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Printable Story

Kurdish leaders enraged by 'undemocratic' American plan to occupy Iraq

By Patrick Cockburn in Arbil, northern Iraq

17 February 2003

The US is abandoning plans to introduce democracy in Iraq after a war to overthrow Saddam Hussein, according to Kurdish leaders who recently met American officials.

The Kurds say the decision resulted from pressure from US allies in the Middle East who fear a war will lead to radical political change in the region.

The Kurdish leaders are enraged by an American plan to occupy Iraq but largely retain the government in Baghdad. The only changes would be the replacement of President Saddam and his lieutenants with senior US military officers.

It undercuts the argument by George Bush and Tony Blair that war is justified by the evil nature of the regime in Baghdad.

"Conquerors always call themselves liberators," said Sami Abdul-Rahman, deputy prime minister of the Kurdish administration, in a reference to Mr Bush's speech last week in which he said US troops were going to liberate Iraq.

Mr Abdul-Rahman said the US had reneged on earlier promises to promote democratic change in Iraq. "It is very disappointing," he said. "In every Iraqi ministry they are just going to remove one or two officials and replace them with American military officers."

Kurdish officials strongly believe the new US policy is the result of pressure from regional powers, notably Saudi Arabia and Turkey.

The US appears to be quietly abandoning earlier declarations that it would make Iraq a model democracy in the Middle East. In Iraq, free elections would lead to revolutionary change because although the Shia Muslims and Kurds constitute three-quarters of the population, they are excluded from power in Baghdad by the Sunni

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Muslim establishment.

Kurdish leaders are deeply alarmed by US intentions, which only became clear at a meeting in Ankara earlier in the month and from recent public declarations by US officials. Hoshiyar Zebari, a veteran Kurdish leader, said: "If the US wants to impose its own government, regardless of the ethnic and religious composition of Iraq, there is going to be a backlash."

Mr Abdul-Rahman accuses the US of planning cosmetic changes in Iraq. "This is to give the government on a platter to the second line of Ba'athists [the ruling party]," he said.

The US appears to be returning to the policy it pursued at the end of the Gulf War in 1991. It did seek to get rid of President Saddam but wanted to avoid a radical change in Iraq. The US did not support the uprisings of Shia Muslims and Kurds because it feared a transformation in Iraqi politics that might have destabilised its allies in the Middle East or benefited Iran.

The two Kurdish parties - the Kurdistan Democratic Party (KDP), which rules western Kurdistan, and the Patriotic Union of Kurdistan - are at the heart of the Iraqi opposition. Together they rule four million people in an area the size of Switzerland that has been outside President Saddam's control since 1991.

The change in American policy means marginalising the Iraqi opposition which has been seeking to unite. In response to the US decision, the Kurds and their allies have accelerated moves to hold a conference of opposition parties in Salahudin, the headquarters of the KDP, now scheduled for tomorrow. "We want to know if we are partners in regime change or not," Mr Zebari said.

He spoke scathingly of any attempt by America "to bring in an Iraqi from the United States who has not seen his country for years and impose him by armed force".

The destabilising impact of the impending war is already being felt in the mountains of northern Iraq. Turkey has demanded that its troops be allowed to take over a swath of territory along the border inside Iraq. The ostensible reason is to prevent a flood of Kurdish refugees trying to flee into Turkey, but the Kurdish parties say they are quite capable of doing this themselves. They say the Turkish demand, to which they suspect the US has agreed in return for the use of Turkish military facilities, is the first step in a Turkish plan to advance into Iraqi Kurdistan.

The Kurds fear that a US-led war against President Saddam might be the occasion for a Turkish effort to end the de facto independence enjoyed by Iraqi Kurds for more than a decade. One Kurdish leader said: "Turkey has made up its mind that it will intervene in northern Iraq in order to destroy us.

- Peace activists who want to be "human shields" arrived in Baghdad yesterday. The activists, who had 18 Britons among them, left London on 25 January in three double decker buses. They will deploy at likely bombing targets.

Patrick Cockburn is a visiting fellow at the Centre for Strategic and International Studies in Washington and the co-author of 'Saddam Hussein: An American Obsession'.

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