

Iraqi Kurdistan: Political Development and Emergent Democracy.

By Gareth R.V. Stansfield. London: RoutledgeCurzon, 2003, pp. 261. ISBN 0-415-30278-1.

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Kurdistan is not a state. It is part of Iraq but its people are ethnically distinct and retain the vision of an independent Kurdistan. The Iraqi Kurds have enjoyed de facto statehood in the north of Iraq for over a decade. Stansfield analyses the record and potential of the “Kurdish democratic experiment” and explores the development of the Kurdish political system since 1991.

The major theme of the book is that the government in North Iraq, the Kurdish Regional Government, comprising two politically and geographically separated units is better than the unified administration which was stipulated by the Washington Agreement on September 17, 1998. The author acknowledges that after 9/11 and the US overthrow of Saddam, the main issue is no longer the development of the Iraqi Kurdish de facto state but of the future of Iraq in general. In the postscript written after September 11, 2001, the author remarks: “The fact that they [the two parties] are about to lose significant income, political standing in the international community, and be left to the mercy of Baghdad and any future regime, remain constant clouds on the horizon of their future” (p. 183).

Stansfield is well qualified to write on Iraqi Kurdistan because he is familiar with the Kurdish political groups in Iraq. He had gone to Iraq many times, lived there with his family and developed intimate acquaintances with the Kurdish political groups and leading personalities before writing this book. He worked closely with the Kurdish Regional Government (KRG) as an adviser in assisting in the establishment of an information-based planning mechanism within the KRGs of Erbil and Suleimaniyah. He observed the Kurdish decision-making process and interviewed the leaders of Kurdish political parties. Thus, this study is based on first-hand knowledge

on decision-making structures of the predominant parties, the regional governments and its decision-making process as well as the First Kurdish National Assembly. So much of familiarity with the subject of study though an asset is also likely to make the researcher biased toward the subject and this is evident in the author's prescriptions and vision of the future. He admits that "any conclusions based on such findings would suffer to a certain degree from bias and ambiguity" (p. 166).

Stansfield argues that the divided political and administrative system is a result of the historical development and characteristics of the political system of Iraqi Kurdistan and attempts at unifying the system would lead to instability with its attendant consequences. The author refuses to admit that the Kurdish political authority is weak in the North of Iraq. He refutes the Turkish government's stand that there exists a power vacuum in the Iraqi Kurdish region. Likewise, he rejects the arguments of people like Volker Perthes and Stephen Pelletiere that the Kurds as a group are ungovernable. To him, the continuing existence of an independent Kurdish entity for a decade in the 1990s is a testimony to their ability to govern themselves.

The author provides a useful background to Iraqi Kurdish movements, which includes frequently changing alliances between, for instance, Kurdistan Democratic Party (KDP) with the Government of Iraq, the Patriotic Union of Kurdistan (PUK) with Iran, and the KDP with Turkey from 1960s up to the second Gulf War. The May 1992 multi-party elections resulted in an almost equal division between the KDP and PUK, and a power-sharing arrangement established in the executive organs of the government being dominated throughout by the KDP and PUK in a structure which exhibited stability for only as long as the two main parties refrained from fighting. After the violent tug of war between KDP and PUK, on 31 August 1996, the two political areas of Iraqi Kurdistan developed into two administrative zones, dominated by the KDP in Erbil and Dohuk Governorate, and by the PUK in Suleimaniyah and New Kirkuk Governorate.

The political system of Iraqi Kurdistan became characterized by two separate, almost identical, political and administrative systems. He examines the difficult and often violent relations between the

KDP and the PUK, and their relationship with the Kurdish Regional Government and the means by which the de facto state operated.

Stansfield describes the Kurdish society as “segmented (with cleavages of a tribal, social, political or geographic nature) with political direction being seemingly controlled by small groupings of often antagonistic political elites.” He argues that within Iraqi Kurdistan political cleavages have developed because of the antagonistic development of the political system, the current situation displays separation of subcultures to an extreme degree led by political elites. Under the circumstances he argues that the democratic development of the Iraqi Kurdish political system requires the successful management of societal cleavages through elite accommodation.

The author argues that despite “inefficiency,” this system proved to be a “stable alternative” to the previous power-sharing arrangement. It has preserved the influence of the political elite of both parties and the cabinets of the divided administration have been the most effective of the Kurdish political institutions formed since 1991. The consociational system practiced since 1996 has proven effective; paving the way for a peaceful political development. Consequently, Stansfield argues that the Washington agreement of 1998, which attempted to draw both of these parties together and ignores the delicate balance which has been achieved by the Kurds themselves, may produce anarchy in the capital city of Erbil. He argues that the reunion of administration and the political system would endanger the progress made since 1996.

In the postscript, the author provides an update on the developments which took place in Kurdish politics during 2000-2003 and tried to place the existence of the de facto entity in the context of the US led policy of regime change. The author continues to impress that, in the post-Saddam Iraq, the independent Kurdish entity is desirable. He implies, without open advocacy, that international community recognizes Kurdish autonomy. He advises the Kurdish leadership to use the existence of the de facto state entity for over a decade as the most influential weapon they have in promoting their cause in the future development of Iraq. He advocates that the international community should acknowledge the gains made by the Kurds which shows that Kurds are not alien to the democratic ideal. In advocating

the Kurdish cause, Stansfield abandons his role as a political scientist and becomes a partisan advocate for the Kurdish cause. The author's advice to retain a two-tier KRG, however, is no longer tenable because of the events since 2003.