

Chapter 7

The Kurdish Dilemma: The Golden Era Threatened

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The two dominant political parties of Iraqi Kurdistan – the Kurdistan Democratic Party (KDP) and the Patriotic Union of Kurdistan (PUK) – face a dilemma. Before the events of 11 September 2001, the three northern governorates of Iraq (Dohuk, Arbil, Sulaymaniyah) remained free of the yoke of Baghdad, in effect benefiting from the events of 1991 that created a political vacuum within which an indigenous Kurdish political and administrative system emerged.¹ The situation was, and remains, highly anomalous. Iraqi Kurdistan was placed under double sanctions, one set from the UN that was imposed on the entirety of Iraq, the other from Saddam Hussein, who placed an internal embargo against the renegade region. The Kurds were protected by the efforts of *Operation Northern Watch* (the ‘no-fly’ zone), to guard them from the perceived aggression of Baghdad, yet military interventions from Iran and Turkey were seemingly tolerated. Within the parameters of external economic controls, political and military intervention and internal rivalry, the KDP and PUK, possibly by accident more than design, succeeded in heading an independent entity. After several rounds of conflict between the two parties, along with the involvement of other groups, Iraqi Kurdistan became divided in 1994 into two *de facto* ‘statelets’, each with its own

Kurdistan Regional Government (KRG) and each dominated by one of the two parties.

Both parties and, indeed, the Kurdish people as a whole accepted this situation. With sanctions seemingly keeping Saddam weakened, the oil-for-food deal (UN Resolution 986 and additions) providing the northern governorates with 13% of Iraqi oil revenue, together with the active smuggling of oil and other goods kept party coffers well endowed. With the PUK and KDP enjoying some form of international recognition granted by heading the *de facto* Kurdish governments in Arbil and Sulaymaniyah, the situation was acceptable for all concerned. Saddam remained a threat, but he was a threat the Kurds could live with, particularly from 1997 onwards.²

The eleventh of September changed the delicate balance which had kept the Kurds safe in their geopolitical anomaly. For the leadership of the Iraqi opposition in general, it was readily apparent and indeed hoped for that the regime of Saddam Hussein would be implicated, sooner rather than later, in the terrorist attacks. However, more than any other Iraqi opposition party, the KDP and PUK have a great deal to lose. As the geopolitical gaze of George W Bush turned towards Iraq, the KDP and PUK were well aware that the political gains made since 1991, the economic benefits made available to them and the fragile but real security they enjoyed, were threatened by a possible change in the status quo.

The Kurds since 1991

After the Kurdish *rapareen* (uprising) and the withdrawal of central government institutions in 1991 from Iraqi Kurdistan, multi-party elections were held in May 1992, returning a Kurdistan National Assembly (KNA) equally divided between the KDP and PUK. The executive KRG reflected this division and adopted a system of power-sharing of ministerial positions for the first and second cabinets.³ However, the absence of both Massoud Barzani and Jalal Talabani from positions of leadership within the newly formed government and the interference of neighbouring countries stoking the volatile rivalry that was ever present between the KDP and PUK resulted in the collapse of the unified KRG and the start of interfactional fighting in 1994. The PUK occupied the regional capital, Arbil, with the KDP retaining control of the revenue-generating areas of Dohuk and Zakho.

Political development

By the mid-1990s, tensions had reached new highs. Both the KDP and PUK were active participants within Iraqi opposition groups, most notably the Iraqi National Congress (INC), yet the KDP and PUK remained rivals. Their attitudes toward the INC reflect this rivalry. The PUK maintained strong links with the INC and its nominal leader, Dr Ahmed Chalabi, while the KDP took a more cautious approach. The differences in this relationship were highlighted by the INC-PUK operation conducted against Saddam's northern forces in March 1995.⁴ The PUK was a full partner in the venture, which ultimately failed after US support did not materialise. The KDP, however, remained wary, did not commit troops, and attempted to prevent the attack from taking place. From its perspective, caution was essential. Recognising its weak position in Iraq and its vulnerability to an Iraqi assault, Massoud Barzani adopted a position that would keep the KDP and KDP-administered areas safe whilst guaranteeing the failure of the planned INC-PUK assault, demonisation of PUK leader Jalal Talabani in Baghdad and damaging Ahmed Chalabi's credibility in the US. For the PUK and INC, it was the start of a tortured five-year period that saw their expulsion from Arbil by Saddam's forces in August 1996 and the marginalisation of the INC.⁵ In 1995 and 1996, the strategy of maintaining cautious ties to the US while maintaining links with Baghdad proved successful. Today, this careful distance from the US is proving to be less effective in protecting KDP interests.

