

## After Saddam Hussein

*The Kurds have set up a cohesive administration in northern Iraq, but the UN embargo is an unnecessary thorn in their daily life—and counterproductive to the aim of upsetting the Baghdad regime*

AS I PREPARED to travel to Iraqi Kurdistan last June, Peter Galbraith, a Senate Foreign Relations Committee staffer and a longtime champion of the Kurds, sought to alleviate my apprehensions. I would be safer there, he said, than in Washington, D.C. Although he had visited northern Iraq several times since the Gulf War, I was skeptical. Yet less than twelve hours after arriving in Iraq, I recognized that he was probably right.

Iraq's Kurds are effectively running their own affairs, administering a population of 3.5 million in a territory almost twice the size of Israel. They are doing so with considerable success, having managed the transition from authoritarian rule better than many others, including Afghans, Somalis, and the various peoples of the former Soviet Union. In fact, with little outside assistance the Kurds have accomplished what George Bush has so far failed to achieve elsewhere in Iraq—the orderly overthrow of Saddam Hussein's regime.

In Sulaimaniya, the largest and southernmost city under Kurdish control, I started to understand the remarkable social cohesion underlying the success of the Iraqi Kurds' administration. Sulaimaniya's police chief explained that there was, in fact, less crime now in northern Iraq than there had been under the Ba'ath. Thus policemen's jobs had become easier. "Before, people didn't trust the police and avoided them. Now they cooperate with us."

Fouad Masoum, the head of the regional Kurdish government elected last May, made a similar observation. Cheating on the high school matriculation exams was down. "Before, cheating was a good thing to do because it was against the regime. Now the students feel responsible."

The Iraqi Kurds' strong feelings of communal solidarity are rare in the Middle East, where tribal, religious, and

ED KASHI/IB PICTURES



*Near the Turkish border poor Kurds scavenge wheat missed by a landowner's harvester*

ethnic factionalism is often fatal to social order. The Kurds were once known for such divisions, and apprehension remains that these could re-emerge, particularly between the two main parties, the Patriotic Union of Kurdistan, headed by Jalal Talabani, and the Kurdistan Democratic Party, headed by Massoud Barzani, the son of the legendary Mulla Mustafa Barzani. Yet nearly two decades of increasingly genocidal repression has forged a remarkable unity among the people, and today the leadership recognizes that any split could provide Saddam Hussein with a deadly opportunity to intervene. Relief is universal among the Kurds that the Iraqi dictator is gone from their area, and even the present hard times seem good compared with the hell of the recent past. Thus internal fighting is not a significant problem among Iraq's Kurds, although Baghdad tries to provoke conflict among them. The Palestinians, in contrast, suffer from such problems.

Moreover, the Iraqi population is relatively well educated by regional standards, and its bureaucracy is relatively disciplined and effective. Iraqi Kurds share in those qualities. They are proud of what they have accomplished, and they value dignity and honor to a degree rare in the West. Despite the economic problems, I did not see a single adult begging. Of what major American city can that be said? Driving through the countryside late one afternoon, I picked up a man sitting by the road with a huge sack. He had lost his identity papers and could not get rations. He

had been gleaning the fields and had more children to feed than dinars in his pocket. As I took out some money, he went through the ritual of declining it, leaving me to insist that he accept it.

Despite the Kurds' relief that Saddam Hussein was gone, Iraqi Kurdistan

ED KASHI/IB PICTURES



*Week-long lines for home-heating oil*

was a very sad place. Evidence of atrocities was everywhere. To suppress the Kurdish rebellion during the Iran-Iraq war, Saddam Hussein depopulated the countryside, destroying nearly 4,000 of the 5,000 Kurdish villages. Piles of rubble where villages once stood testify to Baghdad's barbarous campaign.

Qushtapa is today home to the Barzan widows. Eight thousand of Massoud

Barzani's kinsmen—one in five of the men of the Barzani tribe—were killed. The widows and their children settled in this concrete-block village south of Irbil, the administrative capital in the center of Iraqi Kurdistan. Qushtapa has only dirt roads and no running water, owing to Saddam Hussein's vengefulness.



