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The Kurdish Issue and the Coming War: Issues for War and Reconstruction

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The possibility that Turkey will not allow US basing has raised the potential importance of one of the key ethnic divisions inside Iraq, and of the possibility of such divisions affecting the fighting or Iraq nation building. No one has a precise count of how many Iraqis see themselves as Kurds and how many of these favor some form of Kurdish separatism. Nevertheless, the issue is scarcely minor. The CIA estimates that the total population is Arab 75%-80%, Kurdish 15%-20%, Turkoman, Assyrian or other 5%. This amounts to some

It is now fairly clear that the US will have to deploy forces not only to defeat Iraqi forces in the north, but to ensure the security of the Kurdish Security Zone, prevent a new flood of refugees and tensions with Turkey, minimize the risk of Kurdish-Arab-Turkoman clashes, and secure Kirkuk and the Northern oil fields as soon as possible.

US Special Forces and CIA Special Operations Groups (SOGs) are already in the area. If the US can enter through Turkey, Saddam's forces may not oppose the movement. The same might be true if US forces can "leapfrog" through Turkey by helicopter from the Mediterranean or from the south.

Reinforcement could be faster and easier than some calculate. The **Washington Post** published details on March 1 regarding possible US bases in the Kurdish enclave that could be used if Turkey allows the US to base its forces in Turkey. Alternatively, some have suggested that the US would seize these bases and then deploy light forces ground through Turkey from the Med, from other areas by C-130, or by helicopter.

One potential base is near Harir, a mountain Kurdish town deep in northern Iraq with a 1.5-mile runway, built in the 1980s by the Iraqi military. It has been derelict for a dozen years. There is another disused Iraqi military airfield at Barmani, about 15 miles south of the Turkish border and 30 miles east of Zakhu, and another long airstrip has been undergoing renovations in Bakrajo, a town on the outskirts of Sulaymaniyah.

In any case, the Kurdish issue is likely to become a significant problem virtually from the first day of the war.

The Kurds Have No Friends -- Including the Kurds

In order to understand this issue, it is necessary to understand that Kurdish divisions go much deeper than the differences between secular Kurds and the Ansar and the Islamic extremist challenge. In practice, virtually every Kurdish uprising since the 1800s has involved serious Kurd on Kurd fighting. The situation in the current Kurdish sector is complicated by the fact that the image of a central Kurdish government which has only very limited power and control. There are really two competing territories: "Barzanistan" (KDP) in the Northeast and "Talibanistan" (PUK) in the Northwest. The Kurdish militias -- such as they are -- remain divided. This helps explain why the CIA SOG elements and Special Forces in the area are divided into two teams. Separate teams are needed for each "half" of the Kurdish enclave.

"Barzanistan" vs. "Talibanistan": Reductions in KDP versus PUK Fighting

There has been progress in halting inter-Kurd fighting. The most recent State Department report on human rights says that,

The Kurdistan Democratic Party (KDP) and the Patriotic Union of Kurdistan (PUK) have controlled most areas in the three northern provinces of Erbil, Duhok, and Sulaymaniah since the Government withdrew its military forces and civilian administrative personnel from the area after the 1991 Kurdish uprising. The KDP and the PUK fought one another from 1994 through 1997. In September 1998, they agreed to unify their separate administrations and to hold new elections in July 1999. The cease-fire has held; however, reunification measures have not been implemented.

The PUK held municipal elections in February 2000 and the KDP held municipal elections in May, the first elections held in the Kurdish-controlled areas since 1992. Foreign and local election observers reported that the elections generally were fair.

The KDP, PUK, and opposition groups committed human rights abuses. However, the PUK and KDP have enacted laws establishing an independent judiciary, providing for freedom of religion, freedom of the press, freedom of assembly, the right to form political parties, and women's and workers' rights, and, according to press reporting and independent observers, both groups generally observed such laws in practice. In addition both the PUK and KDP have established human rights ministries to monitor human rights conditions, to submit reports to relevant international bodies, including the ICRC, on worthy cases, and to recommend ways to end abuses.

