

Kurdish Insurgencies, the Gulf War, and Turkey's Changing Role*

by
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INTRODUCTION

Straddling Turkey, Iraq and Iran, in the mountain ranges where the borders of the three countries meet, the Kurds are no strangers to the ups and downs of regional and international balance of power games. Indeed, the modern history of the Kurds is commonly traced to the sixteenth century encounters between the Ottomans and Persians who sought to define the political topography of the region in which the Kurds lived. The Kurds, in turn, became adept at "manipulat(ing) the balance of power between the two empires."¹

The confrontation between the Sunni Ottomans and Shi'ite Persians was more than a contention over territory. It was also a confessional strife, and so far as the Kurds were concerned the Ottomans had the edge over the Persians, as most Kurds were (and still are) Sunnis. That, despite the fact that the Kurds were ethnically and linguistically closer to the Persians,² The intense rivalry between the empires, mostly played out in Iraq, which was viewed as something of a 'buffer zone', had a long-lasting impact on the Kurds. They soon learned that they could play off the regional powers against one another. Stephen Pelletiere cites the instance of the Kurdish Baban family who, around the turn of the nineteenth century, controlled "most of present-day Iraqi Kurdistan."³ In the early 1800s, the Ottoman governor of Baghdad sought to bring the Babans under his control, though Abdurrahman, a Baban chieftain, was "constantly intriguing with and against the governor in Baghdad and the Persians across the frontier."⁴ In 1808, he was asked to relinquish his title over the *pashalik* of Sulaymaniya. (The Ottomans acted on the principle that power should not be vested with a particular individual for too long.) When he decided to enlist Persian help, the Shah asked for his reinstatement "knowing that the certain refusal . . . would give the Persians an excuse to invade."⁵ In the subsequent skirmish the Ottomans were overcome and Abdurrahman regained control of Sulaymaniya. Yet, having antagonized the Persians as well, in 1811 he was deposed for the last time. The Persians increasingly came to dominate the area, and a Persian garrison remained in Sulaymaniya until 1834.

The Baban episode is a telling instance of the pattern of relations that has developed between the Kurds and the regional powers over the centuries. A similar instance can be seen in the case of Daud Pasha, the semi-autonomous governor of Baghdad in the early nineteenth century. Daud had decided to centralize authority in the province. The Kurds, particularly the Babans of Sulaymaniya, promptly allied themselves with the Persians in order to resist Daud. In his attempt to break up this combination Daud was defeated in 1821, leading to a decision to retaliate

against the Persians living in Iraq and in turn to the Ottoman-Persian war of 1821-23. The Persian army, assisted by the Kurds, penetrated as far as Bitlis in eastern Anatolia. Though successful in the war, the Persians were decimated by cholera and forced to accede to the Treaty of Erzurum (March 1823) which left Iraq intact in Ottoman hands. The Persians retreated behind the Zagros mountains never to venture westward again—until recently, that is. As to Daud, the Ottomans removed him in 1831 and brought Iraq under direct administrative control.

These two instances can be viewed as reinforcing Carl Brown's thesis that in the Middle East the "old rules" still apply and are often good explanatory guides for what happens in the region.⁶ In both instances, the Kurdish chieftains, finding themselves in contention with the Ottoman authorities, resorted to Persian help, which, not surprisingly, was readily forthcoming. But, more often than not, the Kurds were brought to the realization that dealing with the enemy of your enemy had its downside as well. In other words, one should be wary of Persians (or anyone else) bearing gifts.

LATE OTTOMAN AND EARLY REPUBLICAN ERAS

It has been said that the Kurds never had it better than under the reign of Abdulhamid II (1876-1909) and that the Kurdish chieftains "formed nothing less than the backbone of the Sultan's regime."⁷ Abdulhamid surrounded himself with Kurdish 'Sufi' shaykhs, staffed his Palace Guard with Kurds and Albanians, and set up the Hamidiyeh cavalry as a "yeomanry frontier guard" composed of Kurds and Turkomans. The Sultan continually played up his role as the Caliph which proved popular with the traditional Kurdish tribes. Perhaps most importantly, he cultivated a network of Kurdish chieftains who owed a good deal of their power and prestige directly to him. It is not a coincidence, therefore, that the major Kurdish uprising during his reign, (described as "the last of the great Kurdish revolts of the nineteenth century") was directed not against the Ottomans but the Persians.⁸ In 1880, the Kurdish Shaikh Ubaydullah, angered by Persian raids into areas under his control, marched on Tabriz. Pelletiere remarks that though this has been seen by some as a nationalist rising, "in fact, it was clearly tied into the policies of Abdul Hamid and also the rivalry of the great powers in the region."⁹ As it so happened, in 1908, when the Young Turks seized power, Said Barzinji, a Kurdish chieftain based in Sulaymaniya, rebelled against the new regime.¹⁰ In 1919, his son Mahmud was to instigate an uprising in northern Iraq, the first since the collapse of the Ottoman Empire.

During World War I, the Kurds fought the Czarist Russian armies which had penetrated as far south as Rawanduz in the Mosul province. After the war, the Treaty of Sevres (1920), concluded between the Ottoman Government and the Allied Powers, contained articles relating to the Kurds. While Article 62 provided for local autonomy in eastern Anatolia, Article 64 laid out specific conditions for the establishment of a Kurdish state "in that part of Kurdistan which has hitherto been included in the Mosul *vilayet*."¹¹ The treaty, however, was never ratified.

