

Down but not out? The Kurds in international politics

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David McDowall, *A Modern History of the Kurds* (London: IB Tauris, paperback edn., 1997)

Henri J. Barkey and Graham E. Fuller, *Turkey's Kurdish Question* (Oxford: Rowman & Littlefield, 1998)

Jonathan Randal, *Kurdistan. After Such Knowledge, What Forgiveness?* (Oxford: Westview, paperback edn., 1999)

Introduction

The capacity of the Kurds—a scattered, divided and stateless people—to make headline news never ceases to astonish. Perhaps most sensational were the extraordinary events early in 1999 which accompanied the seizure in Kenya and subsequent extradition to Turkey of Abdullah Ocalan, leader of the Kurdish Workers Party, with its now familiar acronym, the PKK. Ocalan's arrest, and his sentencing to death by a Turkish court in June 1999, are only the most recent in a series of Kurdish-related events that have captured the imagination of the international public. The post-Cold War period alone has witnessed the massacre, by chemical weapons, of Kurdish villagers in Iraq after the Iran–Iraq war (1980–88) and a failed Kurdish uprising and massive refugee crisis after the Gulf War (1991), to be followed by the creation of a Kurdish enclave in northern Iraq. In 1992, far away in Berlin, which saw some particularly ugly scenes at the time of Ocalan's capture, three Iranian Kurdish opposition leaders were murdered. So significant has been the Kurdish imprint on the contemporary International Relations agenda, that some have suggested that the Kurdish issue today can be likened in some respects to that of Palestine.

A flourishing literature on the Kurds reflects these developments. From a trickle of scholarly works on the origins and evolution of Kurdish nationalism, and on the experience of the Kurds in different Middle Eastern states,² there has, in the last decade or so, been a veritable cascade of new works on the history, politics, society and culture of the Kurds. These place the Kurds squarely at the centre of current

¹ I would like to thank Adam Roberts, Avi Shlaim, James Piscatori, Anne Deighton, and two anonymous RIS referees for helpful suggestions.

² For example, Chris Kutschera, *Le Mouvement National Kurde* (Paris: Flamarrion, 1979); Gerard Chaliand (ed.), *A People without a Country: The Kurds and Kurdistan* (London: Zed, 1980); William Eagleton, *The Kurdish Republic of 1946* (London: OUP, 1963).

debates about International Relations. Whether it be the role of minorities, the resurgence of nationalism, the crisis of the state, the Kurds as objects of humanitarian and other forms of 'new interventionism', and the Kurdish diaspora, or more simply the Kurds as a source of post-Cold War conflict and crisis, the different aspects of the Kurdish question have received a wide, if rather uneven coverage.³

What have been the practical consequences for the Kurds of this recent stirring of public and academic interest? The Kurds are no strangers to international politics. Indeed, they have frequently been described, perhaps with undue hyperbole, as its pawns or victims. Few would deny that the post-Cold War climate has afforded the Kurds a higher profile than before. Yet in providing a microcosm of contemporary security dilemmas which demand the attention of the international community, has the Kurdish question been advanced in any way? Or are we merely witnessing the long-overdue death throes of a weak and divided movement?

The books focused on here, though their scope and reach vary considerably, point to some possible answers. All acknowledge the relevance of the Kurdish question to today's international scene. But they differ as to whether or not the post-Cold War environment will ultimately prove more hospitable to Kurdish aspirations.

In *Turkey's Kurdish Question*, Barkey and Fuller are principally concerned with the domestic and international ramifications of the Kurdish question in Turkey, and in a final chapter suggest a range of possible solutions, ending on an upbeat note about the prospects for a settlement of the 'agonizing Kurdish problem'. But in describing the Kurdish question as 'in essence an ethnic problem, and not one of simple terrorism or economics', the authors invite a broader comparative perspective. 'Turkey', they argue, 'is of particular interest because it presents a fascinating range of issues that have considerable generic applicability to conflict situations in the rest of the world'.⁴

The McDowall book, *A Modern History of the Kurds*, is as its name suggests, of a different genre. Impressive for its reach, analysis and detail, it offers a 'complete' history of the Kurds, with a few disclaimers, viz. the Kurds in Syria and the former USSR. While much of the focus lies, necessarily, at the level of local or regional politics, the international dimension is ever present, and is deftly woven into the narrative. The continuing struggle of the Kurds, a struggle for territory and identity, has succeeded, in as much as the Kurds in recent years 'have steadily grown in importance. It is difficult to imagine they will sink again into the relative obscurity of the middle years of this century'.⁵ That, at least for the moment, means that the Kurds will remain an important part of the international political scene.

