

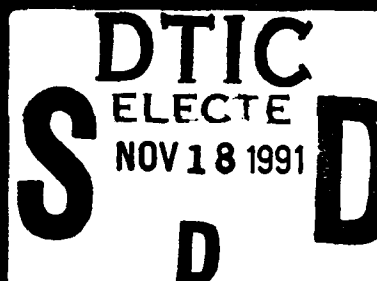
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**THE KURDS AND THEIR AGAS:  
An Assessment of the Situation  
in Northern Iraq**



**Stephen C. Pelletiere**



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**Stephen C. Pelletiere**

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Comments pertaining to this report are invited and should be forwarded to: Director, Strategic Studies Institute, U.S. Army War College, Carlisle Barracks, PA 17013-5050. Comments also may be conveyed directly to the author by calling commercial (717)245-3234 or AUTOVON 242-3234.

## FOREWORD

In the bloody aftermath of Operation Desert Storm hundreds of thousands of Kurds left their homes in northern Iraq seeking refuge in Turkey and Iran. It fell to the U.S. military to coax them back and protect those who feared for their safety. Operation Provide Comfort has now been succeeded by Provide Comfort II, with the U.S. military still heavily involved.

This report documents the recent history of the Kurds, and gives a rundown on the power relations among the various groups in Kurdish society. At the same time, it warns our officers of possible dangers growing out of their mission, and suggests that the overall problem of the Kurds is much more explosive than the benign accounts appearing in the media would lead one to believe.



KARL W. ROBINSON  
Colonel, U.S. Army  
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DR. STEPHEN C. PELLETIERE is a National Security Affairs Analyst at the Strategic Studies Institute, U.S. Army War College. He received his Ph.D. in Political Science from the University of California, Berkeley, in 1978. He is the author of the books, *The Kurds: An Unstable Element in the Persian Gulf*, and soon to be published *Chaos in a Vacuum: The Iran-Iraq War*. Additionally, he is coauthor of the Strategic Studies Institute reports, *Iraqi Power and U.S. Security in the Middle East* and *Lessons Learned: The Iran-Iraq War*.

## SUMMARY

This study about the Kurds attempts to show that the United States, by becoming involved with these people, is running an enormous risk. The individuals directing U.S. policy on the issue apparently misperceive the nature of Kurdish society, and this is potentially a dangerous situation.

The Kurds are prone to violence.<sup>1</sup> Only a firm hand can restrain their wilder spirits and at present there is no such responsible authority to guide them. The leaders they have are mostly feudal lords, so-called *agas*,<sup>2</sup> who are primarily interested in smuggling and exploiting the *miskin*,<sup>3</sup> landless Kurdish peasants.

The *agas* now are attempting to ingratiate themselves with the U.S. military in the hope that the American presence, or threat thereof, will open up the area to their illegal operations. Disappointed, they could cease cooperating with us, or worse turn hostile.

There exists alongside the *agas* another category of leaders, politicians like Massoud Barzani and Jalal Talabani. The influence of this latter group is overrated by U.S. policymakers, and even more by the media which has portrayed them as men of the people. In fact, whatever influence they may have had, has long been lost.

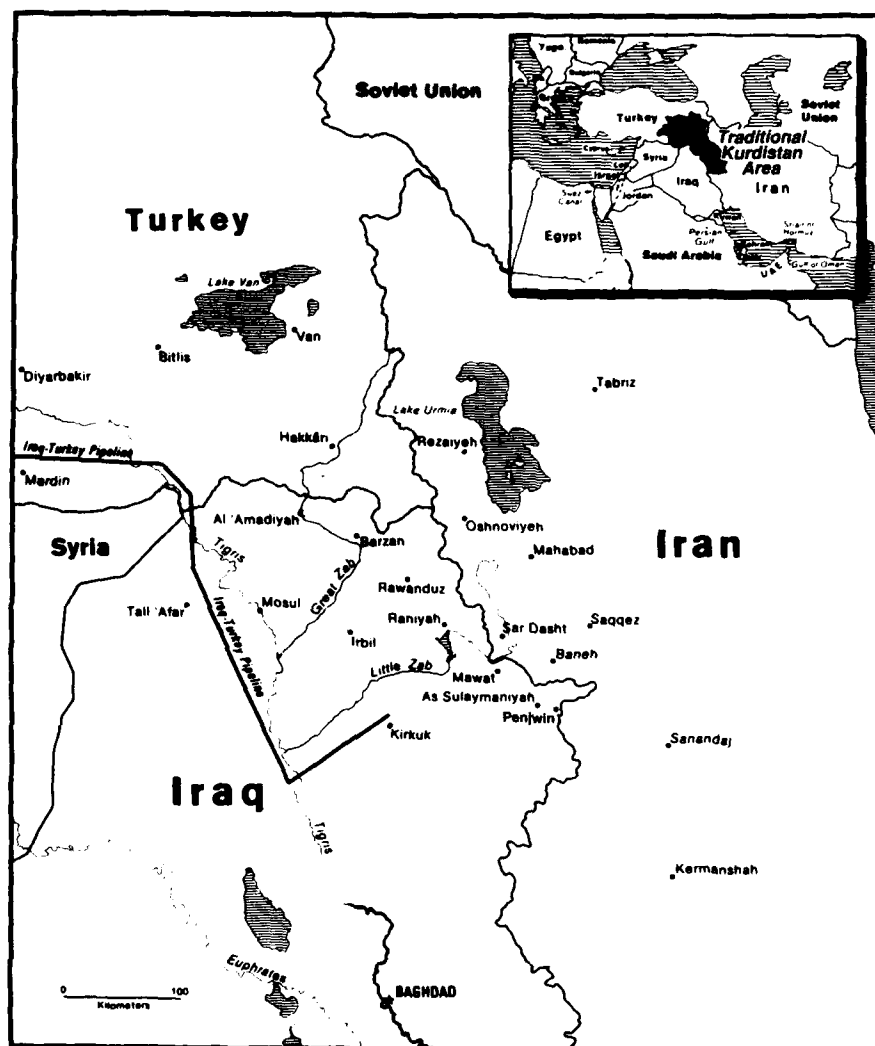
An active political movement did formerly exist among the Kurds, attempting to institute land reforms in the Kurdish area. That movement expired in the mid-1960s. Mulla Mustafa Barzani—Massoud's father—killed it by handing it over to the *agas*.

Today the movement survives on assistance from interests seeking to topple Iraq's present leadership. In effect, the movement's leaders function as paymasters between the foreigners and the Kurdish fighters, the so-called *pesh merga*.<sup>4</sup>

The study concludes with an assessment of the current negotiations among Barzani, Talabani and Saddam Husayn,

and warns that—on the basis of what has so far been revealed—the U. S. military could become involved with the Kurds for some time to come.





**Figure 1. Traditional Kurdistan Area.**

# THE KURDS AND THEIR AGAS

## Introduction.

Within the Middle East the Kurds have the reputation of being desperate characters, inveterate disturbers of the peace, and not at all reliable to deal with. On three occasions since World War II they have caused major disruptions in the region, one of which threatened world stability.<sup>5</sup>

Yet figures within the Administration and Congress make them out to be victims, an odd designation for a people who are probably among the greatest victimizers in history. The Kurds—at the behest of Sultan Abdul Hamid in the late 19th century—slaughtered the Armenians.<sup>6</sup> They similarly massacred the Assyrian Christians in the 1920s.<sup>7</sup> Their record going back centuries is replete with such atrocities.

To be sure, the Kurds are not always the aggressors. They frequently have been aggressed against, principally by the Greeks,<sup>8</sup> the Mongols, the Turks, the Persians and most recently by the Arabs. By and large, however, they have managed to repulse such assaults, usually by their own prowess.

Why, then, are these people—who have proved so resolute over so many years—now perceived to be in need of international protection? And why is the remedy that is being promoted for them one that is patently unworkable? The British seem to be maneuvering toward establishment of an independent Kurdish entity in northern Iraq,<sup>9</sup> a way, they apparently believe, of removing the Kurds from the grip of their enemies, the Ba'thists.<sup>10</sup>

Such an entity would have to be administered by the Kurds, which is an impossibility. The very qualities that have enabled the Kurds to survive for centuries make it virtually certain they cannot rule themselves. The Kurds, as a group, are ungovernable, even by leaders they themselves have chosen. Thus all of this current agitation for Kurdish "statehood" must be seen to be misguided.