By the time the Lausanne Treaty was being negotiated (1922-23), the British had changed their minds. They now wanted to annex Mosul to the newly-created state of Iraq, and that after a rather convoluted process—a referendum under the auspices of the League of Nations—is what they did. During the interregnum (1919-22) the British appointed Mahmud Barzinji as provisional governor of the Mosul province. However, the arrangement soon fell apart and the British had to bring colonial troops into Iraq. They first exiled Mahmud to India and then brought him back in 1922, only to call in the Royal Air Force to bomb Sulaymaniya.

The air force was also instrumental in the newly-established Turkish Republic, in suppressing a Kurdish revolt in 1925 led by Shaikh Said. Though explanations for the uprising are varied, ranging from reaction against the removal of the Caliph by the Kemalist regime to resistance against the envisioned land reform—there is lingering suspicion that the British had a hand in it. Soon afterwards, the Turkish government came back to the negotiating table, and the 'Mosul Question' was settled in keeping with British demands. A treaty was concluded between Turkey, Britain and Iraq (June 1926). There were, however, further challenges Turkey had to face in subsequent years. Despite the policies of detribalization and resettlement, efforts at assimilation and the undermining of the feudal structure in the eastern areas, two major Kurdish uprisings erupted in 1930 and 1937.

FROM SAADABAD TO BAGHDAD

In 1937, the Turkish, Iraqi, Iranian and Afghan governments signed the Saadabad Pact. Certain provisions of the pact had clearly been crafted with the Kurds in mind. Referring to the Saadabad and Baghdad Pacts (1955), J.M. Abdulghani argues: "Implicit in the two pacts was an understanding that Iraq, Iran and Turkey would co-operate in suppressing any Kurdish nationalist movement intent on altering the political status quo in the region."¹²

In the years preceding and following the Saadabad Pact considerable Kurdish insurgent activity took place in Iraq. A British-installed monarchy had been ruling the country since 1921, and when the British mandate was ended in 1930 the whole question of Kurdish autonomy had come up once again. Several insurgencies took place during the 1930s with the ones led by Shaikh Mahmud in Sulaymaniya and by Ahmad Barzani near the Turkish border being the most notable. It was during this period that the Barzanis began to emerge as a force to be reckoned with. The Barzani tribe encompassed, by some estimates, 1,800 families or 9,000 people. In 1943, under Mulla Mustafa (Ahmad's younger brother), they revolted against Baghdad. In August 1945 a major confrontation took place between the Barzanis, comprising some 4,000 to 5,000 fighters and an Iraqi force of some 30,000 soldiers. The Iraqi units, augmented by Kurdish tribes hostile to the Barzanis, forced Mulla Mustafa into retreat. In September 1945, the entire clan crossed into Iran and made its way to Mahabad. Soon after (January 1946), the Mahabad Republic, a Kurdish separatist state backed by the Soviet

Union continuing its occupation of the region since 1941, was established. Mulla Mustafa was promptly made a general in the Mahabad army, but the Republic collapsed in December 1946 when the Soviets withdrew from the area.¹³ When the Iranian army moved into Mahabad, Barzani refused to surrender and crossed back into Iraq. He and some of his men trekked through Iraq, Turkey and Iran, finally reaching the Soviet Union, where they stayed until 1958, the year of the Iraqi revolution.

Meanwhile, in 1955 the Baghdad Pact was signed among Iraq, Iran, Pakistan, Turkey and Britain. As noted earlier, the pact contained elements similar to that of the Saadabad Pact of 1937. Apart from the broader strategic considerations, one motivation "for Iran to participate in the Baghdad Pact of 1955," as Ghareeb observes, "was to cooperate with Iraq in suppressing the Kurdish nationalist movement."¹⁴

REVOLUTIONARY TIMES IN IRAQ

When Mulla Mustafa returned to Baghdad after the 1958 revolution, he was initially received very warmly by General Qassem who hoped to use the Kurds against pro-monarchist tribal leaders, Arab nationalists and Baath supporters. Barzani was accorded special treatment—provided with a mansion in Baghdad and a limousine. He was, however, barred from returning to his native Barzan, close to the Turkish border. Tensions began to surface when Barzani, who had assumed the presidency of the Kurdish Democratic Party (KDP), presented a specific set of demands. These included provisions for Kurdish to become the "first official language" in the autonomous Kurdish region and for police and army units stationed in the Kurdish region to be entirely Kurdish.

In the meantime, a conjunction of interests had developed between the Kurds and the Communists, both of which opposed Arab nationalism and the proposed union with Nasser's Egypt. The Kurds "naturally gravitated toward the Communists," observes Pelletiere, as there was a "fundamental incompatibility" between themselves and the Arab Left who were essentially Arab nationalists.¹⁵ The Kurdish-Communist partnership came into full view during the Mosul-Kirkuk incidents of 1959 which resulted in the massacres of Turkomans and upper classes in these two cities. Starting as an Arab nationalist revolt at the Mosul army garrison, the incidents had unleashed deep-seated ethnic antagonisms between the Kurds and the Turkomans.

All was not sweetness and light among the Kurds either. The longstanding rivalries among the tribes had intensified since Barzani's arrival in 1958. Ghareeb notes that the alliance between Barzani and the Communists, as well as "the government's harsh action against the landowners frightened the chiefs of other Kurdish tribes, especially the Bardosts."¹⁶ Barzani, for his part, was intent on settling the old scores with the "Zibaris, Surchis, and Herkis—who had all profited from his tribe's distress"¹⁷ during the years of exile. When Lolanis and the Pishdar tribe fled to Turkey and Iran respectively, the Barzanis simply appropriated their lands.

Meanwhile, relations between Qassem and Barzani had deteriorated to the point where the Iraqi Air Force bombed Barzan. Between September and October 1961 the Iraqi planes had, reportedly, razed 1,270 Kurdish villages to the ground.¹⁸ Qassem was also supplying the Zibaris, Herkis and other Kurdish tribes hostile to the Barzanis with arms and money. He was neither the first nor the last of those trying to profit from the inter-tribal rivalries among the Kurds.