Jonathan Randal's book *Kurdistan. After Such Knowledge, What Forgiveness?* is a journalist's highly personal account which ranges widely, and rather unevenly, as regards time and place. Rich in anecdote, it tells nonetheless a fascinating story of

³ The following are just a brief selection: Martin van Bruinessen, *Agha, Shaikh and State: the Social and Political Structures of Kurdistan* (London: Zed, 1992); P.G. Kreyenbroek and Christine Allison, *Kurdish Culture and Identity* (London: Zed, 1996); Robert Olson (ed.), *The Kurdish Nationalist Movement in the 1990s* (Lexington, KY: University Press of Kentucky, 1996); Sheri Laizer, *Martyrs, Traitors and Patriots. Kurdistan after the Gulf War* (London: Zed, 1996); Michael Gunter, *The Kurds and the Future of Turkey* (New York: St Martin's Press, 1997); Osten Wahlbeck, *The Kurdish Diasporas. A Comparative Study of Kurdish Refugee Communities* (London: Macmillan, 1999); David Keen, 'Short-term interventions and long-term problems: the case of the Kurds in Iraq', in John Harriss (ed.), *The Politics of Humanitarian Intervention* (London: Pinter, 1995), pp. 167–86.

⁴ Barkey and Fuller, pp. xvi, 1.

⁵ McDowall, p. xi.

the Kurds' (and the author's) adventures and how they have touched and been touched by the lives of important men (Presidents Nixon and Bush and Nasser of Egypt, and the Shah of Iran to name a few). Randal's big theme is betrayal: Kurdish history is littered with turncoats and broken promises. In pessimistic vein, his closing paragraphs warn of a new 'period of repression' by states who share a 'deep-seated hatred of Kurds and Kurdish nationalism'.⁶

Drawing on these three volumes, this article will first look at the historical backdrop to the Kurdish question, before turning to more recent developments, and assessing the Kurds' impact on the present international scene. First however, a few introductory words, without which an appreciation of the salience of the Kurdish issue would be lost.

For a stateless people, the world's total Kurdish population is surprisingly large. Estimates vary, but most specialists would agree with McDowall's figures: 24–27 million Kurds inside the Middle East (roughly half of whom live in Turkey) and 1.1 million outside, mainly in Europe and the former Soviet Republics.⁷ (The most significant Kurdish diaspora is found in Western Europe, principally Germany, where the Kurdish population nears 500,000.) Despite considerable movement of population—some forced, some voluntary—within the region, many Kurds still occupy a swathe of mountainous territory in the north-western Middle East and adjacent areas, incorporating sizeable parts of Iran, Iraq and Turkey, and much smaller segments of Syria, Armenia and Azerbaijan. This notional 'Kurdistan', defined as the area where Kurds constitute an ethnic majority, covers an area of some 200,000 square miles, roughly the area of France.⁸ Kurds have lived in this area for many hundreds, probably thousands of years. Also surprising, given their high visibility, is their heterogeneity. While sharing a common historical experience, 'Kurdish society is multilingual, multiracial, and multireligious'.⁹ Most Kurds probably descended from different waves of Indo-European tribes that entered and settled in the region.¹⁰ The majority are Sunni Muslims and speak either Kurmanji or Surani. This diversity of background, reflected in the very different experiences of Kurds both within and between the countries in which they reside, is central to any understanding of the Kurdish question. If there is no united Kurdish nation, but rather a set of possible Kurdish nations or at least different groups demanding autonomy, there is no single 'Kurdish question' (or indeed solution), but rather a set of Kurdish questions specific to time and place.

Down and out? The Kurds from the Ottomans to the Eighties

During much of the Ottoman period, those Kurds who lived within the empire had enjoyed a considerable degree of autonomy in the management of their affairs. This autonomy and influence was progressively eroded however, during the years of

⁶ Randal, pp. 318–9.

⁷ McDowall, pp. 3–4, 457.

⁸ Randal, p. 14. See also Mehrdad R. Izady, *The Kurds: A Concise Handbook* (London: Crane Russak, 1992), p. 1.

