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CARNEGIE SPECIAL REPORT

NORTHERN IRAQ: ONE YEAR LATER

by

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Frederick Cuny is a part-time senior associate at the Carnegie Endowment for International Peace. He spent five months in northern Iraq in 1991 helping plan and implement the return of the more than 400,000 Kurds who had fled to Turkey in the aftermath of the failed Kurdish uprising against Saddam Hussein. The Endowment asked him to return to northern Iraq to make a first-hand assessment of what has happened in the area in the intervening year and the prospects for the Kurds.

This is his report of a complex and changing situation. The future of the Iraqi Kurds is very uncertain. The findings and recommendations, of course, represent Mr. Cuny's views only. The Carnegie Endowment only emphasizes the importance of the issue.

-- Morton Abramowitz
President, Carnegie Endowment

I. INTRODUCTION AND PRINCIPAL FINDINGS

On July 15, 1991, the last of the allied combat soldiers sent to northern Iraq to help establish a safe haven for Kurdish refugees left the security zone, bringing an end to one of the most remarkable humanitarian operations in history. In less than three months, a combined military and civilian task force known as Operation Provide Comfort had effectively stopped the persecution of Kurds by the Iraqi government, returned 400,000 refugees to northern Iraq, helped restart the economy, and put the Kurds in a better position to negotiate their future status with the Iraqi government.

With the withdrawal of combat troops, the allies had hoped that the overall problem would soon be resolved and that the United States and its allies could disengage militarily from the region. That did not happen. The allies continue to extend military protection

* Victor Tanner helped research and write portions of this report.

The opinions expressed in this article are solely those of the author.



and maintain a small team in the area to convey a sense of a commitment to the Kurds until they are in a better position to normalize their situation within Iraq. That situation remains highly charged and has become more complex due to other factors such as the increased intensity of an insurgency in the Kurdish areas of Turkey led by the Kurdish Workers Party (PKK). Saddam Hussein remains the prevalent threat to the Iraqi Kurds and his army has recently increased its presence in the areas bordering on the Kurdish enclave.

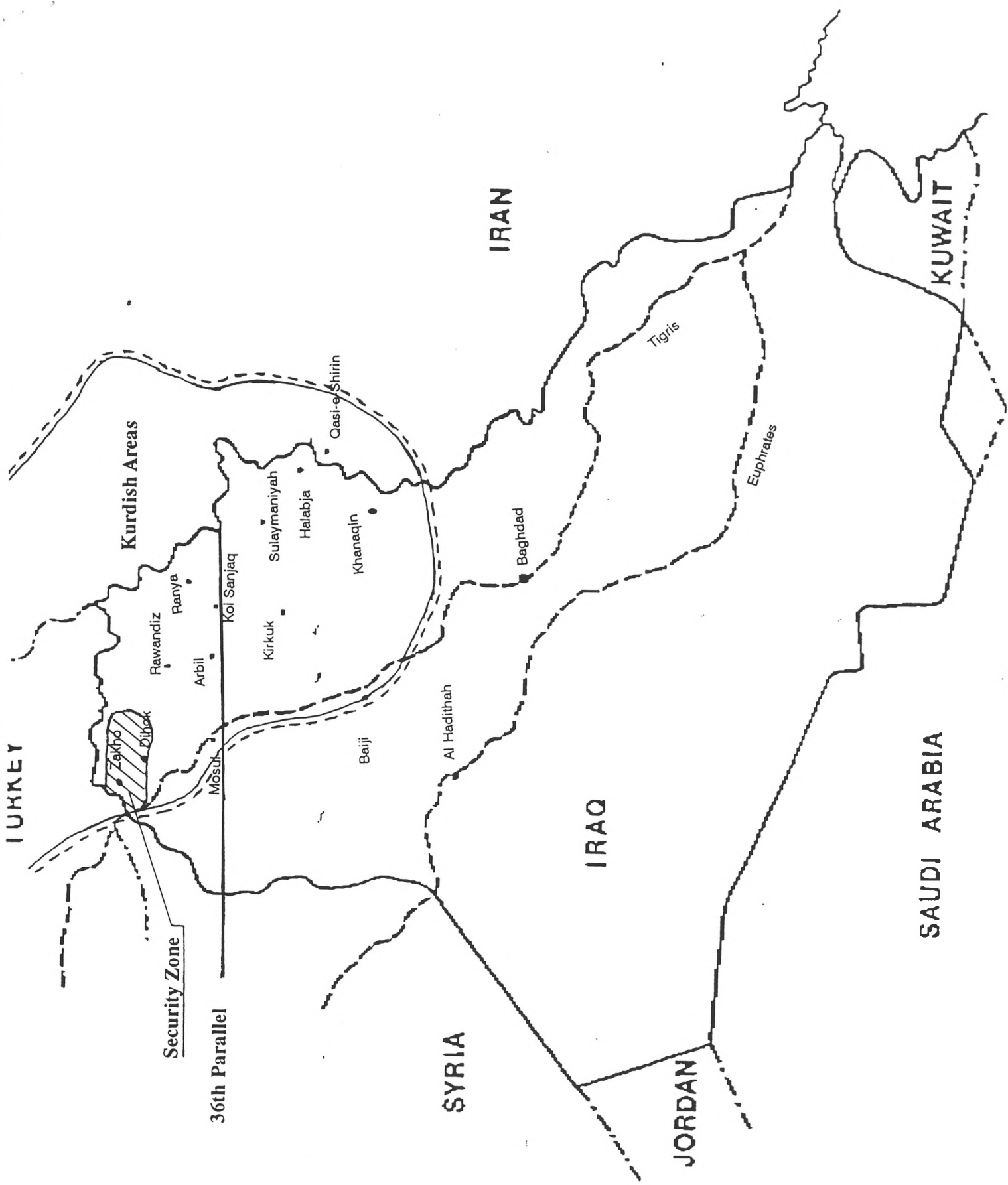
In the midst of this situation, the United States and its allies are faced with several dilemmas, including:

- How to protect the Iraqi Kurds without being drawn into a conflict with Iraq;
- How to support the Kurds without alienating Turkey, a major U.S. ally;
- How to protect the Kurds without encouraging them to think that the Allies will support their independence; and
- How to bring pressure on the government of Saddam Hussein without hurting the Kurds (and other anti-government elements.)

