

## The Kurdish Crisis of 1996

*John Roberts*

Northern Iraq is a strange place. Officially the Kurds living in much of the northern borderlands do not talk of independence and, indeed, their penchant for internal feuding has persistently weakened their prospects of constituting an independent state. But until September 1996, an area covering perhaps one-twelfth of Iraq and embracing almost a fifth of its people, was largely free of central government control.

What is more, the *de facto* autonomy of this area was backed by Western military commitments intended to ensure that Baghdad's authority did not return to the Kurdish borderlands until the government of Saddam Hussein came to an end. And yet, between late July and mid-September the future of an area variously termed Kurdish Iraq or Iraqi Kurdistan hung in the balance as the result of a civil war between the two main Iraqi Kurdish political parties and the conflicting interests of Saddam Hussein and neighbouring governments in Iran and Turkey.

As September drew to a close, it was not clear whether a new balance of power had emerged that would ensure the bulk of Iraqi Kurdistan remained a single territory under control of Kurdish forces and continuing to enjoy a real degree of autonomy from Baghdad or whether the area was on the verge of being carved up by Saddam, the Turkish army, and perhaps Iran as well.

The origins of the crisis go back to the failure of the Kurds to develop a single coherent political leadership. In 1992 when elections were held for a regional assembly, there was an almost exact division of both the popular vote and assembly seats between the two main parties: the Kurdish Democratic Party of Massoud Barzani and the Patriotic Union of Kurdistan, headed by Jalal Talabani.

Initially, the two joined forces and a civil administration was set up in Arbil, the regional capital. But although there were all the trappings of office, real power, in terms of executive authority at almost every level, rested with either the PUK or the KDP.

The PUK was itself an offshoot of the KDP which split off in the 1970s because it argued that the party then headed by the redoubtable Mustapha Barzani, father of the current KDP leader, was focusing too much on its traditional tribal base and not enough on developing support in the towns and cities of Kurdistan which were beginning to grow rapidly as a result of the great oil boom of that era.

A consequence of this dispute emerged very quickly in the wake of the overthrow of Saddam's rule in the north in May 1991. Although the original goal of UK Prime Minister, John Major, and his allies in the US and France had been the creation of a 'safe haven' in a relatively small region of northern Iraq, the arrival of a few thousand US, British, and French troops to establish the safe haven, prompted Saddam to pull Iraqi forces out of a much larger area.

The area which the Kurds found themselves ruling once Saddam had also ordered the withdrawal of all central government administrators the following autumn, extended in places halfway from the Turkish border to Baghdad, although along the Syrian border outlying Iraqi army positions remained no more than a dozen kilometres or so from the tri-border junction of Iraq, Syria, and Turkey.

This enlarged Kurdish statelet embraced a cluster of cities outside the original safe haven, notably Dohuk, Arbil, and Sulaimaniyah (see map on p.28). These are considerable cities; Dohuk was thought to have around 300,000 people and Arbil and Sulaimaniyah each had more than half a million. Indeed, the influx of refugees from Saddam's pogroms in the 1980s when more than 4,000 villages were destroyed, ensured their populations swelled rapidly with liberation. Some 300,000 Kurds fled from Kirkuk, a city traditionally on the marchlands between Arab and Kurd and populated by both.

The cities proved fertile ground for the PUK, but it was Barzani's KDP which generally appeared to possess the greater military strength.

In the aftermath of the Iraqi withdrawal, the leaders of the two parties adopted somewhat different approaches. Both doubted the Western commitment to the Kurds, not least because it was so dependent on physical and practical support by Turkey, which they mistrusted.

Barzani persistently attempted to negotiate autonomy agreements, or perhaps, more accurately, the implementation of pledges on autonomy Saddam had made in the 1970s with Baghdad. The KDP leader felt compelled to persist in this course largely because the West would not support a formal declaration of Kurdish independence for fear of upsetting Turkey, which since 1983 had been engaged in its own bitter war to suppress Kurdish separatist forces. Yet the Baghdad negotiations were extensive. For a while a draft autonomy agreement seemed to have the blessing of both Baghdad and Barzani. But US pressure forced the KDP leader to back off, and Saddam was not prepared to offer more, since that would have constituted an acknowledgment that the region was permanently beyond his control.