This study assumes that such wrong views as this need to be corrected, if we are to avoid future dangerous entanglements and, hopefully, disentangle ourselves from this present involvement. The audience for the study is the U.S. military, which at present is personally involved with the Kurds, and most needful of advice. Since it is a military-oriented study, it says nothing about the human rights implications of the problem. We focus almost exclusively on security related matters. In the section that follows, for instance, we examine the careers of Mulla Mustafa Barzani and Jalal Talabani, two men who more than any others have led the fight of the Kurds against the Ba'thists. They devised the tactics the movement employs and they also set the goals to which it aspires.

In the third section we examine the *agas*, whom we believe are the real powers among the Kurds. We discuss the basis of the *agas'* power, and their attitudes toward the central government and toward land reform, the latter, in our view, being the crucial problem affecting Kurdish society.

Next we discuss the recent revolt of the Kurds after the Kuwait invasion. This episode was badly reported in the media, with the result that months afterward it is difficult to sort out what actually occurred. Yet it is essential to gain understanding, inasmuch as it throws considerable light on the resolution of the Kurdish question.

The fifth section deals with the negotiations currently taking place between the Kurdish political leaders and Saddam Husayn's government. If reporting of the revolt was badly handled, media coverage of the negotiations has been far worse. The media has treated the talks as though they were of no consequence, and has taken the position that nothing is likely to come of them. On the contrary, we believe the negotiations are being conducted in earnest and any outcome is possible.

After that we assess the overall Kurdish situation. It is our belief that the Kurdish "national" movement is deadlocked, if indeed it is not moribund. And we explain what the consequences of this may be for U.S. policy.

Finally we take up the future involvement of the United States and the Kurds, and here we make some specific suggestions as to how best to proceed.

In putting this study together, I relied on my own long experience with the Kurds. I was one of the first newsmen in the 1960s to journey to Kurdistan to interview Mulla Mustafa Barzani, a trip that many journalists have taken since.<sup>11</sup> As I was one of the first to investigate the movement, I feel I have more perspective on it than most—a great deal that reporters writing today take for granted, I long ago began to question. As a result, I have relied upon my personal expertise and experience as lenses through which to filter recent events. Media reports have been useful to the extent that they provide the factual basis for analysis, and classified sources have provided additional facts and some useful political analysis.

Finally, in this study, I deal almost exclusively with the movement in Iraq. There was a politically active group working for Kurdish rights in Iran, but it was destroyed by Massoud Barzani and Iran's Revolutionary Guards in the early 1980s (see below). A Turkish-Kurdish party also is struggling to make its way; however it is small, and not at all influential. At any rate, the U.S. military is mainly going to be dealing with the Iraqi Kurds, and so it seems correct to focus on them.

### **Background to a Movement.**

The single most important event in recent Kurdish history was the appearance after World War II of Mulla Mustafa Barzani as an opponent of the Iraqi government. The veteran guerrilla chief single-handedly publicized the Kurdish cause in interviews with Western journalists.

At the same time, he remained curiously closed-mouthed about himself, and as a consequence there is not much reliable information about him. We know that he was an *aga*. Not wealthy, as most *agas* tend to be; Mulla Mustafa's tribe, the Barzanis, was small, and situated originally in one of the stoniest, most barren areas of Kurdistan. However wealth does not determine status among the Kurds. Barzani was a tribal chief, therefore an *aga*.<sup>12</sup>

We stress Barzani's tribal character, because, as we intend to develop later, this is crucial to understanding the movement. The Kurdish movement has come to grief largely because of internal tensions—tensions generated by the clash of old and new ideas. Barzani most definitely stood for the old ways.

The Barzani tribe came into being in the early 19th century as a result of a religious revival. A local shaykh, setting himself up as a Sufi mystic, drew large numbers of Kurds under his influence, and subsequently expanded his *tariqa* into a tribe.<sup>13</sup>

As the tribe grew, it absorbed larger and larger tracts of land, and in the process excited the envy of more powerful neighbors. Ultimately, it was forced to fight for survival against these neighbors, who eventually drove it into exile; thus the Barzanis departed Iraq en masse for Iran.

This is another fact that needs to be underscored—that the tribe was dispossessed of its land. We will see that much of its subsequent activity is taken up with trying to get that land back. Even today, if we try to predict what the Barzanis will do, we have only to ask, how does the particular crisis with which they are involved relate to their land quest?

Ordinarily, we might have supposed that the tribe, once dispossessed, would be scattered. And by rights it should have been, but for a combination of fortuitous circumstances—the Barzanis left Iraq in 1945, going directly to Iran, which at the time was undergoing extraordinary changes.

The Soviets had occupied the northern half of the country during World War II, and under the aegis of the occupier two breakaway republics had formed, one of which—the so-called Mahabad Republic—comprised Iranian Kurds.<sup>14</sup> The Barzanis attached themselves to this entity, defending it against attempts by the Shah to repossess it.<sup>15</sup>

Owing to strong pressure from the United States, the Soviets ultimately withdrew their support of the Mahabad Republic, bringing about its collapse.<sup>16</sup> A number of the Republic's leaders were hung by the Shah's forces. Mulla Mustafa, however, refused to lay down his arms, and, leading

several hundred of his tribesmen, he trekked to the Soviet Union, a journey of several hundred kilometers which he accomplished in a matter of days.<sup>17</sup>

The Barzanis stayed in Russia for 11 years. Mulla Mustafa became a general in the Russian army; his men attended Russian schools and a number married Russian women.<sup>18</sup> They made no move to settle down permanently, and in 1958 all but a handful announced their intent to return to Iraq.

In 1958, conditions inside Iraq had undergone revolutionary change. King Faisal, the country's ruler, had been overthrown in a coup and subsequently murdered, along with a number of his ministers. The coup leader, Abdul Karim Kassem, after initially espousing the cause of Arab nationalism, drifted far to the left, until ultimately his mainstay became the Iraqi Communist Party.<sup>19</sup> Kassem's extreme leftist stance aroused sharp antagonism from Iraq's Arab nationalist politicians, who conspired against him. Consequently he welcomed the offer of the Barzanis to repatriate, seeing them as natural allies along with the Communists. It is not known whether the Soviets instigated the Barzanis' decision to return, but certainly the move produced an outcome favorable to them—Kassem edged closer to the Soviets after this.

In 1963, the Ba'thists—Iraq's current rulers—overthrew Kassem, after which they massacred the Communists in one of the more bloody purges in Middle East history. Revenging themselves on the Barzanis proved a less easy matter since they were barely accessible, tucked away in the mountain fastness of their tribal home. The Barzanis held out against the Ba'thists, and when the latter were overthrown—after only 9 months of rule—by General Abdul Salem Aref, who also tried to suppress the Barzanis, the tribe stood up to these assaults as well.

Finally in 1968, the Ba'thists took power a second time, again through a military-led coup. The principal figure in this second Ba'thist government was Saddam Husayn, the power behind Ba'thist president, Ahmad Hassen Baker. Under Baker, the Iraqi army resumed its vendetta against the Barzanis.

For months the Ba'thists hammered away at the Barzanis, seeking to subdue them to no avail. Finally Saddam—professing disgust at the inability of his army to conquer—unilaterally called a halt to its operations, and invited the Barzanis to parley. The ensuing peace talks produced the 1970 autonomy agreement whereby the northern region of Iraq was declared an autonomous zone, within which the Kurds were to enjoy a measure of self-rule.

Had the autonomy agreement come into being, Kurdish society would then have been revolutionized—the accord contained a provision that land reform, promulgated earlier throughout central and southern Iraq by the Arab nationalists, would be extended to the Kurdish areas as well. This would have stripped the *agas* of their hold over the society. The agreement did not survive, however, in part because of the activities of the Shah of Iran. The Shah—wishing to weaken the Ba'thists—prevailed upon Mulla Mustafa to repudiate the autonomy agreement. He promised Barzani cash and weapons from the United States, which then-President Nixon pledged to supply through the Central Intelligence Agency.<sup>20</sup>

In order to preserve his tribe, Barzani returned to the offensive, thus recommencing what by now was seen as the endless war of the Kurds against the Iraqis. This time, however, even with the aid of the United States and the Shah, Barzani found that he could not withstand the Ba'thists.<sup>21</sup> The latter quickly took back all but a small portion of the territory the Kurds had previously conquered. By 1975 the tribe once more was on the verge of being driven into exile.