This report examines the evolution of the current situation in northern Iraq, analyses the dilemmas that face U.S. and allied policymakers, explores potential problems and makes some suggestions for addressing them.

SUMMARY OF MAJOR FINDINGS

1. The situation is stalemated. The parties are playing for time. The allies, Iraqis, Turks, and the Kurds' other neighbors are all caught in a situation from which they can neither disengage nor resolve.
2. The Kurds are trying to take advantage of the others' gridlock by solidifying their political, economic and military situation and moving slowly and stealthily toward something that is more than autonomy within Iraq. Their recent elections have unified the country and increased their standing in Europe, but that will have little impact on the outcome of their situation.
3. Despite Kurdish aspirations for self determination, they are still tied closely by geography, economics, and demography to Iraq. Over a quarter of the Iraqi Kurdish population lives outside Kurdistan and has shown no sign of moving to the north.
4. The independent moves by the Iraqi Kurds have alarmed the Turks who are involved in an escalating conflict with the Kurds in their own country. The Turkish military believes that the two groups have more than casual contacts and has tried to drive a wedge between the Iraqi Kurds and the PKK by bombing Kurdistan.
5. The Iraqis may have been receiving the wrong signals regarding allied resolve to protect the Kurds during this period due to the workings of the allied policymaking system. However, the imposition of the recent "no fly zone" over southern Iraq should make it clear that the allies will use military force to protect minorities within the country, at least for the near future.
6. A major new refugee crisis is unlikely as long as the allies maintain the restrictions on the Iraqi air force.
7. During the year, the Iraqis continuously probed and tested allied resolve and will continue to do so. The no fly zone in the south was also an effective countermeasure to recent Iraqi military moves in the north and should deter direct military action against the Kurds. Nonetheless, Saddam Hussein may try to create an incident to embarrass the Bush administration before the election, though his options are now very limited.
8. The most worrisome immediate problem is the potential for increased terrorism against foreigners working in Kurdistan and the effect that could have on the humanitarian presence that is part of the protective arrangements for the Kurds.
9. Despite a blockade by the Iraqis and recently by the PKK, as well as the adverse affects of the UN sanctions, Kurdistan is surviving economically. They are profiting from taxing blockade runners from Turkey, and even the Iraqis are forced to deal with them on issues of agriculture and electrical power.



TURKEY

Kurdish Areas

Security Zone

36th Parallel

SYRIA

IRAN

IRAQ

JORDAN

SAUDI ARABIA

KUWAIT

Tigris

Euphrates

Rawandiz

Ranya

Arbil

Mosul

Kirkuk

Sulaymaniyah

Halabja

Khanaqin

Baiji

Al Hadithah

Baghdad

Qasi-e Shirin

II. EVENTS OF THE LAST YEAR

THE SITUATION IN JULY, 1991

As the allies left the security zone, there was some cause for optimism. Repatriation of the refugees that had fled to the mountains along the Turkish border was complete. Only a small population of Kurds who considered it too risky to return to Iraq under any circumstances remained in a few small camps inside Turkey. In the area east of the allied security zone, many refugees who had fled to Iran were also returning.

Kurdish families were returning with the intent of rebuilding the villages destroyed by the Iraqi government between 1972 and 1990 and reclaiming their land. They wanted to reestablish a Kurdish presence in the rural areas. The only Kurdish city not being repopulated was Kirkuk, which the Iraqis held. Even though the allied security zone had not extended further than Suriya, a small town 100 km east of the Turkish border, the mere threat that the allies might extend the security zone further east had caused the Iraqis to halt their attacks in the area and withdraw to positions south of Irbil and Sulaymaniya. This left the Kurdish resistance, the *peshmerge*, in charge of most of what is traditionally considered Iraqi Kurdistan.

During the Kurdish uprising fighting had been limited to Kirkuk and the border areas of Kurdistan. In the allied security zone most of the destruction was to military or police facilities and, with the exception of some reprisal dynamiting, housing had been undamaged. Thus, when people returned from the mountains to their cities, many were able to go directly to their homes and quickly resume their normal life.

Before the allies left they helped harvest the abundant grain growing in the area and negotiate a deal between the Kurds and the Iraqi government to market the grain. The injection of capital that the grain sales provided helped to re-energize the economy and when the allies departed, shops, stores and virtually all economic activities were operating close to normal. Most importantly, trade had resumed with the south, the Kurds marketing grain and bringing basic provisions and fuel back to the north. Even municipal services, such as water, power and sanitary services, had been restored by the time of the allied departure.

POST-WITHDRAWAL SECURITY ARRANGEMENTS

To protect the Kurds against an Iraqi return, a dual military and humanitarian presence was left in place for what the allies hoped would be a short, interim period. To provide military protection the allies had delivered a *demarche* to the Iraqis warning them to stay out of the area and implying that military force would be used if the Iraqis tried to re-enter the zone by force.¹

¹ The *demarche* specified the security zone, but the Iraqis took it to apply to all of Kurdistan.

The *demarche* was backed up by three elements: First, the allies established a small, but potent rapid reaction force just across the Turkish border in Silopi. It was an international force with an integral assault helicopter company supported by fighters from Incirlik air base also in Turkey.

Second, the allies continued to fly armed reconnaissance missions over Kurdistan. The Iraqis were instructed not to interfere with the flights nor to operate any aircraft or anti-aircraft systems north of the 38th parallel.