Since 1996, two *de facto* entities have therefore existed side-by-side, each with its own government, each with a dominant political party and each claiming to represent the Kurdish people.⁶ Yet the level of tension between them has decreased markedly. Whether this is due to the parties' territorial separation, or the hands-off posture of formerly meddling neighbours who do not – for the moment – view a divided Kurdistan as a threat, is hard to tell. Both factors are probably at work. US policy aimed at promoting KDP-PUK unification at this time, however, might inadvertently spur competition and even open conflict and increase the temptation of neighbouring states to heighten intra-Kurdish tensions.⁷

Economic development

Since 1997 and the implementation of the oil-for-food deal, Iraqi

Kurdistan has enjoyed economic prosperity and, arguably, a certain amount of political liberalisation.⁸ Through this allocation of revenue, Iraqi Kurdish society has changed significantly. From being perhaps the most underdeveloped region of the country in the 1960s and 1970s, and suffering the effects of one of the most brutal military operations launched by a state against its own citizens in the 1980s, Iraqi Kurdistan has managed to advance since the withdrawal of Saddam's government in 1991 and is now the most economically prosperous portion of the country. UN surveys have indicated that child mortality is lower in Iraqi Kurdistan than in the centre and south of Iraq. Increased disposable income has further fuelled economic expansion in the service sector and in the sale of expensive consumer products and high-tech equipment. New economic actors – entrepreneurs, factory owners, small businessmen – have emerged as a result. Preserving the economic and social conditions that have nourished these developments will be key to stability during and after a transitional period. Economic prosperity and the encouragement of a freer economy by the dominant parties, whether by accident or design, is replenishing the depleted middle and mercantile classes. Economic advancement rather than the lure of the militia and Kurdish nationalism is what tends to occupy young Kurds today, particularly in the urban centres.⁹

The oil-for-food programme has acted as a catalyst in the institutionalisation of the Kurdish Regional Governments (KRGs) in Arbil and Sulaymaniyah. The Kurdish authorities collaborate closely with the UN agencies administering the programme and have a significant responsibility in constructing the distribution plans for each phase. Kurdish civil servants have also been consistently exposed to UN operating procedures and benefited from a range of training programmes designed by UN agencies and NGOs. The result is an increasingly active civil service in the three major cities (Dohuk, Arbil and Sulaymaniyah) as the UN operates according to a governorate division, assisting in the formation of a skilled body of bureaucrats. Furthermore, the existence of the KRGs for over a decade has institutionalised the structure of Kurdish governance in the minds of the population. Kurds in their early 20s now struggle to remember what life was like under the Ba'ath regime and associate the word 'government' with Kurdish rather than Iraqi rule.

The durability of these gains will depend on getting two

things right. The first will be to ensure that the income now deriving from oil revenue is not cut off. Since 1998, 13% of Iraq's oil revenue has been allocated to the northern governorates of Iraq under UNSCR. Apart from its immediate financial benefits, this arrangement has brought Kurdish civil servants directly into contact with UN and NGO counterparts, thereby promoting the bureaucratic development of the Kurdish administration, and has promoted the development of a range of local NGOs, the presence of which will be vital in a post-Saddam Iraq. This revenue has lubricated relations between the KDP and PUK by reducing the imbalance of funds available to the two parties and their respective administrations. With its control of the lucrative border crossings at Zakho, the KDP has, until recently, been able to generate significant sums through trade between Iraq and Turkey. The amounts vary, although estimates of several hundred thousand dollars per week would appear to be conservative. The PUK, with its crossings on the Iranian border, has not been able to generate equivalent sums, resulting in the advancement of the KDP in economic and military terms from 1996 onwards. Indeed, the PUK attack on the KDP in 1997 was as a direct consequence of this imbalance, and the struggle for resources remained volatile until the 13% of UN-derived revenue became available.

The second issue will be to ensure that the effect of monetary unification in the wake of a war does not have a sharply negative effect on Iraqi Kurdistan. The Kurdish-controlled region of Iraq now uses the Old Iraqi Dinar (OID), which exchanges at approximately 12 OID to US\$1. It is a reasonably stable currency, but is honoured only in the north. In contrast, the New Iraqi Dinar (NID) circulated by the government in Baghdad has been greatly devalued by inflation, trading at 3,000 NID to US\$1. Thinking should begin now about the basis on which the OID will be exchanged for the NID when transitional authorities begin the task of integrating the northern economy into the national economy in a post-war period.