At this point, Saddam made an overture to the Shah, offering to cede bits of Iraqi territory that the Shah coveted, on condition that he abandon his Kurdish surrogates. There appears to be no mystery why Saddam made this offer—he wanted to exploit the rise in oil prices following the 1973 Arab-Israeli War. As prices shot up, Saddam saw an opportunity to invest in infrastructure; continued expenditures for suppressing the Kurdish revolt were counterproductive.

As for the Shah's reasons for accepting Saddam's offer, they are less clear. He certainly shared Saddam's desire to

exploit the opportunities presented by the rise in oil prices. But, beyond that, he had other reasons for going along, namely, his policy on the Kurds was becoming more and more risky and he needed to change course. Once Barzani Mulla Mustafa failed to hold his own against the Ba'thists, the possibility then arose of the Iranians having to aid him directly. Were that to occur, the Shah's foreign policy would be adversely affected; at the time he was cultivating the moderate Arab states of Saudi Arabia and Egypt. Open war between Tehran and Baghdad would be viewed, in the Arabs' eyes, as a war of Iran against the Arab nation. The Shah's opening to the moderates could not have survived such a perception. Hence, he grabbed at the opportunity to cut his involvement with the Kurds. A deal was struck, and the Barzani revolt expired. The Barzanis fled en masse to Iran, as they had done in the early 1940s, and there they remained until the coming of Khomeini.<sup>22</sup>

For the Barzanis, their career had come full circle. They had begun their exile by emigrating to Iran where, in effect, they took service with the Soviets, supporting a break-away Iranian Kurdish republic against the Shah. Thirty years later they were back in Iran, under the Shah's protection, having involved themselves in an ill-starred CIA operation to destabilize the regime of the Iraqi Ba'thists.

This was a rather tragic way to end up, and certainly for Mulla Mustafa it was an embittering experience. He died shortly after this in Walter Reed Hospital, where he had been brought by friends in the United States. Nonetheless, Barzani was a success in one way—he kept his tribe together. When one reviews the vicissitudes that the tribe suffered, it is remarkable that it endured. We have to assume that Barzani was the cause of this. There is an irony here, however, which we intend to develop when we discuss the career of Jalal Talabani. Barzani, to preserve his tribe, had virtually wrecked the Kurdish movement.

We want now to look at the activity of the Barzanis in the Iran-Iraq War. They were a leading catalyst of that war, inasmuch as it was Khomeini's decision to employ them as mercenaries against Iraq that in part inclined the Ba'thists to start the conflict.



Khomeini's revolution was not a benign one, its primary aim being to export Shia Islam throughout the Middle East by conquest. Moreover, the clerics meant to score their first military success against Iraq, which has the largest Shia community outside Iran.<sup>23</sup> Had the Khomeinists been able to conquer it, they then might have spread with relative ease throughout the Arabian peninsula.

As a prelude to initiating war against Iraq, Khomeini in the late 1970s subsidized the Barzanis to undertake guerrilla raids into Iraqi Kurdistan. The Ba'thists warned Khomeini to desist, and when he did not, they in turn subsidized Iranian Kurds to fight Tehran.

There are about 4 million Kurds in Iran.<sup>24</sup> In the first days of the anti-Shah uprising, they joined the revolt of the clerics. However, once that revolt succeeded, the clerics turned on their erstwhile allies, sending Revolutionary Guards into the northwest to disarm them. The Kurds resisted, and thus Iranian Kurdistan became the scene of an active anti-Khomeini revolt. Khomeini in 1983 determined to crush this insurrection, and tapped as his principal agent for this Massoud Barzani, son of Mulla Mustafa, who had succeeded to the leadership of the tribe after his father's death. As conceived, the plan called first for destroying the Iranian Kurds' revolt after which Revolutionary Guards and the Barzanis would launch an invasion of Iraqi Kurdistan. Massoud saw this as a way of regaining his tribal land and agreed to cooperate.

In the spring of 1983, the Barzanis, backed by Iran's Revolutionary Guards, destroyed the Iranian Kurdish nationalist movement.<sup>25</sup> The Iranians then commenced their invasion of Iraq at Hajj Umran (see Figure 2), using the Barzanis as the spearhead of the attack. The guerrillas, knowing the area intimately, outmaneuvered the Ba'thists, softening them up for attacks by the Revolutionary Guardsmen.

The Hajj Umran engagement went on for weeks, and although the Iranians ultimately were repulsed, they nonetheless retained a sliver of Iraqi territory, which Massoud expected to be handed over to him. How dismayed was he,



Figure 2. Northern Iraq.

then, when the clerics awarded it instead to the Supreme Council of Islamic Revolution in Iraq (SCIRI), an Iranian-sponsored front of Iraqi dissident groups, almost all of which were fundamentalist Shias.

This was a serious rebuff. To a people like the Kurds—for whom honor is a grave matter—the award of Hajj Umran to non-combatant Shias was a mortal insult. Barzani drew apart from his Iranian patrons to review his position. It was during this black period that he conceived a plan for ending his exclusive dependency on the Iranians.

### **The Syrian Connection.**

Barzani determined to form an association with Hafez Al Assad, the president of Syria, at the time allied with Iran against Iraq. A separate alliance with the Syrians, Barzani believed, would give him leverage against his Iranian patrons; he could play one off against the other.

Syria was then sponsoring a group called the Patriotic National Front (JWD), made up of secular Iraqi opposition groups, the principal member of which was Iraq's Communist Party, along with the party's surrogate, the Kurdish Socialist Party (KSP).

Syria supported Iran in its war against Iraq, but it does not follow that the Syrians supported the Islamic Revolution. In ideological terms, Syria and Iran have little in common. Syria is a secular state; Iran is religious. Iran's aim—to spread Islamic fundamentalism throughout the Middle East—is anathema to the Syrians. Damascus particularly fears the creation of a puppet government in Iraq beholden to the clerics. To guard against this, it created the JWD, by which means it hoped to dominate the Iraqi opposition—at the very least to offset the activity of Iranian-sponsored Iraqi groups like SCIRI.

Thus, Assad proposed that the Barzanis join the JWD, a move that could benefit Syria substantially, since Barzani had bases inside Iraq which the JWD fighters could exploit. (In the process of participating in the Hajj Umran invasion, he had penetrated deep into Iraq to set up these bases along the Turkish border.)

Assad's idea was to open up Barzani's enclave to the various organizations that Damascus supported. Iraqi dissidents comprised most of these, but one he intended to install there was the Kurdish Workers Party (PKK).<sup>26</sup> The PKK is a terrorist organization which had been active inside Turkey in the 1960s. Expelled by the Turkish army, it sought refuge in Syria, where, in effect, it languished, unable to regain access to Turkish territory.

Barzani's enclave was a natural for the PKK fighters, situated as it was directly adjacent to the southeast of Turkey

where the majority of Turkey's ten million Kurds are concentrated.

Barzani agreed to sponsor the PKK, even though in so doing he broke a standing rule of his father; Mulla Mustafa regarded cooperation with Turkish dissident groups as unthinkable, knowing this would alienate him from the Turkish army.<sup>27</sup> As long as Mulla Mustafa held sway in northeast Iraq, he closed the border to groups like the PKK. Massoud's decision to renege on his father's pledge brought immediate adverse results.

In the summer of 1984—one of the most crucial periods of the Iran-Iraq War—PKK guerrillas conducted deep penetration raids into Turkey, using Barzani's base as a staging ground. For several days they wreaked havoc, shooting up police posts and holding large numbers of Turkish villagers hostage.

The Turkish army—as could have been expected—was outraged; particularly as there had been no significant guerrilla activity in the Kurdish region for several years. Immediately, the army acted, but not as Barzani—or for that matter Assad—might have expected. A deal was struck between Baghdad and Ankara whereby Ankara received permission to conduct hot pursuit raids against the PKK guerrillas inside Iraq.

Now it was Iran's turn to show consternation. It had been trying to ratchet up activity inside the Iraqi Kurdish region, with the aim of turning the area into a second front against Baghdad. The Turkish raids frustrated this strategy.<sup>28</sup> Periodically after this—whenever Kurdish depredations grew too intense—the Turks would sweep across the border to comb the mountains for guerrillas, operations that permitted Iraq to draw down forces in the north, thus bolstering its southern defense around Basrah. We regard this setback of the Iranians and the Barzanis as one of the more significant developments of the war. After this the Kurdish resistance went nowhere. Barzani repeatedly spoke of the great feats that he would perform as soon as Iran opened the second front. Veteran observers of the war knew, however, that no such front would materialize as long as the Turks kept the clamps on.<sup>29</sup>

At the same time, however, the Barzanis were making some progress. They had gone from conducting fedayeen-type raids across the Iranian border at the outset of the war to operating from easily defensible bases inside the country. This, strategically, was an advance.

