

THE DAILY STAR

LEBANON

A Kurdish state is being established, and Baghdad may accept it

By David Hirst

I was surprised last week to read an article in the Baghdad newspaper Al-Sabah, by its editor Abd al-Jabbar Shabbout, suggesting it was time to settle the “age-old problem” between Iraq’s Arabs and Kurds by establishing a “Kurdish state.” For never before had I heard so heretical a view so publicly expressed in any Arab quarter. And this was no ordinary quarter either. Sabah is the mouthpiece of Iraqi Prime Minister Nouri al-Maliki. Shabbout went on to suggest a negotiated “ending of the Arab-Kurdish partnership in a peaceful way.” He called his proposal Plan-B – Plan-A being what was already in train: namely, a continuous “dialogue” between Iraq’s central government and the Kurdish regional government, conducted within the framework of the “new Iraq” – constitutionally defined as “federal, democratic and parliamentary” – that followed the fall of Saddam Hussein.

But Plan-A, Shabbout observed, was going nowhere. Differences – over power and authority, oil and natural resources, territory and borders – were so profound that dialogue had repeatedly failed. And this month it almost came to war. For a while the Iraqi army and Kurdish Peshmerga faced each other across the frontiers between Kurdistan and the rest of Iraq in an atmosphere so tense, noted Shabbout, that hostilities could have broken out at any moment.

And it wasn’t only Shabbout, but Maliki himself, who warned that if war did break out it wouldn’t be just a war between Kurdish rebels and Baghdad, as it used to be under Saddam. It would be an “ethnic war between Arabs and Kurds.”

Be it Plan-A or Plan-B, war or diplomacy, the latest, dangerous standoff has made one thing clear: the “Kurdish question” has now reached another critical stage in its long history, and it is intimately bound up with the regionwide cataclysm that is known as the Arab Spring.

It was ever thus for the Kurds, their destiny as a people always shaped less by their own struggles than by the vagaries of regional and international politics, and particularly by the great Middle Eastern upheavals regional and international politics periodically produce. These began, in modern times, with World War I and the fall of the Ottoman Empire. In the 1916 Sykes-Picot agreement Britain and France promised Kurds a state of their own, but then reneged on that promise. Kurds became minorities, more or less severely repressed, in the four countries – Iran, Iraq, Turkey and Syria – among which their vast domains were divided. They repeatedly rebelled against this new order, especially in Iraq. But their landlocked location and their broader geopolitical environment were always against them. Their rebellions were invariably crushed – the last one, under Saddam Hussein, through genocide and the use of chemical weapons.

But they never ceased to dream of independent statehood. And the first of two great breakthroughs toward this grew out of the megalomaniac folly of Saddam himself, with his invasion of Kuwait in 1990. One of the entirely unforeseeable consequences of this was the establishment of an internationally protected “safe haven” in northern Iraq that enabled Kurds to take their first state-building steps, in the shape of a regional assembly and a degree of self-government.

The second breakthrough grew out of that whole new constitutional order which the United States-led invasion of Iraq in 2003 ushered in. Under it, the Kurds consolidated their already existing autonomy with broad new legislative powers, control over their own armed forces, and some authority over that mainstay of the Iraqi economy, namely oil.

From the outset, the Kurds had made it clear that they would only remain committed to the “new Iraq” if it treated them as equal partners, and not, as before, a subordinate minority.

It wasn't long before this ethno-sectarian, power-sharing democracy began to malfunction, and to generate those disputes no amount of dialogue could resolve. And as these disputes deepened, they only intensified the Kurds' yearning for independence – and their practical preparations for it. Openly or surreptitiously, they began accumulating constitutional, political, territorial, economic and security “facts on the ground,” designed to ensure that, if and when they proclaimed their new-born state, this entity would have the means and ability to stand on its own feet, to thrive and to defend itself.

So are the Iraqi Kurds now on the brink of their third, perhaps final, breakthrough, the great losers of Sykes-Picot about to become, 90 years on, the great winners of the Arab Spring? They themselves certainly hope so. “Not only is Iraqi Kurdistan undergoing an unprecedented building boom,” reports Joost Hiltermann in the American magazine *Foreign Affairs*, “its people are now articulating a once-unthinkable notion: that the day they will break free from the rest of Iraq is nigh.” And Kurdish leader Massoud Barzani often openly alludes to this possibility. “We have had enough,” he says, of the “the dictatorship in power in Baghdad” and of the Kurds' participation in it.

It seems, however, that he awaits one last thing before taking the plunge, another of those game-changing events – such as the breakup of Syria – that can transform the whole geopolitical environment in the Kurds' favor. But the quarter in which Kurds are actively looking to bring this change about is in Turkey. That they should even think of this is, historically speaking, extraordinary, considering that, of all the Kurds' neighbors, Turkey probably has most to lose from independence-seeking Kurdish nationalism, and has brutally repressed it in the past. Considering, too, that ever afraid that Kurdish gains elsewhere may be a progenitor of Kurdish aspirations in Turkey, Ankara has long set great store on Iraq remaining united, with its Kurds an integral part of it.

But since 2008, in a complete reversal of earlier policy – which had once been to boycott Kurdistan altogether – the government of Prime Minister Recep Tayyip Erdogan has been pursuing “full economic integration” with Iraqi Kurdistan. Meanwhile, its relations with the Iraqi government have been relentlessly deteriorating, with the two now on opposite sides of the great Middle Eastern power struggle that pits Bashar Assad's Syria, Shiite Iran, Maliki's Iraq, and

Hezbollah against the Syrian revolutionaries, most of the Sunni Arab states and Turkey itself.

Under pressures from this struggle, Turkey's extraordinary courtship of Iraq's Kurds has continued to bloom, and to move from the merely economic to the political and strategic as well. In fact it has moved so far – the Kurds believe – that Turkey might soon break with Maliki's essentially Shiite regime altogether, and deal separately with those two other main components of a crumbling Iraqi state, the Arab Sunnis and, more importantly, the Kurds.

The allurements that an independent Kurdistan could proffer in return would include its role as a potential source of much-needed, abundant and reliable oil supplies, as a stable, accommodating ally and buffer between it and a hostile Iraq and Iran, and even – in a policy option as extraordinary as Turkey's own – as a collaborator in containing fellow Kurds, such as the Kurdistan Workers Party, or PKK. Having established a strong presence in "liberated" Syrian Kurdistan, the PKK is now seeking to turn this territory into a platform for reviving the insurgency in Turkey itself.

It is even said that Erdogan has gone so far as to promise Barzani that Turkey would protect his would-be state-in-the-making in the event of an Iraqi military onslaught. However, presumably that would never come to pass if, adopting Plan-B, the Maliki regime really is contemplating the seismic step of letting the Kurds go of their own free will.

David Hirst is a former Middle East correspondent for The Guardian and author of "Beware of Small States: Lebanon, Battleground of the Middle East." He wrote this commentary for THE DAILY STAR.

Copyrights 2011, The Daily Star - All Rights Reserved

24/12/2012