ED KASHI/IB PICTURES

*A guerrilla fighter and orphaned relatives*

The women tell of murderous persecution going back to 1975, when the Kurdish revolt, then led by Massoud Barzani's father and supported by Iran, the United States, and Israel, suddenly collapsed after the Shah of Iran reached a surprise agreement with the Iraqi leader, and the United States cut off aid to the Kurdish rebels. ("Our movement and people are being destroyed in an unbelievable way," Mustafa Barzani wrote to Secretary of State Henry Kissinger, pleading for help. Kissinger did not deign to reply. Explaining in secret testimony why the United States abandoned the Kurds, Kissinger offered this pithy profile in cynicism: "Covert action should not be confused with missionary work.") In 1975 the Iraqi army came and rounded up everyone in the widows' village, taking them to a compound in the southern desert. On the walls of the huts, which were unfit for human habitation, was scrawled "Dar al-Fana"—"House of Annihilation." Many people died. Eventually the survivors were allowed to return to the north, and ended up in Qushtapa. But in 1983, after Iraq began to lose the war with revolutionary Iran, the army returned. One night soldiers surrounded the village, seizing every grown male,

including the blind and the crippled. The women and children cried and tried to follow their husbands, sons, and fathers, but Iraqi forces fired on them, forcing them back.

As this story came to an end, I asked my interlocutor, who seemed strangely emotionless, what she felt. "As long as we are all created by one God," she said, "it must be the end of days that such things happen, because all laws are reversed at the end of days." I heard many other stories of atrocities, told in the same flat voice, without anger, self-pity, or shyness. They want the world, particularly America, to know: Baghdad's use of chemical weapons was only one element of a genocidal campaign, the full dimensions of which are not yet recognized.

But while the memory of past horrors lingered, there was also a remarkable happiness, a tangible giddiness, in the clear summer air of Iraqi Kurdistan. Unlike most of the Middle East, the Kurdish countryside is well watered and green. Traveling south to Sulaimaniya we passed many families marking a Muslim holiday with picnics in shady valleys by the clear streams that flow from the Kurdish mountains. My escort explained that such picnics had been forbidden under the Ba'ath, because the entire countryside had been off limits.

Similarly, when we arrived in Sulaimaniya, at dusk, we saw hundreds of people out walking. This, too—a stroll in the cool evening air—had been impossible under the Ba'ath. Young men had feared arrest and young women had hesitated to venture out alone.

At the summer home of the Iraqi Vice President, which now serves as the Irbil headquarters of the Patriotic Union of Kurdistan, a picture of a smiling, bespectacled Jalal Talabani was perched on a chair at the entrance, while guerrillas who had spent the past decade waging a difficult campaign against Baghdad from their mountain hideouts lounged comfortably about the house and grounds, taking particular pleasure in the sweet ripe apricots in the Vice President's extensive orchard.

**I**N OCTOBER of last year, when Saddam Hussein imposed a blockade on the north, he also halted the payment of salaries to government officials there, ordering them back to Iraqi-held territory. Arabs working in the north obeyed, but Kurdish officials remained at their posts. That is when the Kurdistan Front, the coordinating body for

the various Kurdish parties, took over the administration of northern Iraq, assuming responsibility for paying the salaries of essential workers, such as policemen and garbage men, and providing subsidized rations to the population. But those in what are considered to be less essential government jobs, among them schoolteachers, are paid only sporadically, and Kurdistan Front rations have to be supplemented in the market. Many people are living off their savings, and this winter there will be shortages of food and fuel.

Truck traffic from Turkey illustrates the local ingenuity in handling otherwise daunting economic problems. Iraq offers gasoline for sale in Mosul at less than one cent a liter. Turkish trucks come with huge containers strapped to their sides to pick up the gas. They are, in turn, required to bring in food at subsidized prices. Without the essentially free oil, the flow of food into Iraq would be a trickle. Some food gets dropped off in the north, and the rest is carried into Iraq proper. That oil trade violates the UN embargo, but sensibly no one complains, because the population would otherwise starve. The Kurdistan Front generates income by taxing the trucks on their way to Mosul, although revenues fall far short of what is needed.

Many obstacles to normal economic activity exist in Iraqi Kurdistan. Because of the two embargoes—from the UN and from Baghdad—there is no credit or banking system. Most transactions take place in five- and ten-dinar notes, the equivalent of thirty-three and sixty-six cents. People carry huge wads of bills. Nevertheless, the supply and distribution system has not broken down, as it did in the former Soviet Union. The Middle East has a long commercial tradition.

The embargoes also interfere with private-sector activity. Kurdish peasants could not obtain seed, fertilizer, or pesticides for the last harvest. As a result, the crop was about half what it might have been. One peasant family explained to me that they had used old seed for the summer harvest. They were eating seed that was still older to supplement their rations. If they did not get supplies for the next planting season, there would be no harvest.