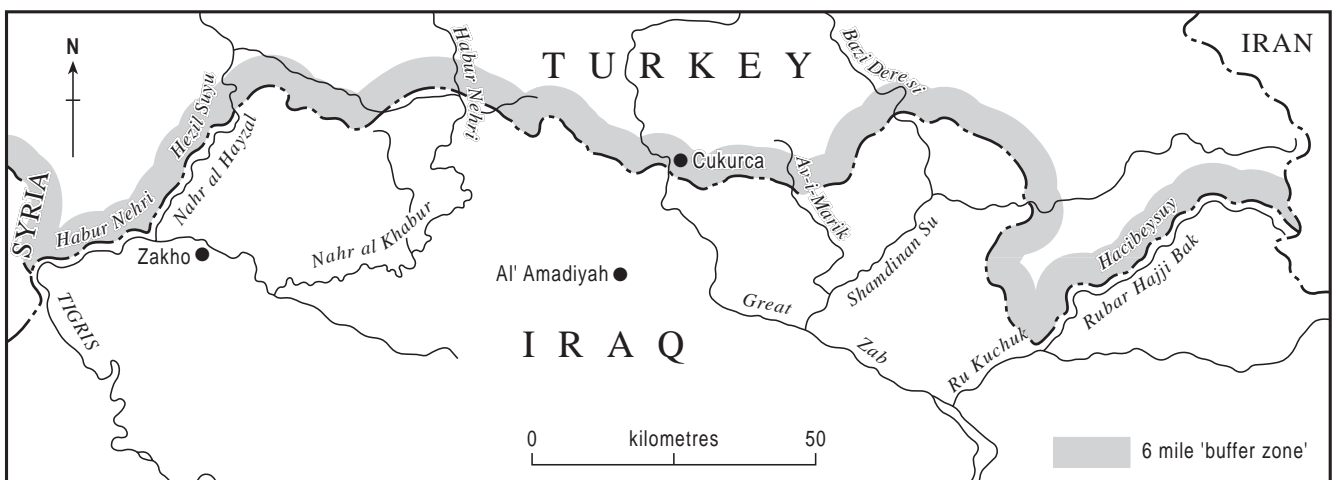
Talabani, whose tribal support lies close to the Iranian border, was more prepared to deal with Turkey because Turkish interests in Northern Iraq affected Barzani lands rather than his own clan domains. On the other hand, he sought to maintain reasonable relations with Tehran since his clansmen commonly had families who straddled both sides of the Iraq/Iranian border.

The guiding principal in both sets of arrangements was a need to balance prospects for the long-term protection from the West with the need to appease,

guerrillas of the Kurdish Pesh Marga and Saddam's forces, a degree of rebuilding could begin; but Kurdistan now found itself suffering from a double embargo. Although the West was prepared to station military aircraft in Turkey and a small military liaison office just inside Iraq itself to ensure the survival of the safe haven, its unwillingness to support calls for outright independence left the Kurds in a peculiar limbo. UN sanctions on Iraq were held to apply to the Kurdish regions, whilst Saddam also imposed his own economic sanctions on the Kurdish areas. Economic recovery was gravely restricted; indeed a largely urbanised and increasingly middle-class society, found itself forced to sell almost all its tangible wealth durables – from tractors and cars to cupboards and kitchen equipment – at knockdown prices to unscrupulous dealers in Turkey and Iran.

At the same time, relations between the PUK and the KDP soured once it was clear that the KDP intended to maintain an effective monopoly over one of the few fairly regular sources of national income: the imposition of levies on trucks ferrying diesel oil and gasoline from the Iraqi refiner at Mosul to Turkey.

In mid-1994, a series of clashes between the two parties prompted the US to mount a major mediation effort. In 1995 negotiations in Dublin produced an accord but this failed to gell. At the same time the situation in northern Iraq, at least from the point of view of most of its inhabitants, became even more unsettled as a result of repeated Turkish military incursions. Turkey's main goal was to seek out and destroy what it said were bases in northern Iraq operated by the PKK, an extreme



or counter, powerful local forces.