⁹ Randal, p. 12.

¹⁰ McDowall, pp. 8–9.

Ottoman decline when Kurdistan is described by Randal as a ‘mountainous irrelevancy’,¹¹ and then more decisively in the Middle East that grew out of the First World War. The infant Kurdish nationalist movement, spawned in the cultural and literary organizations that followed the Young Turk coup,¹² proved to be a poor match both to the designs of the Allied powers and to other competing nationalisms of the region. Despite Turkish assurances, British promises, and loftily worded declarations by US President Woodrow Wilson (and this part of the tale is expertly told by McDowall), the Kurds found themselves, in the mid-1920s, not only without any kind of state but also without any form of self-government of their own. Divided between Turkey, born of the 1923 Treaty of Lausanne, Iran, and the newly mandated territories of Iraq and Syria, the Kurds could only regard their first brush with twentieth century international politics as one of disappointment and failure.

This was a picture destined to repeat itself. The intense hostility of the regional powers, and the occasional and half-hearted interest of external powers, to say nothing of the divisions among the Kurds themselves, impeded any serious and enduring efforts at achieving autonomous status and keeping it.¹³ Attempts there were many, and one might argue that the repression and frustrations of the early years served only to kindle the nationalist flame.

In modern Turkey, the once promised ‘homeland of Kurds and Turks’ never materialized. Instead there was the double blow of Mustafa Kemal’s programmes of secularization and Turkification.¹⁴ The harsh suppression of the Sheikh Said rebellion (1924–5) provided a model for Turkish policy.¹⁵ Thenceforth, the army ‘found control of Kurdistan to be its prime function and *raison d’être*’.¹⁶ Forced into temporary quiescence, and denied even basic cultural rights, the Kurds were to reemerge with new militancy in the more open political atmosphere after 1950. The PKK founded in 1978 by Abdullah Ocalan was by far the most radical and successful of the new Kurdish groups.¹⁷ Its emergence in 1984 as ‘a revolutionary organization in quest of Kurdish independence’ write Barkey and Fuller, ‘marks a major new phase in the development of the Kurdish national movement.’¹⁸ For successive Turkish governments, the struggle with the Kurds was reduced to a zero sum game, a struggle that during the Cold War at least, enjoyed the tacit support of Turkey’s important Western allies.

Iran’s Kurds have a quite distinct history. Long part of the multiracial Persian Empire, the question of joining any putative post-Ottoman Kurdish state was never an issue. Nevertheless, the situation in the Reza Shah period at least, somewhat resembled that of Turkey. Reza Khan admired, and to some extent modelled himself on Mustafa Kemal, and his modernization project also included vigorous suppression of the country’s many powerful tribes, including the Kurds.¹⁹ It was only

¹¹ Randal, p. 18.

¹² Antony Smith, *National Identity* (London, 1991), p. 132.

¹³ On the difficulties faced by minority groups generally in this regard see Donald L. Horowitz, *Ethnic Groups in Conflict* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1985), pp. 275–6.

¹⁴ Michael Gunter, *The Kurds in Turkey: A Political Dilemma* (Oxford: Westview, 1990), p. 12.

¹⁵ See the excellent study by Robert Olson, *The Emergence of Kurdish Nationalism and the Sheikh Said Rebellion, 1880–1925* (Austin, TX: University of Texas Press, 1989).

¹⁶ McDowall, p. 198.

¹⁷ Gunter, *The Kurds in Turkey*, p. 57.

¹⁸ Barkey and Fuller, p. 21.

¹⁹ Donald Wilbur, *Riza Shah Pahlavi: The Resurrection and Reconstruction of Iran: 1878–1944* (Hichsville, New York: Exposition Press, 1975), pp. 261–2.

the changed political environment in Iran following the allied occupation and subsequent abdication of Reza Shah that permitted some of Iran's Kurds, with the support of the Barzani tribe of neighbouring Iraq, to establish in January 1946 the 'Mahabad Republic'.²⁰ This only offered Iran's Kurds a fleeting illusion of autonomy. Their dependence on the support of Soviet occupying forces, a point stressed by Randal,²¹ was soon exposed when the United States secured the withdrawal of allied troops and the Republic was swiftly crushed. To say that the Kurds had been the victims of Cold War politics would be to oversimplify. Not all Iran's Kurds supported the Republic, and as McDowall argues, the notion that this was 'the critical moment at which the Kurds realized their freedom is arguably a rosy version of reality.'²² Until the Revolution broke the hold of the central government, a tight grip was kept on Kurdish areas and aspirations for greater autonomy remained unfulfilled.