Finally, the Military Coordination Center (MCC), a small military team that had been set up to handle day-to-day negotiations with the Iraqis, was left behind in Silopi with forward offices in Zakho. After the allied departure, the MCC was to monitor and report on military developments in the area and to coordinate with the humanitarian assistance agencies. In practice, the MCC also helped to facilitate the work of the non-governmental organizations (NGOs) and the United Nations inside the security zone. One of its most important functions was to reassure the civilian relief agencies that the military was still looking out for their interests -- most NGOs felt that as long as the MCC was in the area, it was safe to continue to work.

The humanitarian presence consisted of an international effort to provide relief and reconstruction assistance. The UN was represented by staff from the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR), which was responsible for helping refugees reintegrate into their communities; the United Nations Guard Contingent in Iraq (GCI), a token force of security guards whose principal mission was to protect UN facilities and escort humanitarian convoys; and the World Food Programme (WFP), which provided food support throughout the winter.

The small number of agencies that had helped during the repatriation effort quickly doubled in number and size and deployed throughout Kurdistan. Over two dozen NGOs helped rebuild villages and deliver vital relief supplies. These agencies were largely European though CARE, International Rescue Committee, and several other American organizations continued to work in the area. Together, the UN and NGOs provided important assistance and helped serve as a symbolic deterrent to Iraqi incursions in the area.

NEGOTIATIONS BETWEEN THE KURDS AND IRAQ

At the time the allies withdrew, the Kurds and the Iraqi government appeared close to signing an agreement that would supposedly give the Kurds autonomy in the north and would solve many of the issues that lead to the uprising. The leaders of the two principal Kurdish resistance groups, Massoud Barzani of the Kurdish Democratic Party (KDP) and Jalal Talabani of the Patriotic Union of Kurdistan (PUK), had been meeting with Saddam Hussein and an agreement appeared to be within reach. Even though the allies insisted that they would not link their withdrawal to conclusion of the agreement (in part because they doubted the Iraqis would honor an agreement signed under the threat of a continued allied presence), many were optimistic that the Kurdish leaders, especially Barzani, would sign the

agreement. (Barzani said that he viewed it as a matter of Kurdish cultural and ethnic survival in Iraq.) While the agreement was not ideal, it was considered the best that could be negotiated under the circumstances.

Contrary to allied expectations, negotiations between the Kurds and the Iraqi government broke off within months after the allied withdrawal. The Kurds blamed Saddam Hussein for imposing last minute changes that effectively denied them autonomy and precluded the formation of a democratic state. Privately, they also blame the allies, claiming that Saddam Hussein changed the terms after it became clear that the allies were leaving. He progressively became less conciliatory and open to negotiation as the rapid reaction force was withdrawn.

When the Kurds refused to return to the bargaining table, the Iraqis imposed an economic blockade on the north which reduced fuel supplies to a minimum and prevented shipments of other supplies from being transported commercially to the north. They imposed restrictions on what the UN could take into the area but continued to allow UN convoys to bring relief supplies. Subsequently, the government also stopped paying salaries for Kurdish workers in the north.

CHANGES IN SECURITY AND OTHER ARRANGEMENTS DURING THE YEAR

On the military front, the Iraqis have increased pressures on the Kurds in the eastern part of Kurdistan. They continue to bombard Kurdish positions along the line of demarcation between the Kurds and the Iraqi army with artillery fire. In recent months they have increased the size of their forces opposite Irbil and Sulaymaniya.

During the year there were a number of changes in the security arrangements that have a bearing on the current situation. On the military side, the rapid reaction force in Turkey was disbanded six months after the main force withdrew from northern Iraq. To offset withdrawal of the ground force, air support was increased. Most importantly, elements of the RAF and French Air Force joined the U.S. Air Force and Navy in patrolling Kurdistan. While the increased number of aircraft was not significant, the fact that it became a multinational force was meant to show allied solidarity in defending the Kurds.

Inside northern Iraq the MCC became a major factor in the security arrangements. Within weeks of the allies' departure, the MCC established a full-time presence in Zakho, a city on the northwest border of Iraq and Turkey which had been the headquarters of the allied forces during Operation Provide Comfort. The MCC was also expanded to include other allied representatives. While some of those departed with their national units, the British and French still make up two-thirds of the MCC, demonstrating that Britain and France are still committed to protecting the Kurds.

On the civilian side, there also have been a number of changes. In the spring of 1992, UNICEF took over as lead agency from UNHCR. The transition to UNICEF administration has not been without controversy. Many observers believe that it was

handled too quickly and that UNICEF does not have sufficient staff to take over all of UNHCR's functions.

The UN Guard Contingent in Iraq (GCI) expanded their presence significantly during the year but never fully established the credible presence for which allied policymakers had hoped. While they constitute a visible portion of the overall UN presence, most NGOs, and, more importantly, the Kurds, understand that they could be quickly expelled by the Iraqis.

The entire UN presence, and that of some of the NGOs working under the UN umbrella, is subject to Iraqi concurrence under a memorandum of understanding (MOU) concluded by the UN with Baghdad. The original MOU was for one year and expired at the end of June. While many Western observers believe that the MOU will be extended if Turkey agrees to extend its agreement permitting allied planes to use Turkish bases, there has been no word from the Iraqis. In response to allied pressure, the UN has announced that it will stay in northern Iraq.

The NGO presence during the last year has expanded and become, in an operational sense, more important than that of the UN. The majority of reconstruction assistance and help in restoring the economy has come largely from the NGOs. While many NGOs have chosen to work under the UN umbrella, there are a significant number who remain unregistered and operate primarily out of Turkey. In addition, two Kurdish relief organizations, heavily supported by European donors and personnel, have emerged.

The NGOs believe that their presence is vital to the security arrangements and feel that without their assistance, social and physical conditions in the area could deteriorate.

The NGOs working under the UN umbrella were plagued by bureaucratic obstacles imposed by Baghdad throughout the year. The Iraqis have not renewed many visas nor issued new ones and those personnel with visas have often found it difficult to obtain travel permits. Many NGOs working under the MOU have significantly reduced their staff because the prerequisite paperwork cannot be obtained. Others are worried that the MOU will not be extended and are uneasy about working without legal status in Iraq even if the UN remains. On the other hand, many of the most important agencies are prepared to continue whether or not the MOU is extended. They say they will remain as long as the MCC stays and overflights continue. If the NGOs depart, that would leave only the UN and it would be subject to Iraqi expulsion on short notice.