...The PUK and the KDP reportedly hold some political prisoners and detainees in the north of the country. The KDP and PUK reached agreement for the mutual release of political prisoners in 1999. In March 2000, the KDP released 10 PUK prisoners and the PUK released 5 KDP prisoners (see Section 1.g.). During the year, PUK and KDP officials reported that all remaining PUK and KDP political prisoners and detainees had been exchanged per the agreement.

Nevertheless, Barzani has never hesitated in the past to make alliances of convenience against Talibani, including an alliance with Saddam that helped lead to Saddam's incursion into Erbil and the Talibani held areas. Barzani has also made alliances with the Turcomans and Turks, forging and breaking them as needed, and sometimes helping the Turks attack the PKK.

Talibani, in turn, has shifted alliances for money and power, something that led him to be referred to in Arabic as "everybody's slippers" during the Iran-Iraq War.

Fighting with Other Kurdish Factions and Non-Kurdish Factions

There also has also been continued fighting between the KDP and the Ansar Islamic extremists, and fighting with the PKK and other factions. The State Department reported in 2002 that,

No hostilities were reported between the two major Iraqi Kurdish parties in de facto control of northern Iraq. The KDP and the PUK agreed in September 1998 to unify their administrations; however, little progress was made at the time toward implementing the agreement. In October 1999, senior officials from the two parties agreed on a series of measures, including prisoner exchanges, the return of internally displaced persons (IDP's) to their homes, and arrangements for freedom of movement between their respective areas. Most of the measures were not implemented (see Section 1.d.). However, during the year, the two main Kurdish parties reported some progress toward full implementation of the Washington

Agreement, including the return of 3,000 IDP's displaced since the 1995-96 fighting, improved movement between the Kurd-controlled areas, and the exchange of all prisoners.

Armed hostilities, which resulted in deaths were reported between the PUK and Islamic Groups, the PUK and the Kurdistan Workers Party (PKK), and the KDP and the PKK. The heaviest fighting began in September, when a newly created Islamist group, the Jund al-Islam, seized control of some villages near the Iranian border and attempted to institute a strictly Islamic theocratic regime. According to press and opposition reporting, the Jun al-Islam attacked PUK fighters near Halabjah, killing dozens of persons. Intermittent fighting between the PUK, and the Jund al-Islam, and other Islamic groups continued until late November, when an agreement between those involved and the Iranian Government dissolved the Jund al-Islam and imposed a cease-fire.

In July 2000, the PUK reportedly ordered all opposition groups to move their offices out of Sulaymaniah's city center following a number of bombings; the IWCP reportedly refused to move. PUK security forces subsequently killed at least six IWCP members and arrested several others at an IWCP office in Sulaymaniah. PUK forces also killed several IWCP members who were inside a car. In connection with this dispute, the PUK closed the IWCP-affiliated Independent Women's Organization and the Women's Protection Center in July 2000 and detained temporarily 12 women who had been staying at an abused women's shelter within the Center. The PUK announced that it would investigate the security forces' actions; however, no information was available by year's end.

....During the year, the KDP and PUK reiterated their September 1998 agreement to begin returning to their rightful homes the many thousands of persons each side had expelled as a result of intra-Kurdish fighting in the three northern provinces. In June the first 70 families were returned. In April 2000, the UNHCR noted that displaced persons still were living in tents or in open, unheated buildings. In August 1999, the KDP reportedly imposed a blockade on eight Assyrian villages near Aqra. Some sources indicated that KDP forces reportedly reentered one of the villages a couple of days later, rounded up the villagers, and publicly beat two of them. The KDP denied that the blockade or village raids occurred.

The tension have been compounded recently by Turkish claims that the Turcoman population is far larger than it really is and exceeds 10% of Iraq's population, Turcoman fear of Kurdish domination, and Assyrian Christian fear of have the Kurds dominate and recover land that Saddam's regime had given them.

The Risk of Wartime and Postwar Fighting

The Kurdish enclave has been held together in recent years by oil for food grants, which help stopped factional fighting over smuggling rights. They now have some cosmetic unity with the promise of power. Historically, however, Barzani has always been the more traditional and tribal leader and more willing to deal with Baghdad. Talibani has been more urbanized and more pro-independence. This means there is a good chance they will divide over the details of any federal republic during the nation-building phase of a peace.