The early experience of Iraq's Kurds again differed substantially. Only in Iraq was some measure of Kurdish autonomy part of the official political agenda. If the British soon abandoned the idea of an independent Kurdistan, they paid lip service to the principle of Kurdish autonomy. And in its award of the largely Kurdish area of Mosul to Iraq, the League of Nations made it a condition that 'regard must be paid to the desires expressed by the Kurds'.²³ The disappearance of this condition from the Anglo-Iraqi treaty granting Iraq independence in 1930 paved the way for a series of attempts by different Iraqi governments to bring the remote northern districts under control.²⁴ While the kind of cultural freedoms, absent in Turkey and Iran, remained in place, the often repeated promises of real, as opposed to symbolic, autonomy or equality never materialized. Symptomatic was the failure of the March 1970 Agreement, in which the Kurds, emboldened by Iranian and US support (and here the Shah of Iran, Kissinger and lesser US officials are singled out by Randal for their treachery²⁵), attempted to extract far-reaching concessions from a weakened Ba'athist government. When Iran and Iraq settled outstanding differences in a negotiated settlement at Algiers in 1975, the Kurds lost their external supporters and the cycle of repression and reprisals was resumed.

By the 1980s then, if the nationalist flame had been kept alive by Kurds in Turkey, Iran and Iraq, the different Kurdish rebellions and uprisings had been relatively easily contained. The exigencies of Cold War politics had, on two occasions, 'helped' the Kurdish cause. But this help was only temporary and in general, the concern for stable and 'friendly' regimes overrode considerations that included the courting of minority interests. The Kurds in short, had little international clout, and were irritants, sometimes serious, but never life-threatening to existing regimes. Their situation, however, for a number of different reasons, was beginning to change by the end of the decade.

²⁰ The two best accounts are still Eagleton, *The Kurdish Republic of 1946*, and Archie Roosevelt, 'The Kurdish Republic of Mahabad', *Middle East Journal* 1 (July, 1947), pp. 247–69.

²¹ Randal, pp. 127–30.

²² McDowall, p. 246.

²³ McDowall, pp. 145–6.

²⁴ See further Peter Sluglett and Marion Farouk-Sluglett, *Iraq Since 1958: From Revolution to Dictatorship* (London: Methuen, 1987), p. 26.

²⁵ Details of US assistance to the Kurds were revealed in the Pike Report to the US House of Representatives (January, 1976). See Randal, ch. 6.

A new window of opportunity? From the Eighties to the Millennium

In a more liberal Turkey, the rise of the PKK as noted, contributed to a new wave of Kurdish activism. In Iran, the revolution offered hope, while in Iraq it was war, and the consequent disabling of central government forces, that provided Kurds with a means of advancing their cause. Factors external to the region provided another dynamic. The Kurds and their concerns now occupied a space in the international consciousness in a way that had been impossible in the Cold War. The broadening parameters of the debate about international security came to include precisely the sorts of threats that minorities like the Kurds posed, either in their relationship with domestic regimes, or in their relationship with the outside world. The Western powers in particular interested themselves in the humanitarian and human rights aspects of the Kurdish issue, as well as in the broader question of cultural and political rights and representation. So changing domestic and international dynamics together help explain the emergence, in Barkey and Fuller's words, of 'new Kurdish political self-awareness',²⁶ giving rise to a revised Kurdish agenda in the 1980s and 1990s.

This agenda, it should be noted, is not a pan-Kurdish one except in the broadest cultural sense. Enough has been said so far to pour cold water on the notion of a pan-Kurdish state, even if that ideal may remain in the minds and rhetoric of some Kurdish nationalists and their supporters, and indeed for a long time it was the proclaimed goal of the PKK.²⁷ The revised Kurdish agenda is one in which Kurdish groups in Turkey, Iran and Iraq have been able to exploit the domestic and international climate, and to some extent to rethink and clarify their own identity and goals. The goal of greater self-determination need not be an impossible one. Here self-determination is used in the 'internal' sense, incorporating what Antonio Cassese calls extensive 'personal and territorial autonomy' for minorities wishing to have a share in their own development.²⁸ This prospect may still seem very distant, some would say utopian, but if one examines the push factors: from below the pressure from Kurdish and other domestic level groups, and from above international society and emerging new norms, it may be that a form of self-determination will emerge as the only available or indeed possible response to the recurrent cycles of repression, resistance and violence.