The Kurdish political strategy since 11 September 2001

The Kurds and the US

The KDP and PUK represent perhaps the most militarily powerful force in the opposition to Saddam, along with the Shia Supreme Council for Islamic Revolution in Iraq (SCIRI). In an attempt to

capitalise on this, and the fact that the KDP and PUK control a vast swathe of Iraq between them, the two parties promoted themselves as something akin to the Northern Alliance of Afghanistan throughout early 2002. Their aim was to strengthen their position with the US in anticipation of regime change. It was an unworkable strategy. Turkey would not allow the Kurds to play a crucial role in a war and the US is unlikely to grant the KDP and PUK a role similar to that of the Northern Alliance in Afghanistan, if only because the *peshmerga* are so weak relative to regime forces. Thus, the KDP, and to a lesser extent the PUK, now face two problems: the marginalisation of their influence after the war – stemming in part from the small role they will have in the fighting – and the reversion to the central government of the oil revenues they now enjoy. For the KDP, this problem will be complicated by the closure of the illegal oil smuggling route from Mosul through KDP territory at Dohuk and into Turkey, which now generates considerable revenue. Both parties are aware of their dilemma and are working assiduously to maintain a high profile in Washington and secure as many guarantees as possible from the US before regime change has been realised. Their actions reflect a higher degree of political sophistication and awareness than we have witnessed previously. As usual, however, the PUK and KDP are pursuing the same objective in different and not always complementary ways.

The Kurds and the Iraqi opposition

As Judith Yaphe notes in this volume, along with the Shia, Kurds are the traditional war-fighters of the Iraqi opposition.¹⁰ Furthermore, Kurds provide the opposition movement with territorial legitimacy and the moral high ground, given atrocities committed by Saddam against the Iraqi Kurds. The KDP and PUK are able to field approximately 80,000 *peshmerga* and armed troops between them.¹¹ Currently, without Kurdish support, no grouping of Iraqi opposition parties (whether it be the INC, the 'Gang of Four' or the 'Group of Six') can operate effectively or exercise a decisive influence on US decision-makers. The KDP and PUK have attempted to capitalise on their salience in advance of a war, aware that once the action starts their ability to influence their situation will wane. However, whilst on the surface it may seem that the KDP and PUK operate closely within the Iraqi opposition setting, their methods differ.

Despite their superficial cooperation within the opposition, the Kurds remain divided, whatever pronouncements emerge from Sulaymaniyah or Salahadin regarding the potential unification of the Kurdish political system. But with the US focus on regime change in Iraq, the internal differences have been put aside for the foreseeable future. Still, this inherent rivalry has resulted in different positions being staked out within the Iraqi opposition movement.

The KDP's support for the overall Iraqi opposition has changed depending upon international circumstances. The overriding aim of the party has been to maintain stability in its area of Iraqi Kurdistan at any cost, and it adapts its policies to this broad goal. The result has been heightened prosperity for Arbil and Dohuk governorates, and, of course, for the KDP itself, but it has, at times, seriously weakened the opposition movement.

The KDP withdrawal from the INC-PUK revolt in 1995 and its alliance with Baghdad in 1996 illustrate the party's 'no permanent enemies, only permanent interests' approach to Kurdish politics. In the latter episode, the combined forces of the Iraqi military and the KDP swept through PUK-occupied Arbil, forcing out the PUK and capturing several hundred INC militia, who were executed by the occupying Iraqi forces. The INC was devastated. It lost its bases in Iraqi Kurdistan, many of its activists were killed and Saddam had secured a major propaganda victory. The PUK, similarly, was severely weakened. For the KDP, however, it was the start of a five-year period of unrivalled prosperity for Arbil, Dohuk and the KDP itself, and an increase in overall security. It is the maintenance of this position which now dominates the thinking of the KDP, and which has meant that, at times, Barzani and the KDP leadership have remained somewhat aloof from the activities of the rest of the opposition.

