poor city, Kirkuk is built close to one of Iraq's largest oil fields.

At the moment, there is a planned referendum on the future status of the city (and the province in which it is located). The referendum is scheduled to take place before the end of 2007 and will determine whether the province should be made a part of autonomous Kurdistan.

However, there is a rising call for a postponement of the vote. If this happens, as many outsiders would like, then the entire U.S. mission in Iraq, and the fundamental justification for the war of liberation, could be fatally damaged.

The nub of the Kirkuk issue is how to reverse Saddam Hussein's appalling legacy of ethnic cleansing and genocide. During the 1980s, the Baathist regime expelled huge numbers of Kurds (as well as some ethnic Turkomen) from the city. It replaced them with Arab colonists from southern Iraq, generously subsidized by the government.

At the same time, hundreds of Kurdish villages in the province were razed, with farms and orchards burned to prevent Kurds from returning. During the genocidal Anfal campaign of 1987-'88, thousands were "processed" through the military camp of Topzawa just outside of Kirkuk, the men mostly taken away to be shot en masse and buried in unmarked graves.

The murders and ethnic cleansing continued after the 1991 Persian Gulf War;

according to Human Rights Watch, an estimated 120,000 non-Arabs were expelled from the Kirkuk area during the 1990s. These crimes were part of what justified the U.S.-led liberation of Iraq.

In the years since Hussein's government was toppled, the Kurds have been exemplary in their restraint and in their adherence to the democratic process. Although they have ample historical claim to Kirkuk, they have put aside the usual bickering and have refrained from the familiar, never-ending squabble about whose ancestors were there first.

The Kurds have not made oil a factor in the discussion either. Although Hussein and many others since he lost power have viewed control of Kirkuk as crucial because they hoped it would mean control of the lucrative oilfields in the area, the Kurds have been very clear that they would like to see the profits from the Kirkuk oilfields distributed throughout the whole of Iraq on a per-capita basis, no matter what the future of the city.

Kurds have also pushed for a legal mechanism to reverse Hussein's crimes. Indeed, it is the democratically ratified Iraqi constitution, backed by 79% of Iraqis in October 2005, that mandated a citywide census followed by a provincewide referendum before the end of this year.

Sadly, the prospect of such a democratic resolution is opposed by much of the diplomatic community and the policy world. Parroting the flawed recommendations of the Iraq Study Group, also known as the Baker-Hamilton commission, their proposed solution is a nonsolution: to postpone the Kirkuk referendum because, as the Iraq Study Group argued, not all the groups in the city agree on what the future of Kirkuk should be and because a referendum could prove "explosive" and lead to violence.

Such an approach is a moral and policy mistake. To put off the referendum would insult Iraq's young democracy.

Delay regarding Kirkuk would have the further consequence of alienating Washington's best allies in Iraq: the Kurds. In today's Iraq, the Kurds are the only community united in their support of the U.S. The best units of the Iraqi army are from Iraqi Kurdistan, and two brigades have recently been deployed to Baghdad as part of the "surge." Kurdish politicians are keeping Prime Minister Nouri Maliki's fractious government intact. Unlike the Iraqi Arabs - Sunni and Shiite alike -who are deeply ambivalent in their views of the U.S., the Kurds are overwhelmingly pro-American. Not one U.S. soldier has been killed in Iraqi Kurdistan.

By putting off a resolution of the Kirkuk issue, the United States would be telling Kurds that it may betray them again, as it did when it encouraged them to fight

the Baathists and then failed to support them in 1975 and 1991. At a time when Americans are already skeptical of the war in Iraq, a demonstrable success is exactly what is required. Reversing Hussein's crimes of ethnic cleansing and genocide in Kirkuk through a democratic political process will demonstrate the fundamental justice of this war and solidify a vital base of American support.

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