It is in Turkey (and to a lesser extent in Iraq) that these pressures are possibly most in evidence. On the one hand Turkey has faced a revitalized and highly active Kurdish movement in the PKK and its now imprisoned (but no less charismatic for that) leader Ocalan. The PKK is well organized abroad, drawing support from a significant and active European diaspora, and has a highly effective propaganda machine including a London-based TV channel. On the other, the Kurdish question complicates regional relations and rivalries, particularly with a country like Syria, which has offered shelter to the PKK, while the experience of Iraq's Kurds in the Iran-Iraq and Gulf Wars, have also served to fan the flames of Kurdish nationalist sentiment.²⁹ Finally, from the international perspective, at a time when democratiz-

²⁶ Barkey and Fuller, p. 5.

²⁷ Barkey and Fuller, p. 23.

²⁸ Antonio Cassese, *The Self-Determination of Peoples* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995), pp. 351, 354-5.

²⁹ See Edgar O'Ballance, *The Kurdish Struggle* (London, 1996), p. 219.

ation is high on the agenda, the Kurdish issue has exposed what Barkey and Fuller aptly call the 'nonfunctional' nature of Turkish democracy.³⁰ This, together with the government's handling of the Islamic issue, has raised apprehensions among Turkey's Western allies at a time when the country has been anxious to promote a positive image abroad.

Despite these obvious incentives to readdress the Kurdish question, recent governments, with the partial exception of the Ozal presidency, have remained implacably opposed. Though, or partly because, the Kurdish campaign is costly in human and material terms (the PKK is held responsible for some 30,000 deaths in 15 years of clashes with the army) and damaging to Turkey's international relations, military action is still the preferred method of dealing with radical Kurds alongside a broader policy of assimilation and forgetting. Turkey's fear of disintegration, a Kemalist legacy, has encouraged a blinkered approach where all Kurds are seen as separatists, though in Turkey as elsewhere, 'autonomists outnumber separatists'.³¹ The state has not so far responded to the more moderate stance of the PKK, particularly since Ocalan's arrest, which has included the offer of a ceasefire. With Turkey in the international spotlight, hosting, for example, an OSCE summit in November 1999, such offers might become increasingly difficult to resist. Carrying out the proposed execution of Ocalan (there have been no executions in Turkey since 1984) could also prove very costly. Writing some years before the PKK leader's arrest and sentencing, Barkey and Fuller, like McDowall, issued dire warnings of the consequences of the continuing failure to meet Kurdish demands. Both call for meaningful reform and look to the Ozal presidency as providing at least a possible starting point.

As president from 1990 until his death in 1993, Turgut Ozal was alone among Turkey's leaders in contemplating a new response to the Kurdish question. With his non-military background and partial Kurdish ancestry, Ozal shifted the 'terms of the debate' about the Kurdish question with his 'imaginative if modest' approach.³² His public recognition of the existence of a Kurdish problem, and the dropping of the 'mountain Turk' label was accompanied by a willingness for dialogue and the granting of certain basic (mainly cultural) rights, though alongside a policy of repression and assimilation. Not all were convinced of Ozal's sincerity. Randal, who conducted a number of interviews with the Turkish president, was left with the impression that his proposed solution for the Kurds was 'a mixture of assimilation and economics rather than political or cultural accomodation ... Ozal led me to deduce that the Kurds would be 'turkified' willy-nilly'.³³ Be that as it may, his successors have been less bold: Sulayman Demirel, president since Ozal's death, did not delay in allowing the army to regain the initiative and in continuing a hard-line policy.

Whatever the limitations of Ozal's approach, and there clearly were many, it represented a small beginning, and one that may be constructed upon in the future. Of the variety of options suggested by Barkey and Fuller, from total repression to total independence, they favour a solution in the 'upper middle ranges of change',

³⁰ Barkey and Fuller, p. 97.

³¹ McDowall, p. 448.

³² Barkey and Fuller, pp. 135-6; McDowall, p. 437.