Similarly, kerosene for heating looked to be in seriously short supply. Reserves were largely consumed last winter, the harshest in living memory. Irbil's chief petroleum engineer explained the problem to me, using his personal circum-

stances as illustration. He began last winter with six barrels of kerosene. In June he had half a barrel and did not know how he would obtain more.

**I**NCREDIBLY, the Kurds' economic problems are not necessary. Rather, they are a consequence of the mindless application of the UN embargo to northern Iraq. Formally, the embargo exists to force Saddam Hussein to comply with the UN resolutions; the scarcely concealed goal is to oust him. But because he does not control the north, enforcing the embargo there does not hurt him. In fact, it strengthens his position, for the greater the prosperity of areas not under his control, the greater the dissatisfaction inside Iraq proper and the more pressure on the dictator.

Iraqi Kurdistan has oil fields that, were it not for the embargo, could be developed within a year, generating income and much-needed fuel. The reason for maintaining the embargo on northern Iraq is to conciliate traditionalists in Turkey who are nervous about an independent Kurdish state and wary of any differentiation between the north and Iraq proper.

Yet there are really two lines of thought in Turkey. Some civilian politicians are more forthcoming with the Kurds, both Iraq's and Turkey's own. Some of them believe that concessions to Kurdish sentiments are the best counter to the Marxist Kurdistan Workers Party (PKK), whose terrorist campaign in southeastern Turkey has escalated dramatically in the past year. They also believe that conciliating Iraq's Kurds will help relations with key European countries that have strong Kurdish constituencies, including France, Great Britain, and Germany. Some politicians, notably the Turkish President, Turgut Ozal, even believe that a humanitarian approach to the Iraqi Kurds could enhance Turkey's strategic position in the region. "Provide Comfort," the coalition operation that established the Kurdish safe-haven zone, was Ozal's idea.

Turkish hard-liners, who are significantly represented in the army and other bureaucracies, would like to see Baghdad's authority re-established over the north. But that would mean a renewal of the Kurdish genocide. Even Saddam Hussein's ouster would not solve the problem. Kurds told me that it was Hussein Kamil, the Iraqi President's son-in-law, who warned the Kurds in their abortive postwar negoti-

ations, "How long will the United States stay? One year? Two years? Five years? Eventually they will go, and then we'll know how to take care of you." Moreover, the return of Ba'athist authority to northern Iraq would likely precipitate another Kurdish flight, recreating the crisis that resulted in the safe havens. Very hard-line elements may hope to seal the border, trapping the population between two armies. Ankara initially tried to do that in 1988, when Baghdad used chemical weapons against the Kurds immediately after the Iran-Iraq war ended, unleashing a flood of refugees. Then, international pressure obliged Turkey to open the frontier. The present risk is that Turkish hard-liners, frustrated at the PKK's continuing terrorism, will persuade themselves that it is better to ride out a wave of international protest than to continue battling the PKK under present circumstances.

They are probably wrong on two counts, however. First, letting Baghdad reassert control over the north will not solve their Kurdish problem. Turkish-Iraqi relations will not return to what they were before the Gulf War, when the two countries cooperated against Kurdish insurgents. Relations will remain strained. Saddam Hussein supports the PKK now. He will likely continue to do so as leverage against Turkey, even if he is allowed to return to the north. It would probably be easier for Turkey to reach an agreement on controlling the PKK with the Iraqi Kurds than to reach one with Baghdad—an argument Ozal himself has made.

Second, Iraq's Kurdish leadership says it does not seek independence. The area is landlocked, surrounded by states that oppose Kurdish independence. Although the ability of a people to administer their own affairs successfully might be deemed to warrant independence, the Kurdish demand is for autonomy. The Kurds recognize that independence is practically impossible. That is why they joined with Sunni and Shiite elements last June to form the opposition Iraqi National Congress in an attempt to oust Saddam Hussein, although the immediate result, predictably enough, was to intensify Baghdad's pressure on the north.

The Kurds' overriding objective is that Saddam Hussein not return to the north. I asked what they would do if the coalition remained unwilling to make the effort necessary to oust him.

Perhaps they should try to join another country? Turkey is the obvious candidate. Ordinary citizens and the Kurdish leadership both were agreeable to that suggestion. Many, including Massoud Barzani, had already been considering it, and Jalal Talabani subsequently raised the possibility publicly while he was visiting Turkey.

For now the Kurds would like to put Provide Comfort on a more durable foundation. They would like it to be open-ended, not subject to an agreement that must be renewed every six months by Turkey's parliament. The agreement is up for renewal again this month. It is critical that Provide Comfort be continued. The life of a people is at stake.

—Laurie Mylroie