The most recent development has been the imposition of a "no fly zone" over southern Iraq designed to help protect the Shiia in that area. It is unclear how the restrictions on the use of planes will affect the situation in the north but it will surely make the Iraqi army more cautious on the ground.

THE IMPACT OF THE IRAQI BLOCKADE

The blockade was not as effective as the Iraqis initially expected. First, the Iraqis can close only one border of Kurdistan; they cannot control the Turkish or Iranian borders from where a substantial flow of goods has been entering the area. Most importantly, the Iraqis cannot tighten their own blockade too much because the Kurds could retaliate by stopping the flow of goods from Turkey. Through July an unwritten agreement seemed to exist between the Kurds and Iraq that permitted a two-way flow of goods through Kurdistan. Turkish trucks were taxed by the Kurds as they passed through Kurdistan to Mosul and Baghdad. After dropping their cargos in Iraq the trucks loaded up with excess fuel, which was carried in massive tanks attached to the underside of the trucks, and proceeded north where they were again taxed as they transited Kurdistan. (Back in Turkey they sold the fuel on the Turkish market.) As many as 3,500 trucks per day passed through Kurdistan each way in July. In late July, this changed. The PKK, presumably at the request of the Iraqis, imposed a 30-day ban on trucks going to Iraq and threatened to attack any truck passing through the Kurdish zone in southeastern Turkey. This brought the flow of supplies to Iraq, and the tax revenue to the Kurds, to a halt. At the end of the 30-day period, the truckers resumed trade with Iraq. (Eight hundred trucks crossed into northern Iraq the first day the PKK ban ended.)

The activity most effected by the blockade is reconstruction. Prior to the blockade some cement and other building materials were moving northward. Since the blockade all materials have come from Turkey, and the Turks have largely stemmed the flow of cement, rubber, roof sheets and other essential reconstruction items from crossing the border at Silopi, the main crossing for traffic bound for Iraq from Turkey.

There is no question that food costs more than a year ago, but it is important to remember that at that time, basic food and other essential goods were heavily subsidized by the Iraqi government. Even though prices for commodities such as milk and bread are three times what they were a year ago, they are still substantially lower than in Turkey and are now more in line with market prices.

The Iraqis are not in a good position to cut power supplies to the area. If the generating station were to be closed down, Baghdad would loose its power too. The plant is close enough to the Kurdish positions that the Iraqis do not want to risk tampering with the power lines going into Kurdistan for fear of retaliation.

As mentioned earlier, civil servants, municipal utility personnel, school teachers, bus drivers, etc. no longer receive an income. But since the government only employed approximately 7 percent of the population in Kurdistan, this has had only a limited impact on the economy.

III. THE CURRENT SITUATION AND ITS POSSIBLE DEVELOPMENT

THE SECURITY SITUATION

In recent months the Iraqis increased their military presence in the north. Two Republican Guard Divisions were moved closer to Irbil and Sulaymaniya. Some allied officers close to the situation believe that the Iraqis are positioning themselves to be able to cut the cities off from the mountain areas. The deployment of the Iraqi forces seemed to indicate that if they were to initiate military action, it would be in areas east of the allied security zone. They may have come to believe that they had a freer hand militarily in east Kurdistan than in the west.

The creation of the no fly zone in the south has substantially improved the security situation for the Kurds. Prior to this, allied commanders were worried that the Iraqis might try to seal off the city of Irbil, cut off Sulaymaniya from the mountains, or take other military moves in the southeastern part of Kurdistan. (Irbil could easily be taken by simply closing the road between the city and the mountains. Capturing Sulaymaniya would be more costly, but given the disposition of troops and the weakness of the *peshmerge*, it could be accomplished without much difficulty.)

The no fly zone makes such moves unlikely. Essentially the Iraqi military is limited to a very narrow operational area with allied air forces operating to their front and rear. Furthermore, the Iraqis must now consider that if they were to make a move against the Kurds in the north, the targets that the allies might chose to bomb would not necessarily be limited to that area.

While the potential for a conventional military confrontation has been significantly diminished, the Iraqis are now more likely to expand their support for terrorist attacks on the Kurds and their supporters.

TERRORISM IN KURDISTAN

One of the most remarkable aspects of the situation during the last year was the lack of terrorist incidents within Kurdistan. However, in July an ominous pattern emerged: terrorist attacks on prominent international visitors and humanitarian agency staff. A car bomb was set off at a hotel in Dahouk where international journalists and election monitors were staying during the Kurdish elections; a similar bomb was set off as a motorcade carrying the wife of the French President, Mrs. François Mitterrand, passed by; and in mid-July, a UN guard was assassinated and a car bomb set off in front of a UN guard office. In August an NGO worker and his driver were assassinated. All of these incidents are believed to be the work of Iraqi agents, possibly working through the PKK, and seem to be designed to intimidate the humanitarian agencies into leaving the area and to convince the Kurds' international supporters that the Kurds cannot provide security in the area. How successful this tactic will be is not yet clear, but if UN and NGO personnel are repeatedly attacked, there is no doubt that their headquarters will drastically reduce their staffs. This

could effectively reduce one component of the international presence and weaken the entire post withdrawal security arrangements.

The Allies need to review the implications of increased violence inside Kurdistan and especially the former security zone and develop an appropriate preventive response.

THE POTENTIAL FOR ANOTHER REFUGEE CRISIS

At the present time any offensive against the Kurds which would drive refugees back into Turkey is unlikely. At the end of June, the Turks agreed to extend the agreement (called Operation Provide Comfort II, or OPC II) that gives their permission for the allies to use Turkish bases to protect the Kurds. The extension, however, was only for six months. For the next four months, i.e., the time remaining under the present agreement, the Iraqis are hemmed in on both sides. There was some concern that the Turks might not extend the agreement in January; however, they are not likely to abrogate the use of the bases as long as the southern no fly zone is in force.