The fighting continued, on and off, until January 1963 when a truce was declared. A month later, in February 1963, the Baath coup took place. Lying low while the Baathists and Communists settled scores between themselves, the Kurds presented their demands for autonomy to the new regime in the spring of 1963. Taken aback by the terms, the Baath regime unleashed its full fury on the Kurds in June 1963. A whole Kurdish suburb in Kirkuk was bulldozed. With the advance of the Iraqi army, the Kurds had to retreat towards the Turkish and Iranian borders. For a while, Turkey and Iran were closely involved in the situation, as was the Soviet Union, still protesting the decimation of the Iraqi Communists by the Baathists. A cease-fire took effect in January 1964. Yet another offensive in May 1966, which turned out to be a disaster for the Iraqi government, led to the so-called "twelve-point program."

KURDISH FACTIONS, IRANIAN SUPPORT, AND THE BAATH

When the Baath returned to power in July 1968 it was officially declared that "autonomous Kurdish rule is realistic and justified."¹⁹ There were compelling grounds why the Baathists would want to come to some form of accommodation with the Kurds: (1) the growing tensions with Iran over the Shatt al-Arab; (2) the activist policy against Israel; (3) the continued feuding with Syria; (4) the growing opposition of the Iraqi Communist Party and other internal groups; and (5) the perpetual drain on the budget caused by the Kurdish campaign. The Baathists were also aware that the inability to resolve the Kurdish problem had been a major cause of the collapse of their regime back in 1963. Yet, despite all that, the fighting was resumed on a larger scale than ever before by the end of 1968. Having received a new consignment of Soviet weapons in early 1969, the Baathists unleashed yet another offensive in the north with 60,000 men—"the greatest concentration of forces yet dispatched against the Kurds."²⁰ The Barzanis put up a fierce resistance, and though forced to retreat, managed to stall the Baathist advance.

Meanwhile, relations between Barzani and the KDP faction led by Jalal Talabani and Ibrahim Ahmad had deteriorated. An intense rivalry had been developing within the KDP between Barzani, "the man of the tribes," and the "reformist" wing of the party led by "town-bred intellectuals". The Talabani-Ahmad faction, also known as the KDP Politburo, had formed close ties with the Baathists whose radical socio-economic platform they found congenial. The Baathists, in their turn, preferred to deal with the Talabani-Ahmad faction because it espoused a leftist policy not very different from their own and because they were "wary of Barzani's 'suspicious ties' to Iran and other foreign interests."²¹

The significance of these developments cannot be overstated. The Talabani-Ahmad faction was challenging the very basis of Barzani's tribal leadership, trying to extend its power base into the rural, mountainous areas controlled by Barzani, while cooperating with the Baathists to undermine him. Thus, it was no wonder that during the fighting in the spring of 1969, the Talabani forces were fighting alongside the Baathists while Barzani was receiving arms and support from Iran. With Iranian backing, Barzani's forces had grown into 20,000 well-equipped men, armed with anti-aircraft guns, field guns and anti-tank weapons.

Out of the military stalemate came the March Manifesto of 1970, a fifteen-point settlement which, in effect, meant the grant of local autonomy to the Kurds in northern Iraq. Kurdish was to become one of the two official languages, the *Nawruz* was to be observed as a national holiday, and there were a host of administrative adjustments which satisfied many of the Kurds' original demands. This was indeed an extraordinary turnabout.

The agreement, which came as a surprise to most, was widely acclaimed in the Arab world. In Turkey, however, there were reservations about its outcome. Within a few months Kurdish insurgent activity in Turkey showed a notable increase. From July 1970 onwards, the Turkish government stepped up its vigilance in the eastern provinces. In April 1971 the Turkish government announced that a Kurdish independence movement in Turkey, set up and supplied by Barzani, had been uncovered. When asked about it, Barzani replied: "We are Iraqi Kurds operating in Iraq only. We have no relations with others."²²

The March Manifesto of 1970, hailed as a watershed in Arab-Kurdish relations, did not produce a lasting settlement. Differences soon became apparent between the Baath government and the KDP over the very definition of autonomy. Barzani's demand that Kirkuk be included in the Kurdish autonomous region was a source of major contention. The growing links between Barzani and Iran was cited by the Baathist leadership as a serious obstacle in the way of the implementation of the autonomy plan. *Al-Thawrah*, the official organ of the Baath party, pointed to the evidence indicating massive flows of Iranian arms and equipment into the Kurdish region, the training of the *pehmerga* at Iranian military academies, collusion between the Kurds and the Iranians against the Iraqi army and so on.²³

Barzani's increasing links with the United States, and his readiness to receive military aid from whatever source, including Israel, were adding substance to Baathist concerns. The connections with foreign powers not only reinforced the Baathists' conviction that Barzani's ultimate objective was the dismemberment of Iraq, but also precipitated a rift within the KDP, resulting in the defection of Barzani's eldest son, Ubaydullah, and other prominent figures in the party to the Baathists. As justification for his alleged links with Israel, Barzani is reported to have said: "A drowning man stretches his hand out for everything!"²⁴

Meanwhile, Iraq had signed a fifteen-year friendship treaty with the Soviet Union (April 10, 1972). About the same time that Soviet Premier Aleksei Kosygin was in Baghdad to sign the treaty, President Nixon was in Tehran where the Shah reportedly persuaded him to support the Kurdish rebellion against Iraq. What must have clinched the argument, concludes Pelletiere, was the report that the Iraqis were going to grant the Soviets port facilities at Basra. Nixon, overriding the objections of the CIA, and outflanking the State Department, ordered operations to start in support of the Kurds.²⁵

In March 1974, after having declared the autonomy plan as effective, the Baathists mounted an all-out drive against Barzani, committing "the largest force and the most sophisticated equipment ever."²⁶ A war of attrition was under way throughout April-June 1974. The Iraqi army was able to reach most of the forward outposts and scatter the Kurdish resistance, re-occupying towns like Ruwanduz. The fighting, reportedly pitting 60,000 Iraqi troops against 12,000 *peshmerga* was the fiercest since 1961.