We will now turn our attention to the other significant actor in the movement, Jalal Talabani.

### **The Appearance of the Ideologue.**

Politically speaking, the alpha and omega of the Kurdish movement are Masoud Barzani and Jalal Talabani. Where Barzani represents a strong traditional, tribal current, Talabani embodies its more modern, ideological trend. Instead of functioning at the tribal level, Talabani consistently has worked through political organizations, the most important of which is the Kurdish Democratic Party (KDP).

Talabani originally was Mulla Mustafa's chief lieutenant. A city-bred, university-educated Kurd, he had little in common with the veteran guerrilla fighter. Indeed, Talabani began his career in politics opposing Mulla Mustafa, although not literally so. As a student, he opposed the "aga-mentality" that Mulla Mustafa represented.<sup>30</sup>

Kurdish society, as depicted in the Western media, is presumably structured along tribal lines. In fact, the old tribalism of the Kurds was crushed long ago by the British. Here, we are referring to the system of fighting tribes, who owned their land communally. The British broke down the concept of communality by legally conveying all tribal property to the chiefs.<sup>31</sup>

This made the chiefs wealthy—exceptionally so, in some instances—but it also changed the character of Kurdish society. In effect, it degenerated into a caste system. At the apex of the system are the *agas*, and supporting them are tribal elements who function as their guards. Together these two groups make up a single warrior caste.<sup>32</sup>

Talabani concluded early on that as long as the *agas* and their guards dominated Kurdish life, it would remain backward. In cooperation with another, similarly persuaded Kurdish

leader, Ibrahim Ahmed, he strove—in the period of the 1950s and 1960s—to found a Kurdish political party, the KDP, which would enroll Kurds of all strata, including the *maskin*. He hoped to forge his party into an effective instrument for restructuring Kurdish society.

The KDP's chief attraction to the *maskin* was its position on social issues. Arab nationalist leaders like Iraq's first republican president, Abdul Karim Kassem, had, by pushing land reform, destroyed the old aristocracy of landed wealth everywhere in Iraq. However, with one small exception, it had not affected the Kurdish areas, where the aristocratic *agas* held out against it.

Around Sulamaniya, where the KDP was strong, the land reform had penetrated, with the KDP's blessing; this, naturally, alienated the party from the *agas*. As a consequence, the KDP found itself blocked from extending its influence wherever the *agas* and their partisans were entrenched.

The party needed a strong resource, which ultimately was supplied by the agreement of Barzani, in the early 1960s, to become its president. We do not know why he took this step, although importuning by Kassem may have been a factor.<sup>33</sup> At any rate, the party leaders—Talabani and Ahmad—were pleased to have him, as Barzani's tribesmen gave the party muscle it badly needed. At the same time, the party leaders expected Barzani to stay in the background, leaving the direction of affairs to them. This was a miscalculation.

It was not long before Barzani had taken over the KDP, installing his fighters in various positions, in effect, packing the membership. Moreover, he so structured the ruling council of the party—the Politburo—that the *agas*, who previously had been excluded from the party, gained some influence within it.<sup>34</sup>

This led to a break between the original Politburo members and Barzani. He drove Ahmad and Talabani and their adherents out of Iraq to Iran, where they sought refuge.<sup>35</sup> Barzani, however, kept the title of KDP president, and continued to portray himself as the leader of a bona fide political movement. In fact, after this the movement turned into a

one-man show. Barzani dominated it, and as for the KDP, it became a cipher. It no longer did any political work among the Kurdish people, although Mulla Mustafa's lieutenants disguised this fact. On trips to Europe and the United States, they played up the deep political commitment of their leader. However, his commitment was virtually nil.

Indeed, Barzani's autocratic tendencies were given further play when Talabani and Ahmad went over to the side of the Ba'thists, leaving the Kurdish movement solely in his hands. The renegades actually for a time engaged in armed clashes with Barzani's supporters.

Then in 1970 Saddam came forward with his offer of an autonomy accord. It was obvious the Iraqi ruler was anxious to put the Kurdish problem behind him. In part this was motivated by a desire to get the economy moving. But along with that, he had a personal consideration of wanting to embarrass Iraq's military leaders. Saddam is not a military man, and thus must fear a revolt of the officers against him. By insisting on a political solution to the Kurdish problem, he underscored the military's failure.

Since Saddam was so anxious for a solution, it made sense for Barzani to strike a deal quickly. And yet the Kurdish leader agreed to a provision whereby the agreement would not take effect for 4 years. This delay was regarded as necessary to clear up unresolved details, including a decision on the status of Kirkuk, a city which both sides claimed. It was agreed that a census would be conducted to determine the city's ethnic composition.<sup>36</sup>

Ibrahim Ahmad blasted Barzani for agreeing to this delay. In Ahmad's eyes the status of Kirkuk wasn't worth holding up a deal that gave the Kurds more than they had ever obtained from the government. The Ba'thists were willing to concede that the Kurds were a people, something no Middle East state had ever done.

Along with this, Baghdad was going to allow the Kurds to speak their own language; indeed Kurdish was to become one of two official languages with Arabic. A specific sum of money was to be allotted to rebuilding the north. A number of Kurdish

leaders were to be brought into the government. The Vice President of Iraq was to be a Kurd. Why, Ahmad demanded, with such payoffs in the offing did Barzani agree to a 4 year hiatus before the accord became law?

It is our belief that Barzani was put off by a provision of the accord calling for the application of land reform in the Kurdish region.<sup>37</sup> Barzani could not have welcomed this provision. After all, he had just quarreled with and driven from the ranks of his party the political spirits, men like Talabani and Ahmad. If he now agreed to institute the land reform, he would alienate the *agas*, as well. It seems likely that he temporized, fearing to affix his name to a document that would revolutionize property relations among the Kurdish people.

If our interpretation is correct, this explains why he eventually agreed to support the Shah's scheme to resume the revolt. In effect, it let him off the hook. It enabled Barzani to avoid having to take a stand on land reform, while perpetuating his image as a fighter for Kurdish rights. Nonetheless by avoiding the issue he finished the movement off entirely. Land reform was the sum and substance of the Kurds' struggle. It provided the focus for all the actions undertaken in their name; it defined the nature of Kurdish society that would come into being once autonomy was achieved.

After Barzani agreed in 1974 to cooperate with the Shah against the Ba'thists, the intellectual current within the Kurdish movement died. Those activists who had remained with Barazani after Ahmad and Talabani departed, left now as well. This meant that the movement was almost purely tribal.

With one or two exceptions, most of the activists were not seen again; Talabani, however, survived. He remained allied to Baghdad for a time, then abruptly he went back into opposition, forming his own party, the PUK. When the Iran-Iraq War erupted, Talabani become a guerrilla leader, and during this phase briefly replaced Mulla Mustafa as the movement's titular head.

We will look now at how he did it, but first we need to put this particular discussion into context.



### **The 1983 Agreement.**

Barzani's territory, as we have noted, lay along Iraq's northern border with Turkey, whereas Talabani's area lay farther south, around Sulamaniyyah in the mountains separating Iraq from Iran. This became a factor of importance when Iran launched its invasion of Iraqi Kurdistan in 1983.<sup>38</sup>

The Iranians had the option of including Talabani in their plan; however they spurned this, probably because they saw him as unacceptably secular, and also as too much of a leftist.<sup>39</sup> But it is also likely that Massoud Barzani blackballed his father's old enemy.

In any event, after Hajj Umran the Iranians in rapid succession conducted a number of other invasions of Iraqi Kurdistan, one of these adjacent to Talabani's area. This put the latter in a quandary—he did not want to support the Iranians, who had scorned him. Neither, however, did he wish to side with Baghdad, against whom he was fighting. Talabani warned the Iranians to stay out of his territory, and when they ignored his warning—and attacked near Penjwin—he ordered his forces to fight back.