PRECONDITIONS FOR ALLIED INTERVENTION

If something other than a minor incident that could be handled within the framework of the existing protective structure and agreements *were* to occur, there would be two principal prerequisites for mounting a major allied response: allied support and Turkish goodwill.

The principal U.S. allies, France and Great Britain, would likely approve a military response quickly and if they joined, other countries would participate as well, though most in a support, rather than combat, role.

The most important factor will be Turkey's goodwill. Unfortunately, this is something that will be difficult to orchestrate after the fact -- the foundations must be laid now. The factors that will determine Turkey's goodwill include:

1. How it views the development of the autonomous Kurdish state;
2. What advantage the Turks see in their political situation, *is a is* Europe and NATO; and
3. How Turkey sees the situation in relation to their own internal Kurdish problem.

From a tactical perspective, missions could be flown from Kuwait or from carriers operating in the Persian Gulf, though both the planes and the ships would be vulnerable. The fighters would have to fly over long stretches of Iraq and in case of an accident, American pilots might have to eject into Iraq. Thus, while it could be done, the operation

would be more hazardous. The benefit of the Turkish bases is that the allied planes are almost always flying over friendly territory.²

Without Turkish participation, the MCC -- the ground element of the protective structure -- would not be practical. It is doubtful that the military would agree to leave a team in an area where their only access required crossing Iraq. (Several observers have posited that Syria should not be rejected out of hand as a possible alternative base for the MCC, though U.S. policymakers would probably be reluctant to explore that possibility.)

EXTENSION OF THE MOU

An immediate allied concern is Iraq's extension of the Memorandum of Understanding that permits the UN and the NGOs to work in Iraq. The Iraqis have given every indication that they do *not* intend to extend it. In August, Ambassador Jan Eliasson, UN Under Secretary General for Humanitarian Affairs, went to Baghdad in an unsuccessful attempt to convince the Iraqis to change their minds. Last year the Iraqis were virtually forced to sign the MOU as a condition for humanitarian aid in the south, especially food aid. But this year reports indicate that the food situation is much better, and the Iraqis appear willing to forgo any further humanitarian assistance from the international community. Food and medical supplies are not embargoed and Iraq appears to have cash reserves to purchase what it needs, at least for the immediate future. Recent statements by World Food Programme that there are sufficient food reserves in the country and internal UN reports that the overall population of Iraq has returned to near normal nutritional standards, has led to speculation that food aid will be reduced or ended soon.

If the MOU is not extended, it does not necessarily mean an end to the private humanitarian presence in the north. A number of NGOs have indicated that they are willing to stay on as long as the MCC remains and overflights continue. In fact almost half the agencies working in the north are not registered with Baghdad and many of the personnel within registered agencies are working in the north without documentation (mainly because they have been unable to get visas from the Iraqis).

The lapse of the MOU would not necessarily mean that all UN personnel would have to withdraw from the north. The allied position is that the UN is in Iraq under Resolution 688 and does not need Iraqi authorization to stay. The UN itself is uneasy with that position but has said that it will remain during the "extended negotiations" for renewal. UNICEF could continue to operate there since it was operating in the country before the MOU was signed. Technically, UNDP could also work in the north, though it is unlikely to do so under the present circumstances (largely because most of the agency's money is jointly administered by the UNDP and the government and it is unlikely that the Iraq would permit the money to be spent).

² In May a French Mirage suffered an engine failure and the pilot was forced to eject into Kurdistan. The pilot and the wreckage of the plane were successfully recovered.

It is clear, however, that the UN presence would be substantially reduced. The UN guards might not be able to operate without the MOU and the small residual UNHCR staff and probably that of the World Food Programme would have to leave. Most of the UN projects would be halted (unless they were part of UNICEF's country-wide program).

The biggest impact would be that the NGOs and the UN would find it more difficult to import materials for their programs. Even under the present MOU many agencies experience long delays and, in some cases, disapproval for cargos destined for the north. The small amount of supplies that comes in from Turkey under UN auspices could be stopped altogether because the Turks only allow humanitarian supplies transported by the UN or the U.S. government to cross the border -- generally NGOs cannot move their supplies independently. Thus, the allies would be faced with either having to modify the sanctions or pressure Turkey into allowing goods to cross the border without restriction.

The best response for the U.S. and the allies is the same as that in the military situation: to take preventative action to ensure that the MOU is extended in full. A much greater diplomatic effort should be mounted immediately to extend the MOU beyond the immediate deadline and to de-link its extension to the allied presence.

The uncertainty about the MOU comes at a bad time. Many NGOs are reconsidering the need for their work in northern Iraq compared to commitments in other areas and a shortage of funds. If the MOU lapsed, it could be a deciding factor in determining whether or not the agencies were to withdraw from the north.

IV. THE EVOLUTION OF A *DE FACTO* AUTONOMOUS KURDISTAN

Ironically, the blockade has led many Kurds to believe that autonomy, and quite possibly independence, is feasible. Because of the blockade, they have had to produce many essential goods themselves or find ways to import them from their neighbors. The blockade is forcing a restructuring of the economic system in the area and making it more independent of the Iraqi economy than ever before. At the same time, political events -- coupled with the allied security arrangements and the internal economic realignment -- have combined in such a way that a *de facto* Kurdish autonomous region has evolved. In May, the Kurds made a bid to legitimize their status by conducting what many observers have noted, are the first free elections in the history of Iraq. In an astounding election where 88 percent of the 1.1 million eligible voters, including all men and women over eighteen, cast ballots, 105 delegates were chosen to a constituent assembly seated in the building that the Iraqi government built in the 1970s to house the parliament of an autonomous Kurdistan. The elections were surprisingly close; Barzani's Kurdistan Democratic Party (KDP) took 45 percent of the vote while Talabani's Patriotic Union of Kurdistan (PUK) captured 43.6 percent. In a remarkable compromise, the two parties chose to give the remaining parties, which together won about 10.5 percent of the vote, five seats so that their voices could be heard officially.³

³ The remainder of the votes were for independent candidates.