During the 1974 fighting, the extent of the Iran-Barzani cooperation had reached such a point that Iranian army troops dressed as Kurds reportedly joined Barzani's forces, and long-range heavy artillery support was given from within the Iranian borders. Iraq, for its part, bombed some Iranian border villages, scattering anti-Shah leaflets in the process. Military observers agree that the Iranian intervention prevented the Iraqi army from destroying Barzani's forces during the December 1974-January 1975 campaign.

'THE GREAT BETRAYAL' AND THE AFTERMATH OF THE COLLAPSE

On March 7, 1975, during an OPEC conference in Algiers, Iraq and Iran agreed to a plan that would settle their outstanding differences. The agreement came as a surprise to everyone concerned, not the least the Kurds themselves. The deal struck by the Shah with Saddam Hussein was "one of the great surprises of Middle East politics in the post-World War II era," notes Pelletiere.²⁷ Within hours of the signing of the Algiers Agreement, Iran began to withdraw its forces from Iraq and cut off aid to Barzani. Soon after, the Iraqis mounted a major offensive against the Kurds, breaking through Ruwanduz Valley and threatening the Kurdish military headquarters in Haj Umran.

Stunned by the developments, Barzani, at first, vowed to fight on. But, a few days later, after a brief meeting with the Shah, Barzani announced he would not resume the fighting. The KDP leadership, split on the issue, also decided to give up the fight. Barzani himself, along with his family, close associates and several thousand *peshmergas* crossed the border into Iran. In 1976, he moved to the United States where he underwent treatment for lung cancer. He died there three years later (March, 1979), thus bringing a unique chapter in Kurdish history to a close.

Upon Mulla Mustafa's departure from the scene the KDP broke into several factions. A faction which grew around Barzani's sons Idris and

Masoud established the KDP Provisional Command (KDPPC). Another group, Patriotic Union of Kurdistan (PUK), was the first to instigate guerrilla activities. Advocating Marxist principles and condemning the Barzani leadership as "reactionary", PUK is led by Telebani, and is widely believed to be backed by Syria.

KDPPC and PUK were soon on a collision course. In July 1976, PUK charged that Barzani supporters had killed several PUK men in Turkish territory. Clashes between the two sides continued near the Iraqi-Turkish border. In one incident, in the fall of 1978, two prominent PUK leaders were killed by men loyal to the Barzanis. With the advent of the Islamic Revolution in Iran, the Barzanis secured strong ties with the new regime. KDPPC supported the Khomeyni regime against the Kurdish insurrection in Mahabad and Sanandaj in the immediate aftermath of the revolution. The spectacle of Barzani Kurds helping Shia fundamentalists quash fellow Sunni Kurds in neighboring Iran may cause some bewilderment at first but it is hardly anything new. Mulla Mustafa, "anxious not to offend the Shah (and thereby close the friendly border at his back) had renounced all connection with the Iranian Kurdish movement."²⁸ Thus, Idris and Masoud could claim to be consistent with paternal tradition.

The Kurdish insurgency in Iran was eventually contained but not until after some serious skirmishing had taken place. In March 1980, the Kurds had retaken Sanandaj and the central government responded by reducing the city to rubble in a fierce artillery barrage.²⁹ The Kurds, in turn, pulled back to the mountains and declared a "liberated zone" west of the Urmiya Lake. Among the forces controlling the region was Abdurrahman Ghassemlou's KDP of Iran (KDPI).

Three months later, in September 1980, Iraqi troops entered Khuzestan, and the Iran-Iraq war was on. In December 1980, the Iraqi forces entered Iranian Kurdistan, coming within fifty miles of Sanandaj. Pelletiere sardonically observes that the Iraqis who had "just brutally suppressed a Kurdish insurrection in their own country (were) supporting Iranian Kurds in their struggle against their central government."³⁰

Talabani, meanwhile, had set up headquarters in Damascus after the collapse of Barzani's rebellion and after the war between Iran and Iraq broke out, PUK established bases in the Sulaymaniya region of Iraq. In contrast to the Barzanis, Talabani decided to help the Iranian Kurds, and even agreed to allow Iraqi army units to pass through the region under his control to deliver weapons to Ghassemlou. Thus, in the summer of 1983, when Iran thrust into northern Iraq, with the Barzanis spearheading the drive, Talabani was faced with a crucial dilemma; to ally with the Iranians would have meant joining forces with the Barzanis, something he was not prepared to do at that time.

Taking advantage of Talabani's predicament, Saddam Hussein renewed his offer of limited autonomy in return for PUK support in defending northern Iraq against the Iranians. In January 1984, there was an exchange of prisoners between Talabani and Baghdad and PUK forces were incorporated into the regular Iraqi army as border guards.

The war in the north had become a war of proxies, both sides depending heavily "on Kurdish surrogate forces—Iraq on Talbani and Ghassemlou; Iran on the Barzanis."³¹ Once again, a balance of power game was being played with the Kurds as both pawns and manipulators.