Moreover, the oil for food guarantees to the Kurds disappears with Saddam's fall as do most of the reasons for smuggling. This potentially leaves both the KDP and PUK without money and the Kurdish enclave without a viable economic existence.

The problem is further complicated by the feeling of both factions that the US and Britain have double-crossed the Kurds in the past (true), and the US is now undercutting the outside opposition (which is so self-destructive and divided that supporting it is not

practical). They are deeply afraid of the Turks coming 12.5 miles into their areas, and a possible Turkish grab for oil areas or Mosul (which does not seem realistic).

The Humanitarian Plight of the Kurdish People

The other side of this story is the Kurdish people. They are divided between Sunni and Shi'ite and many do not speak the same dialects. Substantial numbers remain in the areas controlled by Saddam and either are passive about independence or fully assimilated Iraqis.

Nevertheless, most Kurds have a clear cultural identity, and the Kurdish security zone now occupies most of three of Iraq's 18 governorates. Many of these Kurds have been pushed out of Mosul and Kirkuk in Saddam's efforts at ethnic cleansing -- efforts with a grim history and that go back to the aftermath of his role in negotiating the Algiers Accords of 1975 and the war with Barzani the elder that followed.

The Kurds suffered horribly between 1976 and 1978. They were a catspaw for both Iraq and Iran during the early years of the Iraq-Iraq war, and then became a killing ground for Iraqi troops during the fighting in the North after 1983 -- followed by a systematic set of purges and relocations after the Iran-Iraq War. As the State Department noted in a December 2002, report:

Saddam Hussein became the first leader in the world to systematically and aggressively gas his own people. Between 1983 and 1988 alone, he murdered more than 30,000 Iraqi citizens with mustard gas and nerve agents. Several international organizations claim that he killed more than 60,000 Iraqi citizens with chemicals, including large numbers of women and children. During his two-year Anfal campaign against the Kurdish population, Saddam Hussein used these chemical weapons against more than 40 villages.

It was 6:20 PM on March 16, 1988, when a smell of apples descended on the town of Halabja. This Iraqi Kurdish town of 80,000 was instantly engulfed in a thick cloud of gas, as chemicals soaked into the clothes, mouths, lungs, eyes and skin of innocent civilians. For three days, Iraqi Air Force planes dropped mustard gas, nerve agents known as sarin and tabun, and VX, a newly manufactured and highly lethal gas. These chemicals murdered at least 5,000 civilians within hours of the initial attack, and killed and maimed thousands more over the next several years

Recent Causes of Possible Ethnic Conflict During and After the Coming War

These problems have continued in spite of the creation of the Kurdish security zone in 1991. The latest State Department report on human rights notes that,

There continued to be widespread reports of widespread disappearances. Hundreds still were missing in the aftermath of the brief Iraqi military occupation of Erbil in August 1996. Many of these persons may have been killed surreptitiously late in 1997 and throughout 1998, in the reported "prison-cleansing" campaign. Sources inside the country reported the existence of special prison wards that hold individuals whose whereabouts, status, and fate was not disclosed. The missing were primarily from the Kurd minority but include members of the Assyrian, Turkmen, and Yazidi community. In August AI reported that the Government has the world's worst record for numbers of persons who have disappeared and remain unaccounted for. The whereabouts of Hashem Hasan, a journalist and professor, who was arrested as he attempted to leave the country in 1999, remained unknown at year's end .

The Government continued to ignore the more than 16,000 cases conveyed to it in 1994 and 1995 by the U.N., as well as requests from the Governments of Kuwait and Saudi Arabia to account for the whereabouts of those who had disappeared during Iraq's 1990-91 occupation of Kuwait, and from Iran regarding the whereabouts of prisoners of war that Iraq captured in the 1980-88 Iran-Iraq war. The majority of the 16,496 cases known to the Special Rapporteur are persons of Kurdish origin who disappeared during the 1988 Anfal Campaign. The Special Rapporteur estimated that the total number of Kurds who disappeared during that period could reach several tens of thousands. Human Rights Watch (HRW) estimated the total at between 70,000 and 150,000, and AI at more than 100,000. The second largest group of cases known to the Special Rapporteur consists of Shi'a Muslims who were reported to have disappeared in the late 1970's and early 1980's as their families were expelled to Iran due to their alleged Persian ancestry.