For the PUK, it has been easier to deal with the Iraqi opposition due to its long-standing relations with the INC, greater economic security and Talabani's openly bombastic attitude towards Saddam. Talabani tends to seize opportunities as they appear. Sometimes this works (he certainly looks successful at the end of 2002) and sometimes he loses badly (as in his misjudged attack against the KDP in 1997). He is also much less cautious than Barzani. They both understand the American message, but instead of erring with Barzani on the side of caution, Talabani has gone out

of his way to 'make the right noises' in the US. The PUK has avoided aggravating the Turkish government, which would place the US in a difficult position; and, perhaps most importantly, it has attempted to become politically essential to the Iraqi opposition.

The KDP fully appreciates the determination of the US administration to remove Saddam's regime. However, whilst the KDP leadership's opposition towards Saddam is unequalled, it can be argued that Saddam has proved to be a more reliable ally in times of need than the US.¹² The invasion of Arbil in August 1996 illustrates this fact, and the shared economic interests between the KDP and Baghdad are readily apparent. The KDP, which has nurtured its position, particularly since 1997, and become perhaps the most powerful entity in Iraqi Kurdistan, has more to lose in a post-Saddam Iraq than the PUK. The KDP, therefore, is aggressively pursuing a federal Kurdish entity within a new Iraq in an attempt to preserve its pre-eminence. Virtually all calls for 'federalism' have originated from the KDP, as have recent attempts to unify the political system.¹³ The KDP's relations with Turkey have deteriorated as KDP rhetoric has become increasingly nationalistic (particularly when the issue of the Turkoman population is brought up by Ankara as a means to allow proxy intervention).

The approach of the PUK is somewhat different. Talabani still espouses a federal model for a post-Saddam Iraq, but not as vociferously as the KDP. When necessary, the PUK seems content to play down Kurdish nationalism and instead pursue a policy of unfettered collaboration with the Iraqi opposition as a whole, refusing to become embroiled in issues relating to the Turkomans or the details of a federal system.

The KDP and PUK are attempting to secure their objectives for a post-Saddam Iraq whilst Saddam is still in power. It is a dangerous game, but one that they have to play. Only time will tell which strategy will prove to be successful – the cooperative and pro-opposition approach of the PUK or the cautious yet nationalistic style of the KDP. Perhaps the next round of these strategies will be played out in the forthcoming conference of Iraqi opposition groups. If we consider the major gatherings of the opposition which have occurred since 1991 – in Vienna (June 1992), Salahadin (October 1992) and New York (October 1999) – the Kurds have always managed to achieve concessions on different aspects of Kurdish

interests, whether they be national rights, federalism or inclusion in central government.

The influence of outside actors

There has been a dangerous propensity for the KDP and PUK to encourage neighbouring states to become involved in the internal affairs of Iraqi Kurdistan. The three countries which could possibly become involved during the process of regime change are Iran, Turkey and, of course, Iraq itself. A further dynamic, which has been developing steadily since late 1998, is the influence of al-Qaeda upon Iraqi Kurdistan's indigenous Islamist groups.

Current regional relations

The political geography of Iraqi Kurdistan has resulted in the KDP and PUK forming different sets of relations with neighbouring states. The KDP, with its long border with Turkey, has had for the most part a fruitful partnership with its powerful northern neighbour. Both Turkey and the KDP benefited from huge amounts of oil being smuggled from Mosul (Iraq-proper) into KDP territory at Dohuk and Zakho, and then into Turkey. The KDP also assisted Turkish forces in targeting Kurdistan Workers' Party (PKK) forces based in Iraqi Kurdistan in the mid-1990s, and Turkey came to Massoud Barzani's aid when the PUK attacked the KDP in 1997.¹⁴ More recently, however, the relationship has become increasingly acrimonious. Fuelled by the KDP's use of the rhetoric of Kurdish nationalism and its active advancement of a federal Kurdish entity in Iraq with Kirkuk at its centre, Turkey has significantly reduced the oil-smuggling revenue and has adopted in other ways a threatening posture towards the KDP. Turkey has proved to be particularly adept at using the Iraqi Turkoman Front (ITF) as a proxy against Barzani, further fuelling tensions.¹⁵

PUK-controlled territory shares a long border with Iran, and the PUK has always relied upon Tehran for support. More recently, however, strains were created by Iran's policy of protecting and supporting the various Islamist groups which operate east of Sulaymaniyah in the environs of Halabja, Khormal and Tawella. The PUK and Islamists have fought in the past, and the activities of groups such as Ansar al-Islam, which have included the assassination of a leading KDP politician, Franso Hariri, and the

attempted assassination of the PUK Prime Minister Dr Barham Saleh, have led Talabani to take an increasingly coercive line against Ansar.¹⁶ But, probably due to Iranian pressure, the PUK has still not managed to fully remove the threat posed by these groups.¹⁷ Perhaps for this reason, from 2000 onwards, the PUK actively courted Turkey as a potential ally. Relations between the two had previously been strained by the PUK's tacit support of the PKK and by the Turkish military supporting the KDP in 1997. However, by 2001, the Turkey-PUK relationship was strong and the PUK had seemingly achieved what many thought to be impossible – cooperating with the governments of Turkey and Iran simultaneously.