To allay fears that they were moving to create an independent Kurdistan, the Kurds surrounded the opening of the parliament with all the trappings and symbolism of the Iraqi government. Kurds dressed in Iraqi police uniforms patrolled the grounds and manned the main gate. The Iraqi flag was flown from the flagpole and adorned the speakers' dias. In setting up formal committees, the parliament has been careful to limit the official scope of the activities to those that would be carried out by an autonomous region. For example, they have no foreign relations committee nor a committee to develop natural resources (those functions are, in fact, carried out in other ways). The Kurdish Front, which represents the major political parties and several of the smaller ones, held the elections to legitimize their claim to represent the views of the majority of Kurds and to provide a framework under which the leaders could bring together the diverse elements of the *peshmerge* into a single defensive force. Each of the principal party leaders also believes that the elections will make it easier for the Kurds to deal with Iraq and its neighbors. The parliament can now speak for the whole community.

There is no question that the elections were a public relations coup for the Kurds. They were viewed favorably by the Europeans and in many quarters of the United States. The elections were not only free, but remarkably untainted by fraud and were commended by human rights and electoral monitors from Europe and the United States. But the elections have also served to harden the attitudes of the Kurds' neighbors. Iraq was, of course, opposed to them and the Syrians and the Iranians cannot be pleased to see a democratic success in their back yard. But the neighbor of most concern at this point is Turkey, for without Turkish acquiescence Kurdistan cannot survive.

The Turkish government has viewed not only the elections, but the emergence of the *de facto* autonomous region with concern. The Turks are fearful that an independent Kurdistan would stimulate similar aspirations inside Turkey, especially in the southeast where perhaps 6-8 million Kurds reside. While the Turkish and Iraqi Kurds are not close, the Turks fear a similar Kurdish movement in the southeast would encourage the separation of the Kurdish areas of Turkey.

To allay the Turkish government's concerns, the leaders of the major parties have met with President Ozal and Prime Minister Suleyman Demirel and many Turkish parliamentarians and senior army officers to assure them that the Kurds are seeking a solution within the framework of a united Iraq. They insist, however, that a precondition for resuming normal ties with Baghdad is the installation of a democratic regime.

The Turkish parliament was invited to come to northern Iraq to witness the elections and five members chose to do so (all five were Kurds from eastern Turkey).

The Turks remain concerned, and it is clear that the government would still prefer to see the area remain part of a unified Iraq.

STATEHOOD BY STEALTH

The elections and the formation of the Kurdistan national assembly are the most tangible form of "statehood" that the Kurds could establish without declaring unilateral independence. Not only does it give Iraqi Kurdistan the appearance of an independent state, but it permits them to establish relations with donors at a *de facto* state level.

The elections and the seating of the Kurdistan national assembly are expressions of statehood, no matter what the nature of the Kurdish entity or its relations with Baghdad are. For all intents and purposes, the Kurds are moving toward an independent entity in northern Iraq, i.e., achieving statehood by stealth. For the time being, cosmetics are the only chance they have of placating their neighbors and buying time to sell the idea to Turkey.

THE ECONOMIC SITUATION IN KURDISTAN

A visitor entering northern Iraq for the first time would be surprised at its vibrancy. Markets are bustling and there appears to be no shortage of trade goods. Buses scurry about the main cities delivering people to work; taxis and private cars move as if oblivious to the fuel embargo. The agricultural fields were planted with a greater diversity than before. The Kurds have begun to grow vegetables in an attempt to diversify the agricultural system and replace commodities not obtainable from Iraq. Agricultural experts predict another bumper crop of grain despite insect infestation and weeds. The number of goats and sheep is sufficient to supply enough meat, though herds are smaller this year than usual. The situation is such that the UN is considering phasing out a large portion of the food aid program.

In the rural areas, the reconstruction of villages is continuing, but has been slowed due to the lack of building materials. When people were unable to obtain sufficient supplies to rebuild their shelters, the repatriation from Iran slowed considerably and halted altogether during the winter. In recent months there has been an increase in the number of people returning but most are moving to the cities where overcrowding is a problem.

REINTEGRATION AND RECONSTRUCTION

The reintegration of returned Kurds has been a much bigger problem in the areas east of the allied security zone, i.e., for those Kurds returning from Iran. Repatriation continued from July until the late fall when the first snows fell and it became obvious that housing reconstruction was not going to meet the needs of all those who had returned. Faced with severe shortages of basic food stuffs and fuel and the prospect of a severe winter, thousands of Kurds descended into the towns in the lowlands. While many left in the spring to start rebuilding their houses in the mountains, new incoming refugees from Iran have taken their place and the cities remain overcrowded. Virtually every government installation is being used to house homeless returnees.

Agencies working from Turkey have increasingly had difficulty moving supplies across the border, especially after UNHCR transferred responsibility to UNICEF. A major problem has been a Turkish double standard on the issue of UN sanctions. While the government permits thousands of truckers to break the blockade and carry all sorts of supplies to Iraq daily, NGOs seeking permits to take supplies to Kurdistan often find their transit permits denied on the grounds that the supplies are proscribed by the sanctions. In recent weeks the Turks have even extended the ban to items that are not on the sanction list, such as medicines and pharmaceutical supplies.

The United Nations waited until the beginning of July 1991 to begin planning to provide winter shelter for the 100,000 people who were estimated to remain homeless after the repatriation from Iran. UNHCR waited for several months to see if an agreement would be signed between the Kurds and the Iraqis before initiating the program. (They apparently believed that if an agreement was signed, the burden for managing the reconstruction program could be shifted to UNDP or other agencies with more resources and experience.) In effect, UNHCR did not begin until October. Materials began coming in during that month, but implementation of the construction program was poor.