...The Government continues its Arabization campaign of ethnic cleansing designed to harass and expel ethnic Kurds and Turkmen from government-controlled areas. According to press reports and opposition sources, the Government has displaced forcibly hundreds of families. As in previous years, the regime periodically sealed off entire districts in Kirkuk and conducted day-long, house-to-house searches. Government officials also took hostage members of minority groups to intimidate their families into leaving their home regions .

The authorities continued to detain, abuse, and kill family members and close associates of alleged government opponents . The Government has continued a campaign of intimidation directed at U.N. and nongovernmental organization (NGO) relief workers. In February the Foreign Minister threatened to break off official ties to U.N. workers supervising Oil-for-Food Program distribution in northern Iraq, and to revoke their visas and deport them. In September the Government expelled six U.N. humanitarian relief workers without providing any explanation. The Government continued to "Arabize" certain Kurdish areas, such as the urban centers of Kirkuk and Mosul, through the forced movement of local residents from their homes and villages and their replacement by Arabs from outside the area...

Non-Arab citizens are forced to either change their ethnicity on their identity documents and adopt Arabic names or be expelled to the Kurd-controlled northern governates. Persons may avoid expulsion if they relinquish their Kurdish, Turkmen, or Assyrian identity and register as Arabs. Persons who refuse to relinquish their identity may have their assets expropriated and their ration cards withdrawn prior to being deported.

The Revolutionary Command Council has mandated that new housing and employment be created for Arab residents who have been resettled in Kirkuk, while new construction or renovation of Kurd-owned property reportedly is prohibited. Non-Arabs may not sell their homes, except to Arabs, nor register or inherit property. Authorities estimate that since 1991, more than 100,000 persons have been displaced as part of the Arabization program.

According to numerous deportees in the north, the Government generally uses a systematic procedure to evict and deport non-Arab citizens. Frequently, a security force official demands that a family change its ethnicity from Kurdish or Turkmen to Arab. Subsequently, security officials frequently arrest the head of household and inform the other family members that the person will be imprisoned until they agree to settle elsewhere in the country. Such families frequently choose to move to the north; family members must sign a form that states that the departure is voluntary and they are not allowed to take any property or their food ration cards issued under the U.N. oil-for-food program. The Government frequently transfers the families' houses to Arab Ba'th Party members.

Those expelled are not permitted to return. The Special Rapporteur reported in 1999 that citizens who provide employment, food, or shelter to returning or newly arriving Kurds are subject to arrest. The Government denies that it expels non-Arab families.

According to the U.N. High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR), hundreds of thousands of Iraqi refugees remained abroad. Apart from those suspected of sympathizing with Iran, most fled after the Government's suppression of the civil uprising of 1991; others are Kurds who fled during the Anfal Campaign of 1988. Of the 1.5 million refugees who fled following the 1991 uprisings, the great majority, particularly Kurds, have repatriated themselves in northern areas outside of government control.

The Government does not cooperate with the UNHCR, does not provide first asylum, and does not respect the rights of refugees.

Approximately 12,000 Turkish Kurds who have fled civil strife in southeastern Turkey remain in northern areas controlled by the central Government. The UNHCR is treating such displaced persons as refugees until it reaches an official determination of their status.

The Special Rapporteur and others reported that the Government has engaged in various abuses against the country's 350,000 Assyrian and Chaldean Christians, especially in terms of forced movements from northern areas and repression of political rights. Most Assyrians live in the northern governates, and the Government often has accused them of collaborating with Iraqi Kurds. In the north, Kurdish groups often refer to Assyrians as Kurdish Christians. Military forces destroyed numerous Assyrian churches during the 1988 Anfal Campaign and reportedly tortured and executed many Assyrians. Both major Kurdish political parties have indicated that the Government occasionally targets Assyrians, as well as ethnic Kurds and Turkmens, in expulsions from Kirkuk in order to attempt to Arabize the city.