Kurdish-inspired involvement

Would the Kurds themselves invite a neighbouring power into Iraqi Kurdistan during the regime-change period? Such events have not been uncommon over the last ten years, whether it has been the PUK seeking Iranian involvement or the KDP seeking Turkish or Iraqi intervention. The situation is now quite different. The heightened determination of the US to remove Saddam would make the chances of either the KDP or PUK inviting a neighbouring country's intervention remote. Both parties have learnt that they do not benefit from encouraging external intervention into their affairs, and that short-term gains can have damaging long-term consequences. However, their ability to resist the pressure which countries such as Iran and Turkey can apply, let alone the regime of Saddam Hussein, is questionable. If these parties were faced with a situation that could spell their ultimate demise, for example, the removal of the allocation of Iraqi oil revenue for the Kurdish region or the limiting of domestic political power, then the result would be political instability with a range of consequences, one of which could be a call for outside intervention.

Turkish and Iranian involvement

The leaderships of both KDP and PUK covet Kirkuk as the 'jewel in the crown' of Iraqi Kurdistan. However, there is probably no other event which would mobilise Turkey towards military intervention than Kirkuk being in the hands of Jalal Talabani or Massoud Barzani. This may be considered a product of the Iraqi Kurdistan of the period 1960–90, when Kirkuk was the holy grail, the city of Kurdish

folklore, for the guerrillas and *peshmerga*. The issue of Kirkuk has been heavily politicised recently, and again reflects the different approaches of the KDP and PUK to the current predicament. In brief, the Turkish government has been keen to portray Kirkuk as a Turkoman city, rather than Kurdish. The KDP response has been one of promoting the overt 'Kurdishness' of Kirkuk and disparaging the Iraqi Turkoman community in Iraqi Kurdistan as a whole, thereby again heightening tensions with Ankara. The PUK, however, has been blurring the issue of Kirkuk, with Barham Saleh indicating that perhaps the Turkish government was correct, a statement that provoked a furious exchange of views between the PUK and hard-line Kurdish nationalists.

Neither the KDP nor the PUK will ever really relinquish their desire to possess Kirkuk. The events of 1991 demonstrate the ability of the two parties to infiltrate an area and provoke an uprising. As Kirkuk is the only city worthy of such an effort from the Kurdish perspective, it would be surprising if arrangements were not in hand to start a revolt when the opportunity arises.

Iran's military interventions into Iraqi Kurdistan after the Iran-Iraq War have been far more limited than those of Turkey. Since the 1990s, its interventions have usually been limited and in support of its Kurdish ally, the PUK. Iran has used Iraqi Kurdish territory to support Islamist groups (especially around Halabja), or to pressure Saddam's regime by inserting elements of the SCIRI Badr Army into Kurdish territory. Iran would intervene if the formation of an Iraqi Kurdish 'state' was on the horizon, which is unlikely, or if Turkish influence increased dramatically. The disposition of Kirkuk would be important, because a long-term Kurdish occupation of Kirkuk would encourage a Turkish intervention, which would push Iran into a similar venture. This is yet another reason why Kirkuk remains a highly dangerous variable in a regime change scenario and explains the emphasis that US military planning gives to 'the race for Kirkuk.'

Both Turkey and Iran have their proxies within Iraqi Kurdistan. For Turkey, the Turkoman population has been politicised and presents a significant problem for Massoud Barzani and the KDP. Turkey is also promoting the interests of the ITF to the US administration, and it is highly probable that it will achieve increased prominence among the Iraqi opposition groups as a result,

much to the consternation of the KDP. For Iran, the various Islamist groups which are present in Iraqi Kurdistan are an obvious conduit by which to influence the political affairs of the region. The growing militancy of these groups and their alleged links with al-Qaeda are receiving an increasing amount of attention from US and other Western government agencies.