The Saddam-Talabani arrangement is said to have alarmed Turkey. Pelletiere notes that "with a Kurdish population of over 5 million in eastern Anatolia (adjacent to Iraqi Kurdistan) the Turks fear[ed] the demonstration effect of Iraq's offer of semi-autonomy to the Kurds."³² Faced with an active Kurdish separatist movement on their territory, "the Turks," concluded Pellitiere, "could reasonably complain to both Iran and Iraq that by arming the Kurds they risk destabilizing the whole Turkish-Iraq-Iran triangle."³³

THE GULF WAR'S IMPACT ON TURKEY

For nearly seven years the Iran-Iraq war has been raging across the banks of Tigris. Given the assortment of forces unleashed by the war, and its factional, ethnic, regional and global repercussions, it is no wonder that scant attention has been paid to Turkey's role in this multi-faceted conflict. This can be explained in several ways. Firstly, Turkey has not taken sides in the conflict—unlike most countries in the region which support one side or the other. It has maintained what might be called "active neutrality" since the war's inception. Secondly, it has seemed that Turkey, a Western-oriented, secular country and a NATO member, has not felt threatened either by the Gulf War or the potential impact of the Islamic resurgence in the region. In fact, at times it appeared that Turkey saw the war as little more than a chance to bolster its sagging balance of payments. Indeed, in the early 1980s Turkey's trade with *both* belligerent countries increased by leaps and bounds. The surge in the Iranian trade was largely due to the Western embargo with which Turkey did not comply. During a two year period, 1984-85, Iran became Turkey's number one trading partner with the two-way trade reaching well over \$2 billion. In the case of Iraq, the important factor was the transportation access provided by Turkey, as Iraq's regular trade outlets, port of Basra and the Shatt al-Arab waterway, were closed by the war. Until late 1985, when oil prices began their dramatic plunge, Turkey's overall trade with the two countries was exceeding its trade with the EEC. Turkey, then, has been pictured by some as the only beneficiary of the war or somewhat less kindly by others as laughing all the way to the bank while the Gulf went up in flames.

There was a time, early in the war, when the survival of the Iranian regime was in some doubt. Current conjecture, seems to indicate one of two outcomes: erratic continuance of the war, almost indefinitely, or the collapse of the Iraqi regime. It is this latter scenario, which has many variants, that has lately prompted a spate of speculation. Alongside the more common scenarios concerning Kuwait and Saudi Arabia, one has lately been hearing questions such as, "What would Turkey do if Iran seizes Kirkuk?"³⁴ In a recent article, John Sigler writes, "Some believe that the Israelis may harbour longer-term plans for Iraq, envisioning a defeated Iraq being reduced in size, with Turkey taking over the northern

Kurdish provinces, Iran controlling the Shi'ite south, and Syria absorbing western Iraq."³⁵ There is also speculation about a border strategy orchestrated by the United States which depicts "Turkey's capture of Kirkuk" as part of the overall plan.³⁶ One writer argues that "on the broader regional front, there are hints that the United States and Turkey would seek to dismember Iraq, rather than see Iran scoring a decisive victory."³⁷ Such speculations all tend to suggest that Turkey may no longer remain a mere 'active neutral' in the Iran-Iraq conflict. One should, therefore, examine Turkey's actual and potential involvement in this evolving political configuration.

In December 1986, a three-day conference was held in Tehran under the label 'Cooperation Conference of Iraqi People.' The conference brought together diverse Iraqi groups whose only shared attribute was their opposition to the Baath regime. The *Afkar* correspondent notes that one of the main objectives of the three-day conference was to bring together the two main factions of the Iraqi opposition—the Islamic Movement (mainly Shi'ites) and the Kurdish Nationalist Movement—though "many secular politicians also participated, including ex-monarchists, ex-Baathists, Christians and distinguished Iraqi personalities."³⁸ The conference was addressed by the Iranian President Ali Khamenei, as well as Prime Minister Hossein Musawi, Speaker Hashemi Rafsanjani and Foreign Minister Akbar Velayati. According to the report, "President Khamenei confirmed Iran's commitment to an independent and free Iraq within its recognized international borders [signalling] a clear warning that Iran would not hesitate to challenge any intervention by other countries in the affairs of Iraq."³⁹ Observing that "the message was aimed at Turkey, a neighbouring country to Iraq and a member of NATO," the correspondent goes on to say:

There is no shortage of excuses for Turkey's possible intervention. Turkey has had its territorial claims to Mosul, Kirkuk and other northern cities of Iraq since before 1932. But the League of Nations had ruled in Iraq's favour at that time. A minority of Turkomans still live in northern Iraq which may also become Turkey's 'legitimate' excuse for its intervention.⁴⁰

Turkey's historical claims to the Mosul-Kirkuk area has been the focus of persistent attention lately. Iqbal Asaria notes that "Turkey has periodically expressed its claim to northern Iraq, an area that used to be the Wilaya of Mosul under the Ottoman Empire."⁴¹ He further argues that Turkey's dependence on the oil pipeline from Kirkuk, and "the possible impact of any change on its large but suppressed Kurdish population, may be used as excuses in the event United States and Turkey seek to dismember Iraq. Iran has sent clear signals that it would not countenance any such move on the part of Turkey."⁴² In a related theme, Zubaida Umar argues that Turkey has not done much to espouse the cause of Turkomans in the Kirkuk area, estimated to be around one million. "However, as Saddam Hussein nears the end of his tether, the (Turks) might use them as a pretext for intervention,"⁴³ Umar adds.