The U.N. Secretary General estimated that there are more than 500,000 IDP's remaining in the 3 northern provinces (Arbil, Dohuk, and Sulaymaniah), most of whom fled government-controlled areas in early 1991 during the uprising that followed the Gulf War. The Government continued its Arabization policy by discriminating against and forcibly relocating the non-Arab population, including Kurds, Turkmens, and Assyrians living in Kirkuk, Khanaqin, Sinjar, Makhmour, Tuz, Khoramatu, and other districts. Most observers view the policy as an attempt to decrease the proportion of non-Arab citizens in the oil-rich Kirkuk region, and thereby secure Arab demographic control of the area.

Landmines in the north, mostly planted by the Government before 1991, continued to kill and maim civilians. Many of the mines were laid during the Iran-Iraq and Gulf Wars; however, the army failed to clear them before it abandoned the area. Landmines also are a problem along the Iraq-Iran border throughout the central and southern areas in the country. There is no information regarding civilian casualties or the Government's efforts, if any, to clear old mine fields in areas under the central Government's control. According to reports by the U.N. Office of Project Services, the Mines Advisory Group, and Norwegian Peoples' Aid, landmines have killed more than 3,000 persons in the three northern governates since the 1991 uprising. The Special Rapporteur repeatedly has reminded the Government of its obligation under the Landmines Protocol to protect civilians from the effects of mines. Various NGO's continued efforts to remove landmines from the area and increase awareness of mines among local residents.

In December 1998, the Government declared that mine-clearing activity was subversive and ordered NGO workers performing such activity to leave the country. In April 1999, a New Zealander working for the U.N. mine-clearing program in the north was shot and killed at close range by an unknown assailant. The KDP arrested a person who claimed to have killed the U.N. worker on behalf of Saddam Hussein's Fedayeen. In April Kurd sources accused the Government of exploding a bomb near an NGO working on mine clearing in the north.

The Problem of Oil: Another Possible Cause of Intra-Iraqi Conflict

The Kurds and Turcomans both have claims to substantial amounts of land and real estate Saddam's regime seized as it ethnically cleansed the areas around Mosul and Kirkuk. The land is particularly important because it is general much better for agricultural purposes than most of the land in the Kurdish enclave. This could lead to significant fighting.

Oil and oil revenues, however, are the most critical issue. Iraq's proven oil reserves are not distributed evenly throughout the country. In fact, prior to Iraq's invasion of Kuwait

in 1990, about two-thirds of Iraq's production was coming out of the southern fields of Rumaila, Zubair, and Nahr Umr. Iraqi oil reserves also vary widely in quality, with API gravities in the 24o to 42o range.

Today, the Kurds are excluded from control over any area with oil reserves, and particularly from the key fields around Kirkuk. Iraq's main export crudes come from the country's two largest active fields: Rumaila and Kirkuk. The northern Kirkuk field, first discovered in 1927, normally produces 37o API, 2% sulfur crude, although the API gravity reportedly has fallen in recent years.

Kirkuk is a key potential fault line in Kurd versus Arab versus Turk/Turcoman issues because it is a center of Iraq's oil industry and is connected by pipelines to ports on the Mediterranean Sea. The Kirkuk field was originally brought online by IPC in 1934, but still has well 10 billion barrels of remaining proven oil reserves and still produces nearly half of Iraqi exports. The current population of the city is unclear but is probably near 900,000. It should be noted that while the Kurds claim Kirkuk, so do the Iraqi Turcomans and Saddam has relocated many Arabs there as well as built-up the role of Assyrian Christians.

The only factors that might eventually reassure the Kurds in terms of Kirkuk, the oilfields and oil revenues would be tying the structure of any future Iraqi Republic to a fixed arrangement for sharing oil revenues or full development of Iraq's oil fields, this could almost certainly provide substantial oil export revenues for every part of the country, and fund Iraq's nation-wide development at much better levels than now, although it would not give every major ethnic and religious faction an oil field in its territory,

The DOE EIA reports that Iraq contains 112 billion barrels of proven oil reserves, the second largest in the world (behind Saudi Arabia) along with roughly 220 billion barrels of probable and possible resources. Iraq's true resource potential may be far greater than this, however, as the country is relatively unexplored due to years of war and sanctions. Deep oil-bearing formations located mainly in the vast Western Desert region, for instance, could yield large additional oil resources (possibly another 100 billion barrels), but have not been explored. Iraq's oil production costs are amongst the lowest in the world.