Political Islam and al-Qaeda activity in Iraqi Kurdistan¹⁸

Iraqi Kurdistan is a predominantly Islamic society, and it should therefore be no surprise that there has been a steady development of Islamist political parties in the region, particularly since 1991.¹⁹ Some of these parties, including the Islamic Movement of Kurdistan (IMK) had formed as early as the late 1970s, sparked by the Islamic Revolution in Iran and had fought against Saddam's regime during the 1980s.²⁰ However, it was the development of the *de facto* state and the instabilities which characterised Iraqi Kurdistan in the mid-1990s that gave Islamist parties the space and opportunity in which to become a force in the region.

The IMK, under the leadership of Sheikh Othman Abdel Aziz, benefited from a series of defectors from the KDP and PUK ranks. The defectors had become increasingly despondent due to the interfactional fighting prevalent in the early to mid-1990s. The ranks of the IMK were further swelled by returning Kurds who had fought with the *mujahiddin* in Afghanistan. From early 1992, according to PUK sources, Saddam established links with the IMK, authorising his security network to fund and provide equipment to it in order to promote instability in Iraqi Kurdistan. The IMK was therefore in a position to benefit from the support of both Iran and Iraq.

The IMK subsequently became embroiled in the interfactional fighting which broke out in 1994. Serious fighting between the IMK and PUK took place throughout the region. After being severely weakened by the PUK, the IMK benefited from the action of the KDP and Iraqi government against the PUK in August 1996 and succeeded in achieving control of the Halabja region and areas bordering with Iran. From 1997, an uneasy peace existed between the PUK and IMK. However, throughout this period, the IMK was being increasingly radicalised by Kurds returning from Afghanistan, and by the movement of support away from Sheikh Othman's replacement, his brother Mulla Ali Abdel Aziz, towards a

younger and more militant range of party leaders. Mulla Ali attempted to stem these developments by amalgamating the IMK with the Islamic Renaissance Party (IRP), headed by his brother, Mulla Siddiq, to form the Islamic Unity Movement of Kurdistan (IUMK), but it proved to be too late.

Chief among the younger leaders within the Islamist movements was Mulla Ali Bapir. On 30 May 2002, Ali Bapir declared the establishment of the Islamic Group of Kurdistan (IGK), effectively breaking up the IMK. Ali Bapir attracted approximately three-quarters of IUMK personnel and achieved control of the Iran–Iraq border area. At the same meeting which saw the establishment of the IGK, the ultra-fanatical members demanded a *jihād* to be launched, particularly against the secularist KDP and PUK. Mulla Ali and Ali Bapir both refused, resulting in a further split and the formation of the Jund al-Islam on 31 August 2001. According to PUK sources, Osama bin Laden stepped into this division and supported the unification of the more extreme Islamist Kurdish groups previously marginalised by the IUMK. The main militant groups with significant numbers of Kurds who had fought in Afghanistan were as follows: Kurdish Hamas, formed in 1997 by Omar Barziyani due to his disapproval of the IMK-PUK peace process; Islamic Tawhid, created covertly in Arbil as a sub-group of IMK, headed by Mulla Salman al-Tawhidi; and the Hezi Du Soran (Soran Second Force). This was the largest army of the IUMK, consisting of some 400 highly trained Kurdish fighters complemented by some 60 Arab-Afghans. The force was commanded by Aso Hawleri.

The Jund al-Islam was renamed Ansar al-Islam after Najmuddin Faraj Ahmad (Mulla Krekar) took a leadership role. Mulla Krekar was previously a military commander under Mulla Ali Abdel Aziz in the IUMK. He attempted to be a moderating influence, in relative terms, upon the Ansar al-Islam and pursued a policy of attempting to work towards a reconciliation with the PUK and promoting relations with the KRG in Sulaymaniyah. His arrest in the Netherlands in September 2002 may shed some light on the more secretive influences which permeate the militant Islamist groups within Iraqi Kurdistan.²¹ It appears that Saddam's security apparatus and the network of al-Qaeda have both been involved with Kurdish Islamist groups. However, whether this involvement occurred concomitantly and in a coordinated manner still remains unclear.

Conclusion

The problem the Kurds face is that, once Saddam is removed, their position on the international stage weakens. They have to attempt to locate themselves in positions of influence and authority with the US and within the Iraqi opposition. The KDP, keen to preserve its position of dominance, is pursuing a policy which may be characterised as cautious towards the US (thereby hedging its bets with Saddam, just in case), domineering within the opposition (in an attempt to create an opposition in which its influence is maximised), and confrontational towards Turkey (a manifestation of its Kurdish nationalism). The PUK, starting from a weaker position, recognises that it could benefit greatly from regime change and, therefore, is more open towards US objectives cooperative within the opposition (as a means to achieve influence in a future Baghdad), and is attempting to keep relations with all neighbours problem-free.

