

## THE THIN RED LINE: POLICY LESSONS FROM IRAQI KURDISTAN

By David Danelo



*David J. Danelo is the director of field research at the Foreign Policy Research Institute.*

The hotel maid in Sulaymaniyah had red hair, weathered eyes, freckled skin, and a wide smile. Shirin was originally from Baghdad; she spoke the slang Iraqi Arabic jargon I had learned a decade before. As a Kurdish woman, she had married, settled, and somehow survived. In 2007 she fled north, escaping chaos and civil war. In Sulaymaniyah she had a husband and young son, but she also had a husband and son in her past. "Saddam," she said, drawing her finger across her throat. She paused and repeated the name and gesture, smiling. It seems Saddam killed them, and that she was happy the dictator is dead.

Shirin, along with the other Iraqi Kurds I met in Erbil and Sulaymaniyah, is among those few Iraqis who still celebrate the 2003 U.S. invasion and subsequent occupation. During the Nowruz celebrations of the New Year, dozens, if not hundreds, of young Kurdish men pull me into frenetic dances, cheering my American ancestry and urging long life to both of our countries. They assure me of America's goodness. They question America's current policies. They say they miss George Bush.

As the Iraqi Kurds share their sentiments, I feel a strange emotion; something that, having served in Iraq in 2004, has eluded me for a decade: a satisfaction of meaningful, real success. These Iraqis—Kurds, yes, but still Iraqis—have governed ethically and protected their prosperity. Despite tumultuous politics and numerous enemies, the Kurds took advantage of a brief window of American alliance and used it to liberate themselves. Something went right.

Almost by accident, Iraqi Kurdistan is one of the few tangible and enduring accomplishments of United States policy in the Middle East. In spite of all the false promises, hollow pledges, and failed strategies in Iraq, stable governance happened here. Was two decades of American leadership the reason why? Answering this question may offer insight for other American policy dilemmas, particularly the current face-off with Russia over Ukraine.

As a combat veteran who now writes about U.S. foreign policy, I often listen to debates on what is or is not worth Americans dying for. Amidst these exchanges, I wonder how foreign policy would change if Americans in uniform voted directly on the wars they fought. Would they be cold realists or ambitious idealists? How would warrior values impact their choices? What metrics would they measure to determine what was worth risking their lives to accomplish?

In the United States, these sacred powers of life and death are supposed to be granted to the citizenry and democratically exercised through Congress. Unfortunately, the citizenry does not appear terribly interested in these powers. During the November 2012 elections, just 4 percent of American voters told CNN exit polls that U.S. foreign policy was their top priority. Economic policy, job security, health care, trade deficits, abortion, and same-sex marriage were more important issues to more people. Congressional behavior seems to reflect this public apathy.

When foreign policy is debated among citizens, the participants are typically specialists. Professors, politicians and pundits use stoic, Socratic methodology to temper, or even eliminate, emotional variables. In the current issue of *Foreign Affairs*, stalwart academics duel over geopolitics (Mead: it has returned! Ikenberry: it is illusory!). Billions of dollars and priceless lives hinge on this debate's outcome. But Michael Strahan will not cover these discussions on *Good Morning America*, nor will Jon Stewart lampoon them on *The Daily Show*.

In some ways, the current debate seems settled. With two striking exceptions—the 2010 Osama bin Laden raid and the 2011 war in Libya—President Obama's foreign policy has been lifted entirely from a soft power realist's playbook. From Caracas to Crimea, U.S. responses to international crises are predictable in their nuanced amorality. Today's realists—seen generally as the sober adults within both parties—tell Americans, as Stephen Walt recently wrote, to “keep their rhetoric under control and their powder dry.” They find Senator John McCain's apparent idealism quaint, anachronistic, and, worst of all, neoconservative.

But McCain and like-minded partisans raise important questions about realism's limitations. From Syria to the South China Sea, realist options often leave long-time allies (Saudi Arabia, Israel, Japan, Taiwan) questioning the sincerity of American commitments and capacity for U.S. endurance. Realist dogma and doctrine represents caution and prudence, but absent a stalwart compass, it easily masks weakness and cowardice.

Great nations do not go to war recklessly, but they do not repeatedly draw rhetorical red lines without consequence. Beyond drone strikes and special operations raids, Obama Administration officials seem to view American military force—and U.S. hard power in general—as a necessary evil to be suffered rather than a tool to be prudently employed. In Syria, when the President imposed and removed a red line on chemical weapons, and Ukraine, when he bluntly stated the U.S. would not use direct military action to deter Russian aggression, the President has, [in Adam Garfinkle's words](#), engaged in “gratuitous diplomatic self-mutilation.”

Although the President lectures Americans that his Russian counterpart's bullying signifies weakness, eastern Ukraine's instability suggests the opposite. Having lost credibility twice (Syria, Ukraine) from Russian red line diplomatic maneuvering, the Obama Administration must demonstrate through actions, not rhetoric, what red lines it will fight for if crossed. Such a statement may come across as bombastic, but enlightened exploits are as critical to realism as practical restraint. In a multipolar world, such tactics must be part of a realist's policy calculus. Pragmatic choices after considering options represent wisdom; white flags after red lines denote spinelessness. Preserving peace requires preparing, and perhaps even posturing, for war.

Iraqi Kurdistan highlights this duality. Ironically, a pragmatic realist U.S. administration was responsible for the law of unintended consequences that started the region towards autonomy. In April 1991, to placate the international coalition assembled to win the Gulf War, the George H. W. Bush Administration established a policy of non-intervention regarding Kurdish protection and assistance. The realist policy betrayed internal Iraqi dissenters, it effectively accounted for geopolitical interests and might have preserved a power balance.