From a Turkish perspective, a significant outcome of the Iran-Iraq war has been the developments along the broad front of Kurdish factionalism, and in particular, the "reconciliation," using that term very circumspectly, between Masoud Barzani and Talabani. In an interview with a Turkish newspaper, a *peshmerga* chieftain loyal to Barzani declared: "We are not enemies anymore. But we cannot be considered loyal friends either. So far as we know [Talabani] fights against the Iraqi government."⁴⁴ Other reports confirm that KDP and PUK, both armed and assisted by Iran, have been "moving towards healing the breach" between them. Though both groups are fighting against the Iraqi government, it may be premature to talk of a united front. But it is also reported that "the prospect of a united front reflects the optimism which currently infects the Kurdish movement."⁴⁵ This optimism was underlined by Gassemlou, the leader of KDPI, who (unlike Barzani and Talabani) continues to oppose the regime in Tehran. Gassemlou reportedly said: "The Kurds never had the chance they have now. Never before have there been armed uprisings in all three countries."⁴⁶

Such optimism notwithstanding, on 14 August 1986 the Turkish Air Force planes attacked Kurdish sites along the Iraqi border following an incident in which Kurdish guerrillas ambushed Turkish soldiers. Baghdad radio said that 165 Kurdish guerrillas had died in the raids but some sources put the figure as 200 or even higher. It was after this incident that frequent references to Turkey started appearing in the Iranian press. Under a headline, "Turkey Advised to Maintain Neutrality," *Kayhan* reported a Kurdish deputy in the Iranian Majlis, Mustafa Qaderi, as saying that "Turkey seems to be collaborating with the Iraqi regime and its mercenaries, despite claims of being neutral in the war." According to *Kayhan*, which reflects the government's views, Qaderi (deputy for the Kurdish towns of Piranshahr and Sardasht) issued a warning that "Turkish government should not covet the Iraqi northeastern oil-rich province of Kirkuk," also noting that "Iraq's natural resources belong to the Muslim Iraqi nation."⁴² The interesting spectacle of a Kurdish deputy sitting in the Iranian Majlis making pointed reference to Turkey's alleged ambitions in northern Iraq might indicate how complicated the regional configuration has lately become.

In the northern areas of Iraq, the Iranian army has opened up a "second front". PUK is said to control a region which includes Sulaymaniya, Kirkuk and Arbil, and KDP's control reportedly extends from the Iranian border to the town of Zakho, near the Syrian and Turkish borders. Reports indicate that PUK and KDP have been pinning down 160,000 Iraqi troops in the area. With an estimated 18,000 *peshmerga* (8,000 PUK and 10,000 KDP) controlling the harsh terrain of northern Iraq, why the Kurds have not cut the pipelines or attacked the oil installations has puzzled observers. Some have noted that "up to now they may have been deterred by the threat of Turkish reprisals against Iran."⁴⁸ But according to others, there are indications that this may change. As part of these developments, the KDP radio, monitored in Ankara, announced in September 1986 that KDP was joining forces with

the militant Kurdish Workers Party (PKK) of Turkey. And Masoud Barzani, directing operations from inside Iran, reportedly declared that they will attack Kirkuk.⁴⁹

In the months following the Turkish incursion into northern Iraq (August 1986), the name Kirkuk was featured in the headlines by the Turkish press, too. When the Iranian ambassador to Turkey reportedly said that Iran believed it had the right to attack Iraqi economic concerns, including the Kirkuk-Ceyhan pipeline, in retaliation for Iraqi air raids on Iranian residential areas, his remarks elicited some measured response on the part of the Turkish government. After consultations with President Kenan Evren, Prime Minister Turgut Ozal expressed his government's commitment to protect the pipeline.⁵⁰

After a regular Thursday meeting of the Political High Council of the Iranian government (the Iranian Politburo) on 30 October 1986, Prime Minister Musawi declared that the "Islamic Republic of Iran strongly defends Iraq's territorial integrity . . . [and] that after Saddam's downfall Iraq's borders should be respected by all countries."⁵¹ *Kayhan* reporting the story, noted: "The prime minister reiterated that the shakiness of Saddam's regime should not result in any territorial ambitions on Iraq or its resources." The message was clearly aimed at Turkey, indicative of the strains developing between the two countries.

Given all the recent speculation, one may well ask how serious the likelihood is that, in the event of an Iraqi collapse, Turkey might feel obliged to move into northern Iraq? The answer would involve several dimensions which are inter-connected. Presently the most visible dimension is the Kurdish one. On 4 March 1987, Turkish warplanes bombed the Kurdish "rebel camps and ammunition depots in northern Iraq" with estimated casualties running into the hundreds.⁵² The action was reportedly taken in retaliation for the killing of 34 civilians in southeastern Turkey during the past month. During the same week it was reported that Iran had launched a new offensive in the mountains of northern Iraq while continuing its push towards Basra in the south. The drive was reportedly launched on 3 March 1987 in the Haj Omran area, the scene of bitter battles during a previous Iranian thrust in 1983.⁵³

A brief look at the military situation in the area might put the recent developments in clearer perspective. In northern Iraq, Iran is allied with the Barzani and Talabani forces who are harassing the Iraqi army units in the area. The sole anti-Iranian Kurdish faction, KDPI, is overwhelmed—10,000 are facing 200,000 *pasdaran* and 23 Iranian garrisons.⁵⁴ The conclusion which emerges is this: for the moment at least, Iran has managed to swing the Kurdish factor to its advantage. One might suspect, though, that remembrance of past betrayals might still be haunting the Kurds.