³³ Randal, 280.

which envisions an 'officially sanctioned multi-ethnic state'.³⁴ That prospect still appears very remote indeed. But without allowing the Kurds the cultural and political freedoms that will 'reconcile them to their situation', the Kurdish question in Turkey, indeed McDowall argues, in all three states, will remain a 'running sore'.³⁵ The opportunities provided by Ocalan's arrest, and the broader domestic, regional and international environment, could mark a new departure.

In Iran, after a period of forced quiescence, the Revolution of 1979 again raised Kurdish hopes. Kurds were active in the demonstrations leading to the collapse of the Shah's regime, and although their early demands for greater autonomy were rejected, the post-revolutionary situation and rapid onset of war with Iraq, enabled them to exercise *de facto* autonomy over large areas of Kurdistan. These gains soon turned to losses, however, as Iran's fortunes in the battlefield improved and Kurdish strongholds were recaptured. The Kurds of Iran, as elsewhere, were weakened by internal divisions, while for the new government in Tehran, the exigencies of war, and the commitment to the creation of an Islamic community, left little room for minority aspirations.³⁶ Nevertheless, a new round of negotiations was mooted after the 1988 cease-fire, only to be aborted with the killing of Iran's KDP leader Abdal Rahman Ghassemlou in the Austrian capital in July 1989. For Randal, the death of his 'friend' Ghassemlou was a serious loss not only to Iranian Kurds but to the broader Kurdish cause.³⁷

Inauspicious as these events and the subsequent Berlin cafe killings may seem, it would perhaps be false to say that Iran's Kurds have gained nothing from the revolution. Randal actually says little about post-revolutionary Iran and McDowall is deeply pessimistic of Tehran's intentions, citing repeated attempts to expunge the two major Kurdish parties.³⁸ As far as international clout goes, certainly the world is not much interested in Iran's Kurds, beyond their links with the broader 'Kurdish question', and the killings of their leaders which, at the time, excited further criticism of the already much criticized government in Tehran. There is evidence, however, of a softer side of the Revolution, resulting in some concessions to the Kurds, particularly in the cultural sphere. The election, in 1997, of the reformist president, Muhammad Khatemi, and his agenda to promote 'civil society' within an Islamic framework, may serve to reinforce these more liberal trends, although conservative clerics strongly oppose such moves. So perhaps the once rather isolated Islamic Republic has felt, and responded to, global and regional pressures. Perhaps also, Iranian nationalism, a *mélange* reflecting the multi-ethnic roots of the modern state, has been ultimately more successful in incorporating the aspirations of its Kurdish peoples.³⁹

The situation in Iraq, like that of Turkey could scarcely be more different. The regimes in these two countries can hardly be compared, except in their repressive

³⁴ See Barkey and Fuller, ch. 7, pp. 179–220.

³⁵ McDowall, p. 449.

³⁶ Charles G. MacDonald, 'The Kurdish Question in the 1980s', in Milton J. Esman and Itamar Rabinovitch, *Ethnicity, Pluralism and the State in the Modern Middle East* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1988), p. 243.

³⁷ Randal, p. 317. For Ghassemlou's own interpretation of the Kurdish question see his *Kurdistan and the Kurds* (Prague and London: Publishing House of the Czech Academy of Sciences, 1965).

³⁸ McDowall, pp. 277–9.

³⁹ This argument, for the pre-revolutionary period, is made by C.J. Edmonds, 'Kurdish Nationalism', *Journal of Contemporary History*, 6:1 (1971), p. 99.

policies that have helped incite Kurdish nationalist sympathies on the one hand and excite international sympathy and support on the other. But Iraq is quite exceptional in that Kurds in northern Iraq have enjoyed some form of precarious autonomy since the end of the Gulf War. One might say that the commitment to Kurdish autonomy, present but hitherto unrealized, has finally been imposed on the Iraqi political agenda.