This brought Saddam into the picture. The Iraqi leader approached Talabani with an offer to resurrect the old autonomy agreement, if Talabani would aid Iraq in helping to repel the invasion. The series of invasions had occurred at an awkward time for the Ba'thists—they had not yet fully mobilized and needed all the fighters they could get.<sup>40</sup>

Talabani agreed, and a deal was struck whereby he became Saddam's "governor" in northern Iraq, with the responsibility of guarding the area, which he proposed to do with PUK fighters and whatever other Kurds he could recruit. In the meantime, Saddam agreed to exempt Kurds from the draft, an inducement to join Talabani. Finally, Saddam and Talabani together were to work out an autonomy arrangement for all of the Kurds. Had this agreement materialized it would have meant a great deal, not only for the Kurds but for Iraq as well. Like its predecessor, however, it was stillborn, although the reasons for this are somewhat obscure. Talabani appears to have fallen victim to intrigues. At the time, a number of

powerful *agas* had sided with the Ba'thists, being nominally allied with them against the Iranians.<sup>41</sup> These pro-Iraqi Kurdish leaders—called the *fursan*—were not pleased to have Talabani emerge as a power broker in their midst, one who could deal directly with Saddam.<sup>42</sup> In the first place, they remembered Talabani from his student days, as an opponent of the "aga-mentality." Along with this they regarded him as a johnny-come-lately, whom they did not want muscling in on their territory. Sometime in 1984 the *agas* arranged the assassination of one of Talabani's top lieutenants. This had the effect of discrediting him, as he subsequently proved incapable of avenging the act. The Kurds—who are extraordinarily sensitive to matters of honor—refused after that to pay him deference.

For months Talabani hung on in a kind of limbo, on the run in the mountainous north country, and finally—after fighting erupted between the remnant of his forces and Iraq's regular army—he went back to the opposition. Ultimately, Talabani allied himself with Masoud Barzani, although it is not clear what he brought to their partnership; his group, the PUK, was virtually defunct by now.

### ***Agas and Pesh Mergas.***

With the breakup of Talabani's PUK, the Kurdish movement lost its last authentic political party.<sup>43</sup> (We have already shown that the KDP ceased to function as a bona fide party in the 1960s, when Mulla Mustafa co-opted it.) This raises an interesting conjecture—if there were no political parties in the movement, how could there have been a movement at all? It seems to us that there was not.

But why was there so much anti-Saddam activity among the Kurds? Who were all these *pesh mergas*, dedicated guerrilla fighters, who, the press maintains, were risking their lives for Kurdistan? We want now to look at this particular phenomenon.

When Iraq invaded Iran in 1980, the Iraqi leaders believed that this would be a war of short duration. They were not prepared for the stubborn resistance they encountered, primarily from the hastily formed Iranian Revolutionary Guards

units. Once the leaders came to concede that the war could not be ended quickly, they set about to mobilize. They instituted the draft, with little opposition in the southern, Arab, areas of the country; the Shias were willing to support their country. However, the northern Kurds disdained this option.

In the first place this meant leaving their beloved mountains to fight in the flat desertland of the south, a region they detested. But also they would have to take orders. To be ordered about by fellow Kurds was bad enough, but to submit to the will of a *Baghdadi* or a *Maslawi* was unthinkable, and so the Kurds ran away to the mountains in droves to join the guerrillas. By this time the Barzanis—who had been living out the early days of the war in Iran—had returned to set up bases inside the country, and Talabani, too, had returned from Damascus where he had been in exile to set up a base of his own. Memberships in the KDP and PUK soared, buoyed by an infusion of draft dodgers. And it was in this way that the Kurdish revolt revived.

After Talabani's loss of influence following the assassination, however, the situation changed. The *agas* decided to capitalize on the agreement he had made whereby the Kurds would take over the north's defenses. They approached Saddam with an offer to set up National Defense Battalions. Practically speaking these were paramilitary groups made up of the *agas* and their personal body guards, who undertook not only to fight the Iranians, but as well to suppress the Barzanis and PUK elements.<sup>44</sup>

In effect, the battalions—or *josh*, as the guerrillas derisively called them—were similar to the Black and Tans in Ireland, who aided the British against the IRA.<sup>45</sup> The *agas* mustered the battalions, but it was Ba'thist money—funneled through the *agas*—that ed the members' pay.

Saddam went along with this arrangement because, in a manner of speaking, he had given up on the Kurds; in his mind he was making the best of a bad thing. Unable to draft them, he was willing to adopt the legal fiction that they were government fighters; they "guarded" the north. The *agas*, however, were not content to leave it at this. They sought to

further aggrandize themselves by wrangling lucrative contracts to build roads and forts throughout the region. As the *agas*' wealth increased, they drew more and more followers to their side, many of them former guerrillas, that is, *ex-pesh mergas*.

This had the effect, naturally, of shrinking the guerrilla forces. Indeed, we may say that the mass of Kurds, from this point forward, supported Iraq in the war. To be sure it was a passive support—for example, the battalions refused to serve outside the Kurdish area, which meant that the Ba'thists still had to face the problem of manning the southern front with only limited numbers of troops. Nonetheless, by refusing to go over to the side of Iran, and by resisting Iranian incursions, the Kurds enabled Baghdad to stay in the fight.

In effect, the *agas*, by acting as they did, marginalized the Kurdish opposition. The Barzanis and PUK now had no claim to be leading an authentic revolt. They were reduced to the status of mercenaries, assisting the Iranians against the Iraqi people, among whom were their own Kurdish brothers.

Given this state of affairs, it seems pointless to talk about a movement of Kurdish national liberation. Had the Kurds wanted to carve out a state for themselves, the time to have done so was 1984 when the Ba'th was struggling to survive. By agreeing to take the Ba'thists' pay, the Kurdish leaders squandered the best opportunity they were ever likely to get.

One could argue that the *agas* behaved stupidly, that they did not know where their true interests lay, and that they did themselves irreparable harm. We don't believe this to be true; they knew what they were doing. They created a situation where they could operate in their old, lawless ways, and in which the central government was actually forced to subsidize them.

Exploiting disordered conditions, they grew wealthy building forts and roads; they expanded their private militias at government expense and they escalated their smuggling operations, a simple matter once the governing authority had departed from the region. What possible need would the *agas* have for a state? The less organized Kurdish life, the better

off they were. This is a point that we will take up further in a subsequent section.

### **The Recent Revolt.**

We want now to discuss what went on in northern Iraq immediately after the end of Operation Desert Storm, when apparently all of the Kurds revolted against the Saddam government. Was this not a genuine uprising?

Something certainly did occur in the north after Desert Storm, although precisely what will take time to sort out. It appears the Kurds responded to what they perceived to be an appeal from the United States. It has been alleged that during Desert Storm, the CIA set up clandestine transmitters in Riyadh from which it called for a Kurdish revolt against Saddam.<sup>46</sup> The Kurds responded, with a will.

After all, these people—with their tradition of war fighting—were used to receiving such appeals. The Kurds, as mercenaries, have fought for the Shah of Persia, the Ottoman Sultan, and even, as we have just seen, the Ba'thists. Why not the Americans? A clear-cut appeal from the United States, the greatest superpower on earth (indeed the only one after the Soviet Union's humiliating collapse), would be a hard proposition to resist. And so virtually overnight the Kurds took up arms, and seized all of the major cities of Kurdistan—something they had been unable to accomplish throughout the entire Iran-Iraq war. And then, just as quickly, they abandoned them, and set off on an unprecedented mass exodus to the Turkish border. What happened here?

It seems likely that the United States, in the eyes of the Kurds, was seen to waffle. After first unequivocally appealing for a revolt, Washington refused to prevent the Iraqis from using their helicopters to put it down.<sup>47</sup> This failure to intervene confused the Kurds, who now were unsure whether they had a deal or not. Fleeing in disarray before the onslaught of the hated Republican Guards, they gave up the whole of Kurdistan to their enemies, with the result that the Iraqis accomplished what would ordinarily have been deemed impossible—they plucked victory from the jaws of certain defeat.

We submit that a sequence like this could not have occurred with any other people than the Kurds—a situation where the population, seemingly unified one minute, dissolves into chaos the next. The whole episode, we feel, can be explained on the basis of tribalism. The tribalist Kurds reacted to events in an instinctive fashion. They perceived that the Ba'thist government was on the point of collapse, and so turned their backs on it—a simple matter, as they had no firm attachment to it anyway. At the same time, the Americans—whom they believed were about to take over--were appealing for their allegiance. At once they acted, and just as speedily they took to their heels when it appeared that they had miscalculated.<sup>48</sup>

### **Negotiating With Saddam.**

After the debacle of the mass exodus and its sequel, Operation Provide Comfort, the Western media—particularly television—undertook extended coverage of the plight of the Kurds. In the process of so doing, it promoted Barzani and Talabani as Kurdish spokesmen. Consequently, the announcement by these two that they would negotiate an autonomy agreement with Saddam caused great consternation.