The situation worsened as the year ended. More refugees returned from Iran than had been previously estimated and an additional 200,000 people had to be added as a result of shelling along the Iraqi demarcation line. By that time the program was overcome by weather and overwhelmed by the number of applicants for assistance. Most of the people who could not rebuild their shelters before winter came moved to the cities; most were sheltered by friends or relatives but many had to be housed in schools, public buildings, and idle industrial facilities. The UN and NGOs provided food and other assistance through the winter and spring.

KURDISH RELATIONS WITH EXTERNAL POWERS

IRAQ

Relations between the Kurds and Baghdad are only on an informal basis. Barzani has kept a representative in the capital but insists that no talks are going on there. Since the elections in Kurdistan, it would be extremely difficult for either of the principal Kurdish leaders to reengage the Iraqis unilaterally and it does not seem that the Front will agree to resuming talks anytime soon.

The situation poses many difficulties for the Kurdish people. More than 1.2 million Kurds live outside Kurdistan, many in Baghdad. Despite the economic blockade, there is still substantial links between northern Iraq and the rest of the country -- the Iraqi dinar is still the currency in Kurdistan, many families routinely travel between the two areas, and it is clear that the economy of the north is still tied to that of Iraq. So even though "official" contacts are not being made, unofficial contacts are frequent and more extensive than would appear.

On the diplomatic front, the Iraqis are trying to cut Turkey away from the allies, as well as trying to convince the Turks that they should resume trade relations if not formally at least informally, i.e., break the sanctions. So far they seem to be making some progress: after every mission, there has been a noticeable increase in cross-border traffic between Turkey and Iraq.

The Iraqis also are trying to convince both Turkey and Iran that the Kurds are trying to establish an independent state in the area and that it would be detrimental to all three countries if that were to happen. Ultimately they would like to be given a free hand by their neighbors to reestablish their control over the area and hope that they can play on the fear that the Turks and Iranians have that Iraqi Kurdistan could fuel a pan-Kurdish movement that would create a new country made up of parts of all three countries (and possibly Syria).

TURKEY

Kurdistan's leaders have been actively trying to improve their relations with Turkey. They have two immediate objectives: to win Turkey's support to break the Iraqi blockade (and the UN sanctions) and to convince Turkey to stop bombing Kurdistan. Their longer and more important goal is to convince the Turks that the Kurds in northern Iraq do not pose a threat to Turkey.

In recent months, the Kurdish leaders have had extensive contact with all sectors of the Turkish leadership. Both Barzani and Talabani appear to have good access to the Turkish leadership and to key parliamentarians. More importantly, they also appear to be developing good ties with the Turkish business community, i.e., persons who are in a position to exert influence on the government. Most observers believe that Turkey prefers dealing with Barzani and the KDP rather than Talabani. This is because they view him as being more committed to a solution within an Iraqi framework, but also because they believe he is less unpredictable than Talabani. Moreover, many Turks are convinced that Talabani is toying with the PKK.

Some leaders within the Turkish government see the evolution of an independent Kurdistan as a positive factor in the region. They believe the Kurds could be a buffer, not only against Iraq, but also against fundamentalism from Iran. Others see the evolution of an independent Kurdish state as a means of relieving pressure for Kurdish independence within Turkey.

The real question, however, is not the acquiescence of the civilians, but that of the military. So far, the Turkish general staff has been unequivocal in rejecting the idea of an independent Kurdistan.

Turkish politics have been dominated by a consistent tension between civilian and military policies. The Turkish general staff has preeminence over the government in matters of security. These matters are rendered more complex by the different roles played by the three entities responsible for state security: the army, the *gendarme* and the military

police. Policies toward the Kurds, both in Turkey and in Iraq, have been injected into the very center of this problem. How relations between Turkey and the Iraqi Kurds develop depends on how the military and all its internal factions come to view the situation in Kurdistan vis-a-vis the PKK insurgency.

Impact of Events in Southeastern Turkey on the Situation in Northern Iraq

The deteriorating security situation in southeastern Turkey has heightened the Turks' concerns about the relationship between the situation in Iraqi Kurdistan and the insurgency in Turkey. The Kurdish Worker's Party (PKK) appears to have grown in strength during the last 12 months. The Turkish military claims that the PKK is receiving support and sanctuary from Kurds in northern Iraq. Within days of the allied withdrawal, the Turkish air force began bombing "suspected guerrilla positions" inside Kurdistan and, on several occasions, the government has launched heliborne assaults across the border in an attempt to capture PKK guerrillas or to destroy their facilities. (These assaults have proved fruitless; most of the suspected PKK positions have been civilian villages.⁴)

Turkish bombings continue for five reasons:

1. The Turkish military are acting in some cases on *bona fide* intelligence reports;
2. The military believes that it will deter the PKK;
3. The government believes that bombing will drive a wedge between the PKK and the Iraqi Kurds and force the Iraqi Kurds to help control the PKK to protect their movement;
4. The Turkish general staff may believe that it will undermine the growing links between the Government of Turkey and the Iraqi Kurds; and
5. It will convince the Turkish public that something is being done and that the problem is a result of external interference rather than problems inside the country.

The situation in southeastern Turkey and the bombings in Iraq have strained relations, not only between the Iraqi Kurds and the Turks but also between Turkey and the allies. On some days, U.S. fighter-bombers take off to fly armed reconnaissance over Kurdistan to discourage the Iraqis while Turkish fighters take off to attack Kurdish positions in the same vicinity. The bombings are a major embarrassment for the allies; the Turks are, after all, a member of the coalition to protect the Iraqi Kurds.

The Turks have told the Front to control the PKK if it wants to keep the border open. Barzani has promised to try to control the PKK and his *peshmerge* have engaged the PKK in minor skirmishes. Talabani, however, has remained more aloof. He believes that

⁴ Sources: Military Coordinator Center, UNHCR, personal visits.

the best way to control the PKK is to repopulate the areas along the border so that the PKK's passage to and fro can be detected. The Turks have rejected this proposal for fear that it would put more civilians in the way and instead want the Kurds to clear a no-man's land along the border (presumably so it could become a free-fire zone where anyone within it could be attacked). Clearly the Kurd's response to the PKK has not satisfied the Turks (nor many American policy makers). In early June the Turkish government delivered a *demarche* to the Front demanding that all reconstruction of Kurdish villages along the border be halted and that the populations be evacuated.