Once it became clear, by the end of 1991, that there was a reasonably static front line between the

marxist group which has been waging a war against the Turkish army since 1983 in pursuit of either an independent Kurdish state in southeastern Turkey or at least a real functioning autonomy that would

imply the break up of the highly centralised modern Turkish state.

In the spring of 1995 no less than 35,000 Turkish troops swept into northern Iraq to seek rear bases established in Barzani territory by the PKK – who had themselves forced the inhabitants of up to 80 villages to leave their homes.

This particular Kurdish intervention was further confused by suggestions from no less a source than President Suleyman Demirel that it might be time to consider a revision of the Turkish/Iraqi border (see *Boundary and Security Bulletin*, 3: 1, April 1995, Turkey's Invasion of Northern Iraq).

Demirel subsequently asserted he was only talking of limited changes of a few hundred metres so that the border was, in practical terms, more intelligently located. But he opened a can of worms in that there had been suggestions ever since the young Turkish republic questioned Britain's occupation of northern Iraq in the wake of World War I, that this was territory that Britain should not have annexed to Iraq since it was not part of the Arab lands which formed the core of what was conceived of as an essentially Arab territory.

One other key element should always be borne in mind in considering Kurdish questions. Throughout much of the twentieth century, successive regimes in Baghdad and Iran have sought to use the Kurdish population in the other country for their own ends. The most graphic example of this was the arming of the elder Barzani's guerrilla forces by Iran (and the US) in the early 1970s at a time when the Shah of Iran was suppressing his own Kurdish population. The Kurds are thus well aware of the way in which they are used by neighbouring governments – and then, as they see it, betrayed, just as the Shah overnight abandoned his support to the Kurds of Iraq when he signed the Algiers agreement with Saddam Hussein.

Such fragmentation, isolation and abuse by neighbours, makes it quite natural for Kurdish leaders to rely on temporary arrangements rather than permanent alliances. The Kurds lack any tradition of unity and although there have been attempts to set up Kurdish states, there has never been a coherent indigenous attempt to weld the diverse Kurdish tribes and clans into a single nation embracing the Kurds of Iran, Iraq, and Turkey; the sole real effort in this direction was made by an outsider: President Wilson of the US at the end of World War I. Instead of seeking such long-term goals, Kurdish leaders, regardless of their talk about

a wish for independence and Kurdish unity, routinely prefer to favour short term agreements intended to bring immediate benefits to their people.

It is against this background that the actions of Barzani and Talabani in the latest Kurdish crisis must be judged. In July, a lightly armoured Iranian column struck deep into Iraqi Kurdistan to assault what they termed a base for Iranian opposition forces. Iranian officials said the goal of the operation was limited and was not intended to subvert the territorial integrity of Iraq; nonetheless, the raid was the proximate cause of the August crisis. The forces which entered Iraq, and which were said to have crossed as far west as the Jirnakani refugee camp on the outskirts of Arbil, was said by the KDP to have conducted its operation with the support of the PUK. Likewise, the KDP said an assault on Jirnakani was beaten off by a combination of Iranian/Kurdish exiles and KDP Pesh Merga.

Iran said later it had sought the support of both Kurdish parties for its action. But in practice, what happened was that by relying on the backing of just one party, the PUK, Tehran intensified the struggle between the PUK and the KDP. The location was also significant. The KDP controlled much of the territory around Arbil but the city itself was a stronghold of the PUK.

Throughout August, tensions rose between the two parties. Although US intelligence sources apparently provided the US government with a number of warnings about the consequences of the latest Kurdish fighting, US officials continued to place their faith in the prospect of the fresh negotiations on implementing the 1995 Dublin agreement.

Barzani clearly decided that there was little to be gained from another round of talks. Instead he negotiated an agreement with Saddam under which the Iraqi army would assist him in capturing Arbil. Just as inter-party talks were due to get underway, the Iraqi army moved on the city and in a joint operation on 31 August, Arbil fell to the KDP and Saddam's forces.