But after Secretary of State James Baker visited a Kurdish refugee camp, he called President Bush and convinced him, largely on altruistic grounds, to change policy. The result was Operation Provide Comfort, the first humanitarian intervention in U.S. military history to be authorized—however reluctantly—by the international community. From that point forward—through the no-fly zone in the 1990s and into the eventual 2003 invasion—U.S. policy in Iraq assumed responsibility for protecting Iraqi Kurds. Two decades after Secretary Baker's policy shift, Iraqi Kurds have their own *de facto* nation, and perhaps even a *de facto* state.<sup>1</sup>

Iraqi Kurdistan's fortunes contrast with Syria, the state whose favor Bush and Baker had so assiduously wooed prior to Operation Desert Storm. As Iraqi Kurdistan has emerged has a safe zone for commerce and corporate growth, the Assad regime's control in Syria—indeed, the state itself—no longer exists. But as in Iraq, Syria's fragmentation has seen Kurdish regions stabilize as safe zones. The Kurdish PYD, who controls the Syrian border town Qamishli, has used bases from inside Turkey and Iraq to raid Sunni extremists and defend Kurdish freedoms.<sup>2</sup> In both Syria and Iraq, Kurdish zones are the only places Westerners can safely travel.

---

<sup>1</sup> For the full history on how the 1991 operation created Iraqi Kurdistan, see Quil Lawrence's *Invisible Nation*.

<sup>2</sup> The Kurdish PYD, the Democratic Union Party, is a Syrian Kurdish militia affiliated in varying degrees with the PKK, the Kurdistan Worker's Party.

Partisan preferences aside, anecdotal and institutional rhetoric suggests American warriors want humanitarian interventions to pass some version of what might be called the *Saving Private Ryan* test. Near the movie's end, Captain John Miller, played by Tom Hanks, offers a dying exhortation to Matt Damon's Private Ryan: "Earn this." Prove worthy of the freedom gained because of another's sacrifice. In a foreign policy context, such a test would obligate U.S. policymakers to measure the moral capacity of rescued peoples to prove deserving—over decades, not just an election cycle—of American blood and treasure.<sup>3</sup>

Unfortunately, sole reliance on the Private Ryan Test is not an adequate metric for framing foreign policy. While North Koreans might inspire Asia with great dynamism if under different management, the United States cannot afford the cost required to oust Kim Jong Un's tyrannical regime. Geopolitical calculations and resource allocations play a valid role in a prudent foreign policy that preserves a power balance and protects long-term American interests.

However, in a dilemma with no good options, the Private Ryan Test merits discussion. In Syria, given Bashar al-Assad on one side and Sunni extremists on the other, it's impossible to make a strong case that either belligerent has established enough common ideology to "earn" U.S. assistance. The scale of human suffering is tragic in Syria, but, as numerous commentaries have illustrated, the United States has little to gain in the long term from either party winning.

American realists used to say the same thing about Iraqi Kurdistan, fearing autonomy would lead to increased risk of civil war and repressive responses from Turkey, Iran and Baghdad. But it hasn't turned out that way: on the contrary, Iraqi Kurdistan has been cutting oil deals with the Turks while Iraq's government—little more than Tehran's proxy—remains powerless to restrict Iraqi Kurdistan's independence.<sup>4</sup>

Despite this success, U.S. policymakers fear celebrating Iraqi Kurdistan's autonomy as a moral victory, claiming a "one Iraq" policy is necessary. Such choices hamstring what could be cause for moderate celebration. Iraqi Kurds are not perfect, but visits to Erbil or Sulaymaniyah would suggest they have, like Western Europeans, passed Private Ryan's test by using the political freedoms that U.S. military power midwived to build a better, if not perfect, union.

As the crisis in Ukraine unfolds, U.S. policymakers—and the American people—are vaguely attempting to administer the Private Ryan Test while deciding how to make policy. How capable is the Ukrainian government of accepting U.S. assistance? Are Ukrainians prepared to endure long-term sacrifice to stay free? And if the United States does try to draw and enforce some type of red line, would it be drawn around an abstract, like Ukraine's economic policy, or a physical location, like Kyiv's urban perimeter or Ukraine's eastern border?

Over two decades ago, the United States risked instability in Iraqi Kurdistan even as it patiently, prudently, and consistently applied a thin red line: dotted at times, but invariably effective. The coalition was fragmented and tempestuous, but American leaders determined their policy of protecting Iraqi Kurds was both morally and politically necessary—and they led accordingly. With realist theory dominating foreign policy discussion, U.S. policymakers would benefit from recognizing, as philosopher Reinhold Niebuhr wrote in *The Irony of American History*, "the triumph of experience over dogma." Morality may not always be a sufficient variable for policymakers to define conclusions, but sometimes it proves paradoxically effective even when confronting the most daunting geopolitical odds.

---

FPRI, 1528 Walnut Street, Suite 610, Philadelphia, PA 19102-3684

For more information, contact Eli Gilman at 215-732-3774, ext. 103, email [fpri@fpri.org](mailto:fpri@fpri.org), or visit us at [www.fpri.org](http://www.fpri.org).

---

<sup>3</sup> All the U.S. military service recruiting campaigns run on some form of this theme, but the U.S. Navy's "A Global Force for Good" is the most direct expression.

<sup>4</sup> According to multiple Iraqi Kurdish officials, Iranian diplomats routinely use the first-person plural tense in Persian (Farsi) when discussing the Iraqi government, referring to "our Baghdad" in negotiations.