To the media, this was an appalling step to have taken. Saddam has been so demonized, it is inconceivable to many that anyone would sit down with him. This, we feel, is unfair. Over the course of years Kurds have negotiated with much more uncouth characters than Saddam. By the same token, Arab leaders have had to deal with many boorish Kurds—which is merely to say that transactions have gone on between the two peoples for centuries, under worse conditions than those that presently obtain.

We are too close to the negotiations to make much out of them. We will, however, comment on one or two aspects because we think they illuminate the situation of the Kurds in general. The most startling development has been the apparent willingness of Barzani to cut a deal with his erstwhile nemesis Saddam Husayn. Almost from the first he has shown himself amenable to making concessions. Indeed, it appears that Barzani is prepared to participate in a condominium

arrangement whereby he and the Ba'thist security forces share policing of the north. Under such an arrangement the Barzanis, presumably, would be supplied with small arms by the Ba'thists.

Interestingly, Talabani has opposed this scheme and has tied up the talks by refusing to concede on points that Barzani had already agreed to. Talabani apparently foresees the possibility that he will lose out by having Barzani conclude a separate peace.<sup>49</sup> In effect, Barzani would become Saddam's "governor" in the north—the same deal that Talabani agreed to in 1983. However, unlike Talabani, Barzani would not have to fear being victimized by the *agas*; Barzani has his tribe to depend upon. The Barzanis, were they supplied with weapons from Baghdad, could easily hold their own against the *agas*. To protect his stake, therefore, Talabani appears to have seized on the issue of Kirkuk, the same issue that Barzani had allowed to scuttle the autonomy agreement in the early 1970s. He has insisted that this area be included in the autonomous zone, a point which Baghdad refuses to concede.

Here, too, it seems obvious what is going on. If Talabani is unable to deal with Baghdad, he must ally himself with other interests. The obvious candidates are the Coalition forces, in particular the British, French and Dutch. The British have been most forward in insisting that some arrangement be made to protect the Kurds. They were clearly upset by the willingness of the Kurdish leaders to talk with Saddam. It is our belief that Talabani has made an approach to them, and this explains his obstinate insistence on including Kirkuk. In effect, he is maneuvering to hand over Kirkuk to the coalition.<sup>50</sup>

With Kirkuk included in the autonomous zone, the coalition would then have a club to wield against the Ba'thists. Whenever they balked at coalition demands, the latter could threaten to detach the zone from Iraqi sovereignty, making it a ward of the United Nations. Were this to occur, Iraq would lose one of its richest oil fields. However, with Kirkuk left out of the zone, there is not much of value to detach—except some apparently resource-bare mountains and a lot of unruly Kurds.<sup>51</sup>

The insistence of Talabani, therefore, that Kirkuk be included is tied to his need for coalition backing. It has nothing to do with promoting autonomy—indeed it could be argued that it violates the spirit of autonomy. It is a way of sweetening the pot for his supposititious patrons.

There is no way, however, that the Ba'thists will give on this point. They see what is contemplated; they are not about to surrender the entire north of the country to the coalition, and so they have dug in their heels on the proposal. The British appear already to have anticipated this result, and have prepared an alternate, fall-back position. They have wangled an enclave in southeastern Turkey on the Iraqi border, manned by a mix of coalition units (see Figure 3).

Anyone who is a student of guerrilla warfare knows that guerrillas cannot survive without a friendly border at their backs. Presently the Kurds are vulnerable in this regard because the Turks want nothing to do with them. Indeed, only the adroit political maneuvering of Premier Ozal has kept the Turkish military in line on this issue. The European-controlled enclave offsets this deficiency by, in effect, supplying backup



Figure 3. Coalition Area.



troops drawn from the coalition. They stand poised to enter Iraq, if the Ba'thists do anything of which the coalition disapproves.

There is a hitch, however—the enclave has to be supplied through Turkish territory, a narrow corridor from Iskander in the north to the Iraqi border, and the Turkish General Staff can easily cut this supply line. A single ambush by the PKK against a Turkish patrol and the generals can call off the whole deal.<sup>52</sup> So it comes down to this—to exercise influence over Iraq the coalition must be able to protect the Kurds, which it cannot do unless it has access to the Iraqi Kurdish area. A coalition-controlled enclave solves the problem of access, but cannot function without the concurrence of Turkey's General Staff. Given the attitude of Turkey's generals toward the Kurds, a lasting agreement is unlikely. The whole proposition seems to be very tenuous.

#### **An Assessment.**

We are now in a position to assess the Kurdish movement in general terms. (See Figure 4.) We regard it as one of stunted development. It cannot progress past its present stage

1	2	3	4
1945-64	1964-75	1975-88	1988 →

1. Period of Politburo Control of KDP
2. Period of Control of KDP by Mulla Mustafa Barzani
3. Period of Massoud Barzani-Jalal Talabani Rivalry
4. Period of Aga Domination

**Figure 4. The Movement in Iraq.**

because no substantial link exists between it and the Kurdish people.

Up to roughly 1964, such a link did exist, inasmuch as the KDP, the principal organ of the movement, had a political agenda which dealt with important social questions affecting Kurdish society. Further, inasmuch as the Kurds' concerns were vaguely on track with the Ba'thists,' they might hope for a reconciliation between the parties.

But now there is no such hope. A movement that is almost purely tribal cannot be reconciled to the Ba'th, which remains committed to socialism and to an economy directed from above. The *agas* are set on maintaining their quasi-feudal style of life, in which not only is there no central control, there is no control whatsoever, their ideal being pure anarchy. In effect, Iraq is now two states, operating in different centuries.

The losers in the arrangement are the *misikin*, who now have no one looking out for them. They have been scanted on educational benefits, health reforms, and everything else the Ba'th gave Iraqis when it was confident of its hold on power. Assuming that the *agas* continue to consolidate their hold over Kurdish society, the *misikin* must now look forward to continued ill treatment; they will go on being serfs.<sup>53</sup>

Thus, as we see it, the Kurdish movement—so extolled by the media—primarily serves the interests of the feudal lords and those foreigners seeking to break the power of the Ba'th. The movement's main constituency is the warrior caste of *agas*, with their body guards, and financially it is supported by foreigners trying to bring down Saddam Husayn. The Kurdish chiefs today are doing no differently than Kurds have done for centuries, i.e., serving foreign interests as mercenaries for pay. They are hired guns; and hired guns do not a movement make.<sup>54</sup>

At the same time, the situation could be about to take an ironic turn. The *agas*, in responding to the appeals of the United States to revolt against Saddam, burnt their bridges with the central government. It now seems that Barzani has jumped into the spot they vacated. It appears he is offering to supplant them as the government's mainstay in the north. For Baghdad,

the arrangement is not without appeal. In the first place, were Barzani to come over to its side, this would greatly embarrass all those pro-Kurdish elements in the West who have hailed him as the spokesman of Kurdish liberation. It would be hard for the Israelis and British and French and all the rest of the supporters of Kurdish nationalism to carry on, if the leader of the movement had cut a deal with the West's archenemy, Saddam. In the muddled atmosphere of Iraqi politics, it is difficult to know if this is what actually has transpired. The negotiations between Saddam and the Kurdish Front are still going on (as of this writing) and anything could occur. Indeed, all the sides could turn on a dime, without warning.

This brings us to the final issue we want to discuss, the question of U.S. involvement with the Kurds.

#### **United States and the Kurds.**

U. S. military leaders need to be aware that the strategic environment in northern Iraq is supercharged. For all their ingratiating ways, the Kurdish *agas* are hardly benign fellows. They have a self-interested awareness of what they would like to achieve from Operation Provide Comfort II, and that outcome almost certainly does not square with the announced intent of the Bush administration.

The *agas* want to take over the north, and ultimately to create an independent Kurdistan. They are not much interested in the legal status of this entity, as long as they have control over it. Having gained control, they will indulge themselves to the utmost degree. They will run guns into the area, which they will turn over to their partisans, and after that the *agas* will seek to settle old scores, thus the intertribal feuding will recommence.

The spectacle of northern Iraq in flames is certain to unsettle the Turks, who are extremely apprehensive about their own restive Kurdish population erupting. The Turks will then be tempted to "fill the power vacuum" in northern Iraq, militarily. If this occurs, we can expect a counterstroke from the Iranians, who fear the extension of NATO's authority into their sphere of interest. The United States doesn't need these headaches.