At this point, with the involvement of the Iraqi army, an essentially local problem became a major international crisis. Although Arbil was not part of the original safe haven established in 1991, the fact that the Kurds had managed to secure autonomy over a much wider area, coupled with the West's reliance on air power to keep pressure on Saddam, had led to a widespread assumption that all the liberated Kurdish areas, and certainly those lying to

the north of the 36th parallel (the southern edge of the no-fly-zone) were somehow under Western protection.

In terms of the various UN Security Council resolutions, and perhaps under other forms of international law as well, it would appear that Saddam did nothing wrong. The ceasefire agreement of 1991 and subsequent UN resolutions restrict his use of air power but do not cover movements by ground forces. But in practice, his action gravely threatened to upset the local balance of power. In global terms, Saddam appeared to have burst the confines of his cage. In local terms the danger was even more serious. It was not so much that the Iraqi army had taken part in the operation against Arbil, it was the fear that when it pulled out under a 3 September decree by Saddam, it would have left behind a large contingent of the feared Mukhabarat, or Secret Police.

These had been the prime perpetrators of the Anfal Campaigns of the late 1980s in which, Kurdish forces say at least 300,000 people were killed and countless more tortured in what appeared to be the precursor to genocide.

The news that Saddam was on the loose prompted a collapse in PUK morale. This is the only explanation for the manner in which the KDP managed to gain swift control of virtually the whole of Kurdistan – and most notably the PUK stronghold at Sulaimaniyah in the days immediately following the fall of Arbil. Sulaimaniyah fell to Barzani's forces without a fight on 11 or 12 September.

Saddam's forces do not appear to have taken part in these subsequent operations, although, when they pulled out of Arbil they did not completely pull back to their former front lines but maintained new positions much closer to the city.

The fall of Arbil and the blow to US pride prompted President Clinton to launch two sets of US missile attacks on Iraqi military positions, on 3 and 4 September. These were focused on the south of the country. The new Islamist-led government in Turkey declined to cooperate with the US in any retaliatory operation, and effectively ruled out the option of any extension of the northern no-fly-zone or intensification of US military protection for the Kurds. Indeed, some two weeks after the fall of Arbil, the former Turkish Ambassador to Washington, Sukru Elekdag, commented that some aspects of the situation in Northern Iraq suited Turkey since it meant restoration of the territorial

integrity of Iraq and an end to any dream of an independent Kurdish state. In saying this, the veteran diplomat was clearly reflecting the prevailing mood in his country.

In extending the southern no-fly-zone, President Clinton was thus seeking both to set himself a target that could actually be achieved and send a message to Baghdad that its actions in the north carried adverse consequences beyond the infliction of damage by US cruise missiles. The southern no-fly-zone, extended to the 33rd parallel, now covered all the approaches to the Iraqi capital to the south and even some southern suburbs of the Iraqi capital. But it was essentially a symbolic gesture. And because there was no additional coverage for the Kurds that is why Saddam appeared ready to keep his troops in threatening positions along the Kurdish front line, thus contributing, if only psychologically to the victory of Barzani's forces over the next few days in Sulaimaniyah and elsewhere.

For Washington, its failure to take the Kurdish problem seriously until Arbil was actually assaulted has cost it dear. Because the US/Iraqi confrontation is so often seen in both the Middle East and the United States as an essentially bilateral conflict – or indeed as a personal conflict between the President of the United States and a figure considered a vicious dictator in the West, but who still possesses considerable popular support in much of the Middle East precisely because of his anti-American stance – President Clinton needed to demonstrate his own power. But in doing so, he either misjudged, or was prepared to ignore, the consequences to the loose alliance of forces which waged the Kuwait war in 1991 and which has subsequently been engaged in continuing to contain Saddam through a mixture of economic sanctions and external military force.