In the event of a military attack aimed at regime change, the most immediate concern would be the fate of Kirkuk. It is the tripwire which could promote external involvement from Turkey and then Iran, and could also witness fighting between different ethnic groups (whether they be Kurd, Turkomen or indeed Arab), or even between the KDP and PUK themselves. In the transitional period, immediate concerns would include maintaining the value of the Kurdish unit of currency, the OID, and the provisions made for maintaining the share of oil revenue for the northern governorates.

Kurdish politicians from every party constantly use the phrase the 'Kurdish genie is now out of the bottle', meaning that it will be impossible for the Kurds to return to their former victimised, marginalised position. But they may be wrong. If Saddam is removed, the focus of the world in general, and the US administration in particular, will be on Baghdad. Saddam will probably be replaced by a Sunni Arab politician, and the international community will concentrate upon rehabilitating the Iraqi economy and reintegrating it, and its oil wealth, into the international system. By then, the danger is that the Kurds' voice will be still heard, but rarely listened to. The leaderships of KDP and the PUK will have to ensure that they speak with a unified voice and act in a unified manner in an attempt to keep the gains that have been made.

Notes

- ¹ For the purposes of this paper, the northern governorates of Iraq, which have been outside the control of Baghdad since 1991, are referred to as 'Iraqi Kurdistan'. This is not to imply that the region is wholly 'Kurdish'. There are significant populations of other peoples, including Assyrians and Turkomans. Furthermore, the area of the region in Iraq which may be identified as possessing a majority Kurdish population is somewhat greater than 'Iraqi Kurdistan' as defined.
- ² 1997 was the year in which the last round of fighting between the KDP and PUK occurred. Since then, a ceasefire has been maintained and an attempt has been made to implement normalisation strategies as agreed in the US-brokered Washington Agreement of September 1998.
- ³ The prime minister of the first cabinet (June 1992–March 1993) was Dr Fuad Massoum of the PUK, with Dr Roj Nuri Shawais of the KDP appointed as deputy prime minister. The second cabinet (March 1993–August 1996) was presided over by Kosrat Rasoul Ali of the PUK, again with Dr Roj as Deputy. The KDP headed the KNA with Jawher Namiq Salim being appointed Speaker.
- ⁴ The attack aimed to destroy the Iraqi V Corps stationed at the Iraqi–Kurdish dividing line, capture Mosul and Kirkuk and promote a national uprising against Saddam.
- ⁵ The situation between the KDP and PUK continued to worsen throughout 1995 and 1996. The KDP was angered by its expulsion from Arbil and concerned about the increasing militarisation of the PUK. The PUK continued to be motivated by gaining a share of the ever-increasing oil-smuggling revenue which the KDP received through its control of Dohuk and Zakho. Recognising these problems, neighbouring countries were heavily involved in the heightening of tension, with Iran supporting the PUK, and the KDP increasingly turning to Baghdad. Claiming concern regarding the strength of the PUK–Iran alliance in mid-1996, and receiving little support from the US to alleviate the problem, the KDP formed a temporary alliance with Saddam, resulting in the invasion of Arbil city and the expulsion of the PUK.
- ⁶ The KDP and PUK agreed to re-assemble a joint KNA in Arbil in October 2002, with PUK representatives taking their places for the first time since the invasion of Arbil in August 1996. The reunification of the KNA was called for by the Washington Agreement of 1998 and it is thought that the US has applied pressure to unite the Kurds in advance of regime change in Iraq. Yet it is more likely that the initiative originated with the PUK and KDP themselves, as the Washington Agreement has been increasingly overlooked by the US as it focuses more on Baghdad. It is, however, highly likely that the full unification of the Kurdish political system, with a unified executive, will be overtaken by events.
- ⁷ Since 1996, Kurdish-controlled Iraq has been divided into two administrative areas, each

representing the area of dominance of the KDP and PUK. The KDP retain the entirety of the governorate of Dohuk, with most of Arbil governorate, including the capital city of Arbil itself. The KDP therefore occupies the northwestern portion of Iraqi Kurdistan, with its KRG residing in Arbil and the KDP headquarters nearby in Salahadin. The PUK retains the entirety of the governorate of Sulaymaniyah, with a large portion of Kirkuk governorate (though not including the city of Kirkuk itself), and a small part of Arbil governorate. The PUK's governmental apparatus resides in the city of Sulaymaniyah, with its party structure being divided between this city and the political bureau complex at Kalarcholan.

