

The Syrian city of Raqqa, recently cleared of its ISIS fanatics, is being rebuilt after nearly total destruction. Meanwhile, the residents are being housed in refugee camps in the wind-swept desert. Even these camps are better than living under ISIS rule, a government so fanatical that even the already pious population chafed. Women were forced to cover up every square inch of skin under black sacks lest they "tempt" men from righteousness. Any deviation was punished by flogging, one of the lesser ISIS punishments.

Although grateful for this generous refugee camp housing his family of ten, he is complaining: "They give a lot of rights to women! If I raise my voice at a woman, they might put me in jail."

Giving any rights to women is certainly "un-Islamic," among conservative Muslims. What they "conserve" is a very long tradition of male supremacy. But in this refugee camp, the governors are Kurds, a non-Arab ethnicity whose native lands are divided among Iraq, Iran, and Turkey. The Iraqi Kurds have fought for their freedom and may indeed win it in the near future. They are resolutely modern, democratic, and fierce---and they dare to regard women as their partners, not subordinates. ISIS already knows how tough Kurdish women soldiers can be.

Those Americans today who think we have little influence on making a better world should take a harder look at the Iraqi Kurds, who under American protection during the two Iraq wars. Two contending warlords made peace and worked to produce a modernizing, genuine democracy. Literacy rates soared, democratic institutions flourished, and most surprising of all for a Muslim country, the status of women rose from that of property to equality. In addition, the Kurds demonstrated a willingness to fight for their independence with an army that includes the only female fighters in the Middle East aside from Israel. The bullies from ISIS are terrified by these women.

The Kurds have a fascinating history. We meet them first as "Medes," one of the ancient Iranian tribes absorbed by their Persian cousins to become the first truly international empire under Cyrus the Great in 550 BC. The Persian Empire (Achaemenian) ruled over an empire that extended from Egypt to the borders of China.

We do not hear about them again until the end of World War I, when the Turkish Ottoman Empire collapsed and their colonies became new nation states. All of the Arab ethnicities (Egypt, Lebanon, Iraq, Yemen, and Syria) became states under the "protection" of the British or the French, because they were not considered strong enough to become functioning independent states. Unfortunately, the Kurds, who had been promised a state of their own, were betrayed, and their lands were divided among their neighbors. Iraq, Iran, and Turkey were their new overlords. The reason was that the Kurdish lands sat atop a huge pool of oil, which the protectors wanted to control. Greed prevailed over idealism.

Another case of thoughtless pragmatism was the British promise to both Jews and Palestinians that the Holy Land would belong to both. The Jews were unhappy, but agreed; the Palestinians were enraged, and refused anything less than the whole country. This issue is still roiling the region.

What was done to the Kurds is roiling an even larger region. America's dilemma is that we gave air protection to the Kurds during the Iraq war. Without this protection, Saddam Hussein would have wiped them out, as he demonstrated when he used Sarin gas on a Kurdish village, murdering the entire population. America not only protected the Kurds so that they could become a modern state, but also served as the model for what kind of democracy and egalitarian culture that they would have.

Now our earlier policy of keeping Iraq from splitting apart is getting difficult. The Kurds deserve our recognition much more than the Iraqis, Turks, or Iranians do if we really believe in democracy. I think that the Kurds will take their independence in spite of us all. If we heed our better angels, we will support the Kurds.