Thus most of Washington's Middle Eastern friends demonstrated that they were extremely nervous about the US response and did not wish to be associated with it. Saudi Arabia refused any assistance and even snubbed the US Defense Secretary by saying there would be nobody to see him in Riyadh. Syria and Egypt publicly called for a peaceful rather than a military response and the Arab League, based in Cairo and clearly reflecting Egyptian as well as broader Arab views condemned the US response. Even Kuwait, which did support the US missile strikes, got worried when Washington asked if it could despatch a fresh contingent of troops to Kuwait, and took 24 hours to reluctantly give its approval.

In terms of the US-Iraqi confrontation, the two waves of cruise missile attacks were followed by sporadic challenges by Iraqi anti-aircraft positions to US warplanes enforcing the no-fly-zones. Saddam himself responded to the first wave of cruise missile attacks on 3 September by broadcasting a speech in which he called on Iraq's ground and air forces "to consider the cursed imaginary lines north of the 36th parallel and south of the 32nd parallel to be non-existent." He urged the "hawks of the air force" to "hit powerfully and efficiently, depending on God, at any target of the aggressors that violates the airspace of your great country, all over Iraq, now and in the future."<sup>1</sup>

Tension remained high for several days in the wake of the cruise missile assaults, largely because a few planes from Saddam's air force did make occasional forays close to the limits of the no-fly-zones whilst ground radar and anti-aircraft positions did lock on to patrolling US aircraft from time to time, in pursuance of their commander's orders. At one stage, it appeared as if the US was about to initiate a solo repeat (since there was no mention of any other allied participation) of the air war launched against Saddam in January 1991. A squadron of B-52s flew to the US base on the British Indian Ocean colony of Diego Garcia, which is also the forward logistics base for heavy equipment kept in readiness for any potential deployment of US ground troops in the northern Indian Ocean from the Horn of Africa to the Gulf. Eight F117A 'Stealth' fighters, which each carry four laser-guided deep penetration bombs, were also deployed to Kuwait, while Kuwait put its own ground forces on alert.

But Saddam, who seems to have been waging a largely political war whilst the US tried to contain him through military means, surprised the Americans with a declaration by Iraq's ruling Revolutionary Command Council on 13 September that – following an appeal by Russia – Iraq would "suspend its military reaction" to allied aircraft patrolling the no-fly-zones.<sup>2</sup> This unilateral ceasefire declaration, delivered just as it seemed that Clinton was about to order a further series of air strikes, wrongfooted the Americans. With most countries in the region – not to mention France – adopting a decidedly lukewarm attitude to US military action, it began to look as if the US would find itself seriously isolated if it were to continue to pursue a military vendetta against Saddam's forces in the absence of any further provocation. Although the US buildup continued for some days, it appeared that Washington had, at least for the time being, determined that there was no immediate need for any further military action against Saddam. Instead

it, too, began to concentrate on political action – notably with the start of a new dialogue with Barzani.

In the aftermath of the US air strikes and the KDP sweeps, the immediate fear was that northern Iraq might be partitioned. Turkey had immediately announced its intention of setting up a 25km deep *cordon sanitaire* in northern Iraq to protect itself from PKK assaults – and said that it would conduct a fresh sweep against PKK positions in Iraq. It was thought possible that Iran might intervene to take some of the last PUK-controlled districts under its wing. And no-one knew whether Saddam's involvement in the capture of Arbil was the precursor to a much broader extension of Baghdad's authority in the Kurdish region.

Yet this has not happened. It remains a distinct possibility, particularly if Barzani's authority in the north should be challenged or if it should become clear that Saddam has managed to extend his influence not just to Arbil but to other districts and cities in Iraqi Kurdistan. Yet at the time of writing it appears that another switch in alignments may lead to an altogether different outcome. As of late September, Barzani was under intense US and British pressure to use his newly-established authority to keep Saddam at bay. In Ankara, on 18 September, Barzani held talks with Robert Pelletreau, the US assistant secretary of state for the Near East, in which the Americans sought once again to broker a truce agreement between the KDP and Talabani's defeated PUK forces. Barzani refused to meet Talabani outside Iraq, and the Americans appear not to have pressed the point. But the day after the meeting, US Central Intelligence Agency Director John Deutch told a congressional committee in Washington that Barzani was now seeking to distance himself from Saddam.