After World War I the British, in an attempt to secure the oil region of Kirkuk for themselves brokered the cause of a certain Shaykh Mahmud, a tough Kurdish *aga*.<sup>55</sup> After supporting him against the Turks—who were then masters of what is today Iraqi Kurdistan—Britain ultimately dumped Mahmud, finding him absolutely uncontrollable.

In effect, Mahmud bit the hand that fed him. He proclaimed himself "King of Kurdistan" and sought to drive the British out of his realm. We would submit that the United States today is about to repeat history.

To be sure, the administration may decide to continue granting support, and then, of course, the U.S. military will back the President. But Army leaders should be apprised that this is a most dangerous situation we have become involved in, one that should be approached with extreme caution. It is not as benign as the media and some in Congress are making it out to be.

## ENDNOTES

1. By this we mean that the Kurds have a long tradition that extols martial prowess. Over the centuries their regular activity has been to serve as mercenaries in the armies of the Middle East and southern Caucasus. When not so engaged, they have supported themselves by smuggling and various forms of banditry. This preoccupation with violence shows up in all areas of Kurdish life. A oft-heard saying of the Kurds—"Kurdish children are born to be slaughtered"—reflects this situation.

2. *Aga*, from the Arabic, "lord, master, sir." The *agas* are, in effect, clan elders. Formerly their status depended upon martial prowess. After property law changes, described below, they became more on the order of rural gentry, the community's interlocutors with the central government. Some are quite wealthy (see note 12 below). As may be imagined the *agas* are traditional in their outlook, not to say backward.

3. *Miskin*, Arabic, "poor, miserable, beggar, humble, submissive, servile." Under the caste system that prevails in Kurdistan these people are the lowest order of society. In appearance, they are a breed apart from the warrior caste, primarily made up of the *agas* and the *pesh merga*, whom we will discuss below. For a discussion of the *miskin* see my book, *The Kurds: An Unstable Element in the Gulf*, Boulder, CO: Westview Press, 1984; also Hannah Batatu, *The Old Social Classes and the Revolutionary Movements of Iraq*, Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1978.

4. Probably no phenomenon in Kurdish life is more misunderstood than that of the *pesh merga*. The media has made them out to be dedicated resistance fighters (the term translates as "one who is prepared to die"), and refers to all Kurds who fight against the Ba'thists as such. In fact, the term as originally used in the 1960s referred specifically to politically committed individuals who were members of the Kurdish Democratic Party (KDP). Thus, ideological commitment was the hallmark of the original *pesh merga*. In this study we intend to show that, commitment of this sort having virtually disappeared among the Kurds, the term *pesh merga* no longer has much relevance.

5. The three occasions to which we refer are the Kurds' involvement with the Mahabad Republic after World War II, which provoked a confrontation between the United States and the Soviet Union, also the Kurds' participation in the Shah's conspiracy to topple the Ba'thists in 1975, and finally Operation Provide Comfort.

6. The Sultan organized the Kurds into a paramilitary force called the Hamadiya Cavalry, which he then set upon the Armenians. For a discussion see *The Encyclopaedia Britannica*, New York: Encyclopaedia Britannica Co., 1911, s.v. "Kurds."

7. The slaughter of the Assyrians was carried out by the Kurdish chief Aga Simko. For details of this episode and the one above see *The Kurds: An Unstable Element in the Gulf*; also Hasan Arfa, *The Kurds*, London: Oxford University Press, 1966.

8. One of the earliest (400 BC) references to a people believed to be the Kurds appears in Xenophon's *Anabasis*. He claims that a tribe, the Karduchoi, assaulted the Greeks as they withdrew from Persia. The attack occurred in the Zagros Mountains, the Kurds' traditional home. This fact, plus the similarity of names, may indicate that these were indeed the ancestors of the present-day Kurds.

9. See "'Europeans Call for Kurdish Enclave in Iraq," *The New York Times*, April 9, 1991.

10. The ruling party in Iraq. For a discussion of the recent history of the Ba'th see Stephen C. Pelletiere, Douglas V. Johnson II, and Leif R. Rosenberger, *Iraqi Power and U.S. Security in the Middle East*, Carlisle Barracks, PA: Strategic Studies Institute, 1990; also Phebe Marr, *The Modern History of Iraq*, Boulder, CO: Westview Press, 1985.

11. The involvement of the Western media with the Kurds goes back to the early 1960s when *The New York Times* reporter Dana Adams Schmidt visited Mulla Mustafa Barzani in northern Iraq and wrote a series of articles for *The Times*, which he later expanded into a book, *Journey Among Brave Men*, Boston: Little Brown & Co., 1964. After Schmidt, a

whole parade of journalists made the trip to northern Iraq, myself included (I went in 1964 for *The Milwaukee Journal*). All of these journalists, without exception, treated the story as an adventure yarn, with political overtones. As we shall show below, the media treatment of the Kurds' political struggle is simplistic.

12. In a closed society such as Iraq it is difficult to know the wealth of specific groups. We can gain some idea of the *agas'* financial situation, however, from media interviews conducted with them during Operation Provide Comfort. See *The Washington Post* of April 17, 1981, in which an *aga* (who describes himself as being "in the agricultural business") boasts of owning one of the largest mansions in Zahko ("with four large gardens"); also see *The Washington Post* of April 7, 1991, in which another "tribal leader" claims to own 120 villages.

13. The Kurds are attracted to Sufiism, two major orders of which, the Naqshbandi and Qadiri, are to be found among them. *Tariqas* are lodges in which the devotees assemble. Sufiism, as the reader may be aware, is a way of worshiping under Islam. The majority of Kurds are Sunnis; Sunniism is a sect.

14. The Allies in World War II occupied Iran in order to facilitate the movement of supplies to the Soviet Union. The Soviets took over the north of the country and the British the south. The then-Shah of Iran, Reza, was deposed and sent into exile in South Africa where he died. Supposedly, this was done because of his pro-Axis sympathies. After the war had ended, the British withdrew from their zone, however the Soviets remained in occupation, claiming that the break-away republics were in need of protection.

15. The republic was the creation of a number of city-bred Kurds from Mahabad—a few intellectuals, some upper class landowners, and a prominent religious leader. These men were no match for the Shah's army (this was Shah Mohammad Reza, Reza's son, whom the Allies had put on the throne after Reza was deposed). Thus when the Barzanis appeared, they were welcomed by the republic's leaders, and by the Russians, as well. The latter had no desire to use Soviet troops against the Shah's forces. For an account of the short-lived republic, and Barzani's role in the affair, see William Eagleton Jr., *The Kurdish Republic of 1946*, London: Oxford University Press, 1963.

16. The United States, under Truman, allegedly threatened to use the atom bomb against the Soviets if they didn't get out. Some scholars cite this confrontation as the beginning of the cold war.

17. This journey has become part of the lore of Kurdistan. It is comparable to the brilliant retreat of the American Indian Chief Joseph of

the Perce Nez to Canada, or—although not on such a grand scale—the already mentioned retreat of the 10,000 Greeks under Xenophon.

18. For an account of Barzani's stay in Russia see Dana Adams Schmidt's *Journey Among Brave Men*.

19. The Communist Party during the period of the 1940s and 1950s wielded considerable power in Iraq. For details see Hanna Batatu, *The Old Social Classes and Revolutionary Movements of Iraq*.

20. The Shah persuaded Nixon that the Ba'th was a dangerous client of the Soviets by means of which would they would take over the Persian Gulf. For details of the involvement of the Shah and CIA with the Kurds see the House Select Committee on Intelligence report (the Pike report) published in *The Village Voice*, February 23, 1976; also Phebe Marr *The Modern History of Iraq*, and Edmund Ghareeb *The Kurdish Question in Iraq*, Syracuse, NY: The Syracuse University Press, 1981. Also see *The Washington Post*, April 3, 1991.

21. Aid from the United States was not substantial, merely about \$16 million worth of arms which the Israelis supplied from their stores. The latter were then reimbursed by Washington.

22. For a discussion of this episode see *The Kurdish Question In Iraq*.

23. The population of Iraq is close to 18 million, and 55 percent of this is Arab Shia. Another quarter are Arab Sunnis and the rest by-and-large are Kurds. Moreover, Iraq's army throughout the war was 65 percent Shia, a condition to a degree occasioned by the fact that the Kurds for the most part refused to serve.

24. Population figures on the Kurds are unreliable because all of the countries where they dwell tend to undercount their numbers. We believe there are about 10 million in Turkey, 4 million in Iran, 2 1/2 million in Iraq, 500,000 in Syria, and 50,000 in Russia.