Turning our focus to Turkish-Iranian relations one sees that the developments on the Kurdish front, so favorable to Iran, are very unsettling for Turkey. Iran and Turkey are clearly in an adversarial course on this issue, and the tensions do not end there. In a recent article, Mehmet

Osmanoglu, a Turkish proponent of global Islamic unity, underlines the connection between the strategic and ideological dimensions, admittedly from his particular vantage point:

Looking at some realistic scenarios of the Iraqi future, then, Muslims have reasons to feel apprehensive about 'the Turkish factor'. . . Should it become obvious that the Ba'thist regime in Baghdad cannot withstand the Iranian pressure and that it must fall, one must expect the Turkish army to occupy northern Iraq on the basis of 'historical claims' that it once formed part of the Turkish Empire . . . No doubt, this will be done with the full connivance of NATO and the USA. Given the fact that, politically speaking, Turkey has lost its Islamic moorings, such an outcome of the Iran-Iraq war will not be conducive to the emergence of a new Islamic order in the Muslim Middle East which is the ultimate goal of this struggle.⁵⁵

One does not have to subscribe to the author's political perspective to recognize the import of the ideological factor in the situation. As the Kurdish insurgency is played out against the backdrop of the Iran-Iraq war, a Turkish involvement in the affairs of the region could kindle the underlying ideological discord between Iran and Turkey, so far skillfully masked. When Osmanoglu speaks of a Turkey which has "lost its Islamic moorings," or argues that "the expansion of the secularist Turkish state in the Middle East will retard the process of Islamic self-assertion," his statements, whether accurate or not, highlight the ideological incongruity between Shi'a fundamentalism and Kemalist Westernism.

On 8 January 1987, President Evren issued a grim warning about the "mounting threat of Islamic fundamentalism inside Turkey."⁵⁶ The President and his fellow generals had decided that the infiltration of the state administration, in particular the educational system, must be stopped. Though it was the "headscarf issue"—whether female students should be allowed to wear headscarves on campus—which seemed to have captured the public attention, Evren and the generals had more reason to be alarmed by the infiltration of the armed forces. Evren disclosed that nearly 100 cadets had recently been expelled from the military academies for their Islamic leanings.

Compounding the issue is the fact that the army, which sees itself as the custodian of the Kemalist tradition, and the Motherland Party government do not see eye-to-eye on this issue. Whereas Prime Minister Ozal, a devout Moslem known to have been sympathetic to the National Salvation Party during the 1970s (his brother Korkut was a leading member of NSP), views "Islamic extremism" as a "potential" threat, the generals see it as an "immediate one, more dangerous than communism or neo-fascist nationalism."⁵⁷ There are those who argue that, while the army was busy suppressing those ideologies during the 1980-1983 period, "Islamic fundamentalists filled the ideological vacuum on the campuses."⁵⁸

Developments such as these have clearly affected relations with Iran. The Iranian government has served notice that the tenor of relations between the two countries would depend on Turkey's "respect for Islamic values."⁵⁹ Coming at a time when there is increasing concern about the politicization of religion around the country, a public lecture from Iran about "respect for Islamic values" cannot be what Turkey's generals want to hear, especially when there is mounting evidence that the Iranian government has been actively encouraging these trends by providing financial support to Islamist groups and engaging in propaganda activities. There is also increasing concern about the activities of the Iranian refugee population in Turkey. It now appears that Turkey might well have been designated as a combat zone between anti-Khomeini groups and Iranian government agents. A recent incident in which an opponent of the Iranian regime was gunned down in Istanbul may presage things to come.

Arguably the most telling development on the political front has been Speaker Rafsanjani's statements, reported in the Turkish press, that an Islamic revolution would soon take place in Turkey. To this a Turkish government spokesman responded: "The Turkish government is determined to implement secularism within the framework of democracy and does not need lessons from anyone on this subject."⁶⁰

PORTENTS FOR THE FUTURE

To reiterate what has been established so far: there is an increasing linkage between the Iran-Iraq war and the Kurdish insurgencies in Iran, Iraq and Turkey. Iran seems to have turned the Kurdish factor to its advantage, much like the pre-1975 situation. The developments on the Kurdish front, which are clearly hurting Iraq, have now started to pose a threat to Turkey as well, and an adversarial situation is developing between Turkey and Iran. It could be said that the scenario of an autonomous Kurdish entity to be instituted in the aftermath of an Iraqi defeat, whether it be under Iran's tutelage or merely indebted to it, must be quite worrisome for Turkey. "Iran's fresh gains in its war against Baghdad and the possibility of the establishment of an autonomous Kurdish state in northern Iraq adjacent to Turkey's mainly Kurdish-populated eastern and southeastern region [are sending] shock waves through Ankara,"⁶¹ an observer notes.

If such an eventuality comes to pass, Turkey will find itself facing the dual challenge of Kurdish insurgency *and* Islamic resurgence (quite a potent combination) along its southern border. The question is whether the Turkish generals, who are thought to have the last say in matters of such strategic import, will be sufficiently alarmed by that scenario to try and pre-empt it. Recent publicity given to the massacres of villagers by PKK guerrillas is viewed by some as indication that the Turkish public is being readied for more dramatic action by the Turkish army.

While it is true to say that the PKK, and its armed wing, the Kurdish National Liberation Front, cannot be considered in the same league as KDP or PUK in terms of numbers or organization, and their tactics of

indiscriminate killing of civilians for purposes of intimidation may backfire upon them, they are considered a potential threat by the Turkish authorities. That has less to do with what they might be able to achieve on their own and more to do with the dangers inherent in their actual or possible linkages with other Kurdish factions and/or regional powers. PKK is known to be operating out of Syria, which gives the issue yet another dimension. If reports of Kurdish insurgents in Turkey receiving their arms through the Iranian conduit are true, this could further complicate the already strained relations between Iran and Turkey.⁶²

“Whipping up your neighbour’s Kurds is an old Middle East game, in which Iran has recently been on a winning streak,”⁶³ *The Economist* observes, with its customary muted sardonic style. The statement is a succinct one and may have the added advantage of being true.⁶¹ The author’s research has consistently indicated, however, that players in the Middle East are notoriously averse to sitting at the losing end of the table for long stretches of time.