For his part, Barzani said after a meeting in Ankara with Turkish Foreign Minister Tansu Ciller (who, as then prime minister, had been responsible for the massive Turkish operation in northern Iraq of Spring 1995) that the scheme for a *cordon sanitaire* had not been mentioned and that "we understand they have given up the project."<sup>3</sup> For Turkey, one key question – which has yet to be answered – is the nature of Barzani's own ambitions. He is now in *de facto* control of a substantial swath of northern Iraq, although only a few days earlier he seemed likely to remain embroiled in a civil war with the PUK.

For a while, Barzani appears to enjoy the kind of physical and undisputed control over northern Iraq which his father sought to win. It may be that he

will convince Washington, and perhaps more importantly Ankara, that he can indeed be trusted to run the Kurdish statelet on an essentially pro-Western basis so long as Saddam remains in power. In this case, he may also be able to use his new authority to force the Mukhabarat out of the Kurdish areas once again. However, his 20 September comment in this regard – “*Let them tell us where these agents are, so we can arrest them*”<sup>4</sup> – is not particularly reassuring for any of the major parties involved, the West, Saddam or, above all, the Kurdish people now living in Barzani-controlled territory.

As of the end of September, the Kurdish crisis had produced a variety of outcomes. Politically, it could be argued, most of Iraqi Kurdistan was, for the first time in modern history, controlled by a single Kurdish ruler. But the price paid was heavy. Barzani’s victory amounted to the forcible overthrow of the putative democracy epitomised by the free elections of 1992. It has also led directly to a worsening of the Kurds’ economic plight. Arbil fell just three weeks after the United Nations had concluded a firm agreement under which there would be a partial lifting of UN sanctions against Iraq as part of the so-called “*food-for-oil*” scheme permitted under UN Security Council resolution 698. But the involvement of Saddam’s troops in the fall of Arbil led the UN to put that plan on hold – and there are no indications at present as to when it might be revived.

Secondly, Saddam’s own sanctions will probably be reimposed. On 10 September, Saddam had announced that the government-controlled areas of the country were free to trade with the Kurdish-controlled regions and within two or three days Iraqi tankers were trucking oil directly to the Kurdish areas to ease the persistent fuel shortage there. But Barzani now appears to have turned against Saddam again. “*The alliance with Saddam is over,*”<sup>5</sup> one KDP commander, Maki Ruri, told a Western journalist. A likely consequence is that Saddam’s sanctions against the Kurds will now be reimposed since they hurt the Kurds far more than government-controlled Iraqis.

Yet the Ankara talks show that once again the Kurdish statelet is being given a chance to make a little further progress towards real autonomy, with Western power available, however ineffectively, as a deterrent against any renewed assault by Saddam. But there are many possible events – a change of mood in Ankara or Tehran, a lack of resolve in Washington, or a simple failure by Barzani himself to act on behalf of all Iraqi Kurds including the

defeated PUK – that could change the situation overnight. The most likely prospect is still that, after a while, internal Kurdish fragmentation will again provide scope for both Saddam and the Kurds’ powerful neighbours to resume their meddling in this troubled land.

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## Notes

- <sup>1</sup> SWB ME 2708 MED/page 1, 4 September 1996, ‘Saddam urges Iraqis to resist US “aggressors”, disregard air exclusion zone’. Speech carried originally by the *Iraq News Agency*.
- <sup>2</sup> ‘Iraq promises to suspend attacks on US warplanes’, by Patti Waldmeir in Washington, *Financial Times*, 14 September 1996.
- <sup>3</sup> ‘US grants Barzani his spoils of war’, Patrick Cockburn in Salahudine, northern Iraq, *Independent*, 21 September 1996.
- <sup>4</sup> Patrick Cockburn, *Independent* 21 September 1996, op cit.
- <sup>5</sup> ‘Clinton aims to avoid election defeat at hands of Saddam’, by Patrick Cockburn in Arbil, *Independent on Sunday* (UK), 15 September 1996.

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