

► Breakfast at Talabani's

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"Don't scorn us, come back soon," said Patriotic Union of Kurdistan (PUK) leader Jalal Talabani, as he waved goodbye from the porch of the house that once served as Iraqi Deputy Prime Minister Tariq Aziz's residence now the PUK headquarters in Baghdad.

Talabani always thinks big. When I traveled with international observers to the "safe haven" of northern Iraq in May 1992 to monitor elections organized by the Kurds, Talabani's mark was conspicuous. Throughout Kurdistan, the better Iraqi government buildings had become PUK possessions, and Talabani ran a remarkable election campaign, unfortunately marred by a faulty law that discriminated against smaller Kurdish parties as well as by some technical problems.

Thinking big also meant that in the long march between 1990 and 2003 to rid Iraq of Saddam Hussein, Talabani never wavered, unlike his rival and nemesis Massoud Barzani, the leader of the Kurdish Democratic Party (KDP). This allows him to feel strong in Baghdad today.

The avuncular Talabani is a uniquely likeable fellow, very well read, with a command of Arabic far superior to most Arab politicians. He has gathered around him able lieutenants, including Barham Saleh, the present prime minister of Kurdistan and formerly an impressive lobbyist in Washington for Iraq's Kurds; Latif Rashid, a low-key and efficient manager, now Iraq's minister of hydraulics a particularly exciting position for an engineer; and Fouad Masoum, a distinguished lawyer who recently headed the Iraqi Governing Council's constitutional committee, a task which by all accounts he accomplished well.

Talabani invited me to breakfast a week ago for a remarkable round table. There was much time to make up for. I had last spoken with him in 1994, after hosting him at London University. He was then to travel to Japan, when we heard news of the outbreak of skirmishes between the PUK and Barzani's KDP, which soon developed into a major inter-Kurdish conflict. The fighting claimed some 5,000 lives, according to a leading Iraqi Kurdish leader, Mahmoud Osman.

One remembers well conversations with former Iraqi opposition figures, so tragic are their tales, and so important for the rest of the Middle East. I cherish a long personal relationship with the Kurds, and with Talabani in particular. I first met Talabani in January 1991, on the eve of the Gulf War, over lunch at the Russell Hotel in London, along with Edward Mortimer, now an adviser to UN Secretary-General Kofi Annan, and a friend of justice for the aggrieved in the Middle East, from the Palestinians to the Kurds.

At our Baghdad breakfast, Talabani talked about Grand Ayatollah Ali Sistani and called him a "blessing for Iraq." This was genuine, and I tended to concur. The agreement between the two leaders was a good omen for Iraq, I thought. However, I was concerned about the possibility of a new outbreak of civil war between rival factions in Kurdistan. This had constituted the greatest setback for the chances of democracy in Iraq throughout the 1990s.

Talabani assured me it would not happen again. A new war is indeed unlikely at the present moment, since all the efforts of the Kurds are geared toward ensuring that they are well represented vis-a-vis their southern compatriots in the new Iraqi Constitution. However, the real question is what mechanisms can be put in place to prevent the normal competition between various Iraqi factions from turning violent.

Talabani said that he thought the Americans would prevent fighting. Maybe. However, as Talabani left me with information on Kirkuk, and on how the former Baath regime had started to "Arabize" the city at the Kurds' expense a brutal reality of recent Arab nationalism I became skeptical. Some mechanism is indeed required, both at the Iraqi and at the international level, to avoid future conflict. Unfortunately, there is too little effort to address that risk, since the UN is far too concerned about finding a political role for itself in post-war Iraq. Instead of building up a network of human rights observers, a plan that has never been sincerely advanced in the past decade, the organization is tinkering with political problems that only Iraqis are really able to address.

Nor will the UN succeed in that better than the Coalition Provisional Authority. The consummate politician cum jurist in Talabani saw this immediately in my suggestion that, instead of leaving Iraq in the throes of uncertainty until June 30, there should be an immediate surrender of sovereignty to the Governing Council. I believe there is no possibility of enlarging the council, as suggested by some of its members, especially Adnan Pachachi, whom I also met last week. Nor is there any reason to wait until June to return formal sovereignty to the Iraqis. The Governing Council, which successfully blocked the deployment of Turkish troops in Iraq, can and should ask for the transfer process to occur now, to save Iraq uncertainty.

I went out from breakfast made to feel important, knowing perfectly well that the learned, larger-than-life Talabani was a past master at hoodwinking Arabs, me included. But I liked his invitation to lecture on the nearest occasion at the law school of Iraqi Kurdistan, and I do look forward to doing that in the spring, perhaps on the topic of mechanisms needed to prevent internecine Iraqi violence. Kurdistan in springtime is a corner of paradise on earth, and a unique place to examine the constitutional protection of long-victimized minorities.