



EPP: Imagine having Islamic terrorists just two counties away

By [Todd Epp](#) on Jul 2, 2014 at 9:23 p.m.

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Imagine if Islamic terrorists occupied the biggest city two counties over. How confident would you feel that they will stay put and leave you and your community alone?



That's the dilemma that faces my Kurdish and international friends in Erbil, the capital of the Kurdistan Region in northern Iraq. Just down the road in Mosul -- 60 miles of highway -- the Islamic State of Iraq and Syria has scared two divisions of Iraqi soldiers to lay down their weapons and abandon their equipment -- including state-of-the-art, American-made and supplied Kiowa and Blackhawk helicopters.

Meanwhile, half a million people -- about three-fourths the number of people who live in South Dakota -- are fleeing for Erbil, where I worked for 18 months.

That's like knowing a bunch of well-armed and well-trained thugs are just up the road from Sioux Falls in Brookings.

It doesn't exactly give you confidence that everything will turn out OK.

While Iraq's troops cut and run like they normally do in wars where the Iraqis can't beat up on undefended civilians, their Kurdish "countrymen," if you will, will stand and fight. The Kurdish peshmerga know how to fight, and will fight. They've already faced down al Maliki's Iraqi army near the Syrian border and from a line running from Mosul to Kirkuk.

But while much of Iraq has been in violent chaos since the United States removed its remaining troops in December 2011, Kurdistan stands as a nascent democracy, economic engine, emerging oil producer and American ally in what is otherwise a really tough neighborhood featuring our untrustworthy NATO "brother" Turkey, the failed state that is Syria, the chaos that is Iraq and the trouble maker that is Iran.

Kurdistan actually turned out to be what President George W. Bush thought he was going to get in all of Iraq after all expending American blood and treasure - - a stable, on-the-path-to-democracy, pro-American nation.

So, as ISIS sits in Mosul and eyes its next moves -- south and east to Baghdad or north and east to Erbil? -- I think about my Kurdish friends who have already endured Saddam Hussein's decades of terror. I've had friends who literally had to run for the mountains to get away from Saddam's goons.

I think about my international friends from the United States, Switzerland, Austria, the Netherlands, Germany, Bulgaria, France, Nepal, the Philippines and elsewhere who are working with the Kurds -- in government and in free enterprise -- trying to show them best practices and helping them build a country.

Some have decided to leave Erbil. Others have decided to stay. It's not an easy decision personally or professionally.

I don't know what advice to give Obama about the situation. It was folly, in my opinion, to go into Iraq in the first place in the name of rooting out terrorism

that didn't really spring from there. Now, because of years of war and the power vacuum post-Saddam, Iraq really is a breeding ground of terrorists.

Iraq wanted us to leave in 2011 so we -- America -- left. I think we all hoped for the best but feared for the worst -- and the worst has happened, with even worse yet to come in this cradle of civilization on the plains of Mesopotamia.


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