Endnotes

* This is a revised version of a paper presented to the CPSA Annual Meeting in Hamilton, Ontario, June 6-8, 1987.

1. Stephen Pelletiere, *The Kurds: An Unstable Element in the Gulf* (Boulder, Colorado: Westview Press, 1984), p. 23.
2. Both are Aryans, speaking a language of the Indo-European group, though the two languages are not mutually intelligible.
3. Pelletiere, p. 32ff.
4. *Ibid.*, p. 33.
5. *Ibid.*, p. 34.
6. Carl Brown, *International Politics in the Middle East* (Princeton, New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 1984). See the introductory chapter in particular.
7. Pelletiere, p. 46.
8. *Ibid.*, p. 50.
9. *Ibid.*
10. See J.M. Abdulghani, *Iraq and Iran: The Years of Crisis* (London: Croom Helm, 1984), p. 131.
11. Cited in Pelletiere, p. 57. Also see Edmund Ghareeb, *The Kurdish Question in Iraq* (Syracuse: Syracuse University Press, 1981), pp. 6-7.
12. Abdulghani, pp. 131-132.
13. For an overview of the rise and demise of the Mahabad Republic see Pelletiere, pp. 99-114. See also Ghareeb, pp. 11-12.
14. *The Kurdish Question*, p. 12.
15. *The Kurds*, p. 116.
16. *The Kurdish Question*, p. 38.
17. Pelletiere, p. 126.
18. *Ibid.*, p. 129.
19. Cited in Abdulghani, p. 133.

20. Pelletiere, p. 164.
21. Ghareeb, p. 76.
22. Cited in Ghareeb, p. 108.
23. See Abdulghani, pp. 137-138.
24. *New York Times*, April 1, 1974. The extent of the Iranian, American and Israeli involvement with Barzani has been extensively documented. See Abdulghani, pp. 139-147; and Ghareeb, pp. 131-146.
25. For a penetrating analysis of the U.S. role see Pelletiere, pp. 167-176.
26. *Ibid.*, p. 169.
27. *The Kurds*, p. 170.
28. Pelletiere, p. 179. Pelletiere adds that "in specific instances [Barzani] may even have cooperated with SAVAK" to achieve the suppression of the Iranian Kurdish movement. Ghareeb points out that "the leadership of the Iranian KDP differed markedly from that of the Iraq KDP. While the Barzani leadership depended on tribal loyalty, the Iranian leadership depended on intellectuals and enjoyed the backing of urban dwellers and peasants" (p. 14).
29. *Ibid.*, p. 183.
30. *Ibid.*, p. 184.
31. *Ibid.*, p. 187.
32. *Ibid.*
33. *Ibid.* There are widely varying estimates of the Kurdish populations and their distribution across countries. Stephen Pelletiere estimates there to be 7-7.5 million Kurds. D.A. Schmidt, *New York Times* reporter, estimates around 2 million Kurds in Iraq, 4-5 million in Turkey, 3 million in Iran, around 300,000 in Syria and about 175,000 in the USSR—around 10 million all told. These are considered conservative estimates. In a recent *New York Times* article (May 17, 1987), Alan Cowell estimated the numbers to be: 3.5 million in Iraq ("one-quarter of the population"), 5.5 million in Iran, and 8-10 million in Turkey. Part of the problem lies in establishing precise ethnic identities in the areas in question.
34. Fahir Armaoglu, "Iran Konusu [On Iran]," *Tercuman*, November 5, 1986, p. 4.
35. John Sigler, "The Iran-Iraq conflict: The tragedy of limited conventional war," *International Journal* (Spring 1986), p. 445.
36. Talat Halman, "Seytan in Sisesi [Satan's Bottle]," *Milliyet*, November 17, 1986, p. 10.
37. Iqbal Asaria, "The Final Throes?," *Afkar-Inquiry*, February 1987, p. 7.
38. "Opposition Regroups," *Afkar-Inquiry*, February 1987, p. 9.
39. *Ibid.*, p. 8.
40. *Ibid.*
41. Asaria, p. 7.
42. *Ibid.*
43. Zubaida Umar, "The Forgotten Minority: The Turkomans of Iraq," *Afkar-Inquiry*, February 1987, p. 37.
44. *Tercuman*, October 10, 1986, p. 7.
45. "The Kurds: The Gulf's other war," *South*, October 1986, p. 17.
46. *Ibid.*, p. 18.
47. *Kayhan*, November 1, 1986, p. 1.
48. *South*, p. 18.
49. *Ibid.*

50. *Kayhan*, November 29, 1986, p. 1.
51. *Kayhan*, November 8, 1986, p. 1.
52. *Globe and Mail*, March 5, 1986. Under a 1984 agreement Iraq allows Turkey "hot pursuit rights" up to ten kilometers into Iraqi territory.
53. *Ibid.*
54. *South*, p. 18.
55. Mehmet Osmanoglu, "What Future for Iraq," *Afkar-Inquiry*, February 1987, p. 52.
56. *The Economist*, January 17, 1987, p. 54.
57. *Ibid.*
58. *Ibid.*
59. *Ibid.*
60. Cited in Emin Aker, "Constrained Diplomacy," *Afkar-Inquiry*, April 1987, p. 16.
61. *Ibid.*
62. *New York Times*, May 17, 1987, p. 10.
63. *Ibid.*, June 13, 1987, p. 44.
64. Henry Kissinger is commonly cited as being the source of the statement, "It is diplomatically correct, and may have the added advantage of being true."