25. The movement was headed by Abdur Rahman Qassemlu, an Iranian Kurdish landowner who had backed Mossedeq, the Iranian premier overthrown in 1953. Qassemlu fled to the Eastern bloc and for awhile was an economist under Dubcek in Czechoslovakia. He returned to Iran when the Khomeini revolt erupted. After his movement was destroyed by the Barzanis and Revolutionary Guards, Qassemlu returned to Europe where he was assassinated by Iranian agents. For details see *The Kurds: An Unstable Element in the Gulf*.

26. Assad was involved in a feud with the Turks at this time over water from the Euphrates Rivers. The Turks were building a huge dam that would reduce Syria's supply of water from the river, against which Assad had

protested bitterly but to no avail. For a history of the PKK, and Syria's feud with the Turks see Michael M. Gunter's *The Kurds in Turkey*, Boulder, CO: Westview Press, 1990.

27. The Turkish Army inherited its strong distaste for the Kurds from Turkey's founder, Kemal Ataturk, who salvaged modern Turkey from the wreckage of the old Ottoman Empire. To do so he had to surrender practically all of the Empire's former possessions, but he resolutely retained the whole of the Anatolian peninsula. When the British tried to carve up that remnant—by inciting the Turkish Kurds to revolt—Ataturk foiled them by ruthlessly crushing the Kurdish rebels.

28. Given Assad's reputation for political astuteness, it's hard to see why he didn't anticipate this result. To be sure, he may have meant to do just this, that is block the Iranians from opening a second front, knowing that, if they did so, they would probably defeat Iraq and convert it into an Islamic Republic. This, however, is pretty Machiavellian.

29. In addition, to its scarcely veiled threat to enter the war on Iraq's side, Turkey could always bring the Iranians to heel by threatening to close its borders to Iranian imports. Rigorous enforcement of customs regulations invariably produced enormous traffic jams backing up trucks for miles from the border.

30. Jalal Talabani matured politically during the 1940s and 1950s, when the Middle East—and particularly its Arab and Iranian components—was turning left. Nationalist leaders like Gamal Abdul Nasser set the style for young Middle Eastern radicals to emulate. Such men were resolutely opposed to landed wealth, and espoused the cause of the people. Hence, the KDP in its early days was quite radical, calling for a total restructuring of Kurdish society.

31. In fact, the old tribal system first came under attack in the last days of the Ottoman Empire. When the Sultans decided to reorganize their military, they found they no longer needed Kurdish cavalry, and therefore instituted private property as a means of settling the Kurds on the land where they could more easily press them into service as infantry. The British carried the process further by legally transferring to the *agas* control of all tribal property.

32. The bodyguards of the *agas* were called *pesh mala*; so obviously the term—much used today—of *pesh merga* derives from it. For details on this phenomenon of bodyguards in Iraq see Batatu's discussion of the *hushiyyah* in *The Old Social Classes and Revolutionary Movements in Iraq*.

33. Kassem wanted to institutionalize his hold over the Kurdish community by placing Barzani, whom he felt was disposed toward him, in the position of KDP president.



34. Barzani reorganized the Politburo along functional lines, and in the process created a category of membership for "the tribes." The *agas* filled this quota.

35. I interviewed Talabani and Ahmad in 1964, when I went to Kurdistan. The two were living temporarily in Tehran under protection of the Shah, after Barzani had driven them out of Iraq. For details of this see my book, *The Kurds: An Unstable Element in the Gulf*.

36. Despite all the fuss about Kirkuk, the real sticking point has always been over how the autonomous zone would be administered. I stress this because an incorrect impression has been created that Kirkuk is the only matter of importance. If one traces the history of the autonomy talks (and the idea did not originate with the Ba'th; previous Iraqi regimes had grappled with it), one sees that the two sides consistently have failed to agree on administration—it is a key point because whoever administers the area can say how social legislation is to be applied.

37. During my interview with Ahmad in Tehran he told me that Barzani was "a man of the tribes"; that he only cared for his tribe, and thus dreaded land reform which would break down the old tribal way of life. See *The Kurds: An Unstable Element in the Gulf*.

38. This area was also the locale of one of three passes through the Zagros Mountains, which added to its strategic importance for the Ba'thists.

39. After he had split with Saddam and gone back into opposition, Talabani for awhile advertised himself as a Maoist. He told me that, although he approved of the Communists' organizing tactics, he was not a party member, but rather an intellectual Marxist. Conversely, the Barzanis have always been careful to burnish their religious credentials, which has stood them in good stead with the Iranians. Recall, that the tribe was founded by a Sufi mystic.

40. For a discussion of the Ba'thists' mobilization problems see *Iraqi Power and U.S. Security in the Middle East*.

41. We say nominally because the *agas*' support seems to have been of a passive variety, that is they merely undertook not to go over to the side of Iran. If the Iraqis wanted them to fight actively, they had to pay extra for this.

42. *Fursan*, Arabic for "cavalry." It refers to the official title of the group, the "Salahadin Cavalry." Salahadin, of course, was the Kurdish warrior who defeated the Crusaders.

43. The question of just who made up the core membership of the PUK is an interesting one. There is evidence its mainstay comprised Fayali

Kurds. The Fayali are unique in that they are practically the only Shias among the Kurds. Driven out of Iran by the Shah, they took refuge in Iraq, only to be proscribed in turn by the Ba'thists. Thus, like the Barzanis, they are landless. It would be significant, if the only two real fighting groups within the Kurdish political movement were, in a sense, outcasts.

44. See *The New York Times*, April 27, 1991, for discussion of the status of the *agas*, in which the claim is made that they were formerly "owned" by Saddam Husayn.

45. *Josh*, Kurdish "little donkey," a pun on "horseman" or "cavalryman," the Arabic title of the pro-government Kurds.

46. See *The New York Times*, April 16, 1991, "Radio Linked to CIA Urges Iraqis to Overthrow Saddam Husayn," also *The Washington Post*, April 7 and 9, 1991.

47. See *The New York Times*, April 30, 1991 "Bush Refuses to Back Rebels."

48. This is precisely the sort of behavior one would expect from mercenaries. Moreover, the Kurds have several times in their history been betrayed in this way. After World War I, they backed the British, who ultimately withdrew from their area, turning it back over to the Turks, who promptly wreaked vengeance on the Kurds for having turned their coats. With a background like this, it is natural the apparent betrayal of the United States would cause a stampede.

49. There is strong motivation for Barzani to do just this—it's a way of getting his tribal territory back. At present the tribe is in limbo. If Saddam agrees to take them on, with the result that the Barzanis and Ba'thists together supervise the north, the tribe will cut quite a swath there. If one looks at press reports of the deal that Barzani is seeking to conclude with Saddam, it does appear something like this is in the works. (*The Washington Post*, May 19, 1991.) It calls for an amnesty; the return of all Kurds to their villages; rescindment of laws punishing Kurds who fought against the government; and the incorporation of Kurdish guerrillas into the Iraqi army.

50. It is perhaps significant that all of the players in the coalition force manning the enclave are former holders of oil concessions in Iraq which the Ba'thists nationalized—the United States, Britain, France, the Netherlands and Italy.

51. Support for this theory is found in *The Washington Post*, April 1, 1991, where the Kurdish leaders talk of a "marriage made in heaven." Say the leaders to the Americans—"we have the oil and want democracy; you have democracy and want oil."

52. Since this was written, the Turks have done just that. Declaring a buffer zone along the border, they descended on the Kurdish "bases," wiping out several, which they claimed were used by the PKK.

53. For details of harsh treatment inflicted on the *miskin* by the *pesh merga* see news coverage of Operation Provide Comfort. For example, *The Washington Post*, April 29, 1991 ("*pesh merga* prevent Kurds from returning to their homes"); *The Washington Post*, April 30, 1991 ("Marines say guerrillas are pirates, straight out bandits"); and *The Washington Post*, May 1, 1991 ("guerrillas confiscate cars"); also *The New York Times*, April 30, 1991 ("*pesh merga* discriminate against Christians").

54. In this connection, it is interesting to compare the names of the Kurdish force that Sultan Hamid created to suppress the Armenians and that which the Ba'thists organized—the *Hamadiya* Cavalry, vice the Salahadin Cavalry. Both are the *Fursan*. It would appear the Kurds have been involved in such practices for decades, if not centuries.

55. For details of this episode see C. J. Edmonds, *Kurds, Turks and Arabs*, London: Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1925.

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