⁸ The original oil-for-food deal (Security Council Resolution 986) was agreed between the government of Iraq and the UN in 1996. However, it was not until 1997 that funds became available through the programme.

⁹ Iraqi Kurdistan now has a predominantly urban population, with an overall estimated population of approximately 4 million people.

¹⁰ Yaphe, J (2002) 'America's War on Iraq: Myths and Opportunities', in this volume.

¹¹ It is useful to make a distinction between the *peshmerga* and the 'Kurdistan Army'. The *peshmerga* remain the traditional tribal militia of the KDP and the older informal militia of the PUK. Both parties have attempted to rationalise their military

structures and place military activities under the control of their respective KRGs and Ministry of *Peshmerga* Affairs (Defence). There are therefore party *peshmerga* (normally the 'old guard' of the Kurdish movement) and 'government' soldiers (mainly recruited in the post-1996 period).

¹² Arguably, few families/tribes have been targeted as systematically as the Barzanis by Saddam's regime.

¹³ The KDP went as far as creating a 'draft constitution for an Arab-Kurdish federation in Iraq'. The document was then accepted by the PUK towards the end of September 2002. Federalism has become a dominant theme of the KDP's media outlets, and has been forwarded extensively by the Centre for Global Peace at the American University in Washington DC, where the KDP funds the Mulla Mustafa Barzani Chair (see, for example, Carole O'Leary, 'Post-Saddam Iraq', *Washington Times*, 26 September 2002).

¹⁴ The PKK (Parti Karkaren Kurdistan – Kurdistan Workers' Party), is a Turkish Kurdish separatist party headed, until his capture, by Abdullah Ocalan.

¹⁵ A common strategy employed by the ITF has been to pay Iraqi Kurds to register as Turkomans, thereby officially increasing the proportion of Turkomans within the region. The presence of this Turkic minority in the region is used, in part, to justify Turkish military intervention in Iraqi Kurdistan.

¹⁶ Franso Hariri, close confidante of Massoud Barzani, ex-governor of Arbil and head of the KDP's Arbil party organisation, was

assassinated in February 2001 by groups reportedly affiliated to the renegade al-Tawhid faction of the Islamic Unity Movement of Kurdistan (IUMK). Barham Saleh survived an assassination attempt in April 2002. His assailants were captured and admitted to belonging to the Jund al-Islam (later renamed Ansar al-Islam).

¹⁷ The PUK is adamant that these groups are part of, or at least related to, the al-Qaeda network, and have as members certain high ranking Arab-Afghans of that organisation. The leader of one of the main groups, Mulla Krekar of the Ansar al-Islam, was arrested in the Netherlands on 13 September 2002. It remains to be seen whether links between Kurdish Islamist groups and al-Qaeda will be verified.

¹⁸ The focus of this section is on the more militant Islamist factions of Iraqi Kurdistan. It is important to note that there are several moderate Islamist parties, charities and groups that operate in the region and are a force promoting stability. The most prominent of these groups is the Kurdistan Islamic Union (KIU), which adheres to a policy of unarmed political activity and full involvement with all political parties and the KRGs. Interestingly, the KIU is the most popular Islamist political party in Iraqi Kurdistan and may prove to be a significant actor if democratic structures are developed further in the region. The KIU is part of the Muslim Brotherhood and has been supported to a significant extent by Saudi Arabia and other Gulf states.

¹⁹ Sources for this section include

interviews conducted in Halabja with members of Islamist parties and discussions with PUK personnel in Sulaymaniyah. Information regarding the historical development of militant Islamist parties in Iraqi Kurdistan has been provided by Roj Nariman Bahjat (a KRG-PUK official in Sulaymaniyah during 1999–2001), who conducted field research in Iraqi Kurdistan during the rise of the Jund al-Islam.

²⁰ Interview with IMK Political Bureau members, Halabja, June 1998.

²¹ His arrest was made possible due to the fact that Iran refused him entry, possibly in an attempt to placate the US in the current focus on Islamist militant groups. He then landed in Sweden which handed him over to Dutch authorities on drug trafficking charges. US administration representatives are reportedly very keen to interview him.