The backdrop to the present situation is well-known and can be quickly resumed, and here both McDowall and Randal provide thorough and illuminating accounts respectively. A split among Iraq's Kurds after the disastrous events of the mid-1970s—which saw the newly created Patriotic Union of Kurdistan (PUK) break away from the KDP—was repaired during the Iran-Iraq war to achieve a common Kurdish front against the Baghdad regime. This new act of rebellion proved very costly, leading to the notorious Anfal campaigns, symbolized by the Halabja attack, which first brought the plight of Iraq's Kurds to Western television screens.⁴⁰ It was not Halabja, but the Gulf War, the failed Kurdish uprising (and this time it is President Bush who Randal finds guilty of betrayal⁴¹) and the massive refugee crisis that ensued, that finally produced an international response. Concern for the Kurds (reflected in the path-breaking United Nations Security Council Resolution 688), a desire to monitor and contain Saddam Hussein, and to assist the West's ally, Turkey, all helped give birth to the so-called 'safe havens' policy, in which allied air power protected a northern Kurdish (and southern Shi'ite) zone inside Iraq. Not only did UNSCR 688 name specifically Iraq's Kurds, it also endorsed in principle the right of interference in the internal affairs of another state.⁴²

Under these auspices, an apparently viable regional administration soon emerged in northern Iraq, and McDowall and Randal record with pride the democratic elections that took place in 1992. 'An historic moment', writes McDowall, 'it demonstrated almost uniquely outside Israel and Turkey, the ability of a Middle Eastern electorate to conduct a peaceful, multi-party election'.⁴³ But this early optimism proved unfounded. Cut off from the rest of the country, with limited and dwindling international support, and constant interference by regional powers, Iraqi Kurdistan became the scene of competition, conflict and intrigue between not only rival Kurdish factions (including a Tehran-supported Islamic Kurdish Group), but with the umbrella opposition group, the Iraqi National Congress (INC) also. Left alone, Saddam Hussein would undoubtedly have built on his rapprochement, since 1996, with the KDP leader Barzani, to again beguile the Kurds with his own version of autonomy. But he is not left alone. Iran, Iraq, Turkey and the United States all have distinct and often competing agendas as regards the future of Iraq's Kurds. The United States, for example, has not abandoned a 'rollback' option, one variant of which would include using Kurdish militias and other opposition support to overthrow Saddam Hussein and install a new regime.⁴⁴ Most Middle Eastern states are, unsurprisingly, opposed to such a scheme.

⁴⁰ See Middle East Watch, *The Anfal Campaign in Iraqi Kurdistan* (New York: Human Rights Watch, 1993).

⁴¹ Randal, pp. 33, 52–3.

⁴² McDowall, p. 375. On the details of UN involvement, see Adam Roberts and Benedict Kingsbury, *United Nations, Divided World: The UN's Roles in International Relations* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1994), pp. 35–6.

⁴³ McDowall, p. 381; Randal, p. 310.

⁴⁴ See, Daniel Byman et al., 'The Rollback Fantasy', *Foreign Affairs* (January/February 1999), pp. 24–41.

The situation of Iraq's Kurds at least, as a microcosm of the kind of security issues outlined at the start of this article, continues to occupy the minds of Western policymakers, if the soundbite factor is, for the moment absent. But a happier outcome to the Iraqi Kurdish situation will depend not on the United States, nor even on regional powers, but on the Kurds themselves. Though some of the necessary ingredients for a federalist outcome remain present, Randal and McDowall are not hopeful. It is difficult to imagine how a viable regional entity can emerge from the cauldron of conflicting interests that is today's Iraqi Kurdistan.

The same might be said for all three states. The Kurds lack unity of purpose, leadership, and organization, and historically this has been a key factor behind the failure of any Kurdish state to emerge. But Kurdish statehood is not the issue here; that is why the Kurdish question, despite other commonalities, cannot be compared to that of the Palestinians. Most Kurds do not aspire to an independent state. There is no shared goal, common enemy nor even a patch of land that all Kurds claim as their own. Satisfying Kurdish aspirations requires the decoupling of the issue of statehood from that of cultural autonomy and self-government. In an age when the state is seen to be receding and politics becoming more localized, the broader international community affects little problem with such a separation—in theory at least. But the current Turkish, Iranian and Iraqi regimes do, and continue to fiercely resist any such surrender of sovereignty.

Ocalan's arrest, the chaotic conditions in Iraqi Kurdistan, the settling (or silencing) of Iran's Kurds, all suggest that this is hardly a moment for complacency about the future of the Kurdish peoples. Yet paradoxically, the international, regional and domestic levels at which Kurds operate continue to reinforce their status as significant actors, both in themselves, but also as an example of the salience of sub-state groups in contemporary world politics. In different ways, the three books considered here bear ample testimony to this conclusion.