The Turkish military is concerned about the PKK's sources of support. Some officers clearly believe that the Iraq Kurds are giving them weapons. At one point, the Turkish government even accused the United States of dropping supplies to the PKK. (That accusation stemmed from a supply drop to Kurds trapped in winter snows. A helicopter making the drop apparently became lost and inadvertently dropped its supplies in Turkey.) More important than this incident is the belief on the part of some Turkish officers that allied support for the Iraqi Kurds is undermining their campaign to suppress the PKK. They argue that an autonomous Kurdistan would support the PKK.

For its part, the U.S. and the allies have been careful not to interfere. The MCC has even been ordered not to investigate bombings of Kurdish villages. There have been some near misses and Turkish bombs fell on villages where NGOs and UN staff were working.

At this point, it is unclear exactly how many PKK use northern Iraq as a base (Barzani says that the PKK numbers less than 5,000, while Talabani sets the number at approximately 3,000). But the PKK is attacking Turkey from Iraq and with increasing frequency and boldness. Several allied observers believe that the Turks, frustrated by their inability to suppress the movement at home, find it convenient to bomb northern Iraq and blame "foreign intervention" for the uprising and their inability to control it. The fact that the Turks have limited their military action to bombing, which they surely must know is extremely ineffective against guerrillas, lends credence to this claim.

Whatever the actual numbers of PKK cadres that use northern Iraq, they are probably smaller than officially estimated. Journalists who have traveled with the PKK report that they stay away from the Iraqi Kurdish settlements and operate in small, independent units that can live off the land and the scarce resources currently there. None of the over 2,000 relief workers in the zone has reported encountering the PKK, nor reported instances where the PKK has attempted to acquire relief supplies.

RELATIONS WITH THE ALLIES

The Kurds have devoted much effort to establishing good relations with all the allies. They have focused their efforts on the U.S., Great Britain and France. Recently, they have expanded their presence in Washington and have actively cultivated Congress. However, the principal official contacts are through the Military Coordination Center (MCC) in Iraq and the U.S. Embassy in Turkey. Despite U.S. misgivings about the situation, relations

between the Kurds and the U.S. are good and the U.S. remains committed, for the time being, to protecting the Kurds.

The Kurds are on very good relations with the Europeans. They have worked hard to expand their contacts with the governments of John Major and François Mitterrand and have even gained strong support in Germany. However, there is no "European policy" on the Kurdish issue. The Europeans are preoccupied with the Maasterich agreement and Yugoslavia. At the moment, the principal concern of Europe is the Turkish treatment of its Kurds -- something that hurts the Iraqi Kurds in their dealings with Turkey. The French position is illustrative. As outlined in three points during President Mitterrand's visit to Ankara in April, 1992, France condemned:

1. Any notion of Kurdish succession within any state;
2. Terrorism and the tactics of the PKK; and
3. Human rights abuses in eastern Turkey.

France, however, remains one of the Kurds strongest supporters in international fora (largely because the *Institut Kurde* and Madame Mitterrand's commitment to the Kurds).

Britain also is strongly supportive of the Kurds, though, again, in the context of a solution within the framework of a united Iraq. John Major was instrumental in triggering western intervention in Iraq in 1991 and his personal prestige is on the line.

Germany seems the most committed to the Kurds, both in Iraq and in Turkey, but the extent of German support is limited by Germany's lack of military clout on the international scene and by the resignation of Foreign Minister Genscher who was personally committed to supporting the Kurds. Italy is not a major player on the Kurdish question and at the moment is more concerned with developments in Yugoslavia.

Thus, while European support is important, it is only effective as a means of bringing pressure on the U.S. -- no European country can support the Kurds against Iraq alone. While several European air forces could continue to overfly Kurdistan if the U.S. were to withdraw, no EC country has the ability to back up the threat should the Iraqis decide to move on the Kurds. It is even doubtful that the Europeans have the clout necessary to convince the Turks to continue overflights in the absence of the U.S.

KURDISH EXPECTATIONS

For their part, the Kurds may be overestimating the U.S.'s long-term commitment. They interpret every U.S. move against Iraq as support for their position and constantly call on the U.S., especially the MCC, for help in resolving everyday issues. The imposition of the no fly zone in southern Iraq may also contribute to their false sense of security.

In this environment where long-term support for the Kurds may not be as strong as it appears, many observers are worried that the Kurds are experiencing a "Prague spring." Hopes for democracy, self-determination and autonomy, interspersed with an unprecedented degree of personal freedom unseen in their lifetime, are infusing the Kurds with what may be an unrealistic view of their situation and their future. Surrounded as they are by hostile neighbors, they cannot exist without the support of the West, and that support is tenuous at best.

THE ROLE OF THE MCC

The MCC has evolved into a vital element of the protective framework in northern Iraq, both militarily and politically. Furthermore, it is the one place where the allies and the Iraqis interact on a regular basis to deal with the Kurdish issue. Throughout the last 12 months, the MCC, as the forward element of the allied presence, was, in effect, often making policy. When heavy snows blocked food supplies to the Kurds, the MCC conducted airdrops to remote settlements using the helicopters assigned to the team. This moved the U.S. into the role of providing emergency humanitarian assistance, what U.S. policymakers had hoped to limit to the UN and NGOs.

The reality is that the MCC must often make on-site decisions that will shape policy. Often the MCC is the first to know about major developments and must react quickly. During the last year some policymakers felt that the MCC was acting too independently and formulating, rather than carrying out, allied policy. With the recent change in command at the MCC, a more limited role was crafted by Washington and the policy guidance was made more restrictive. In some cases, the intent of the instructions given by the U.S. to the commanding officer of the MCC is different from the instructions given to the British and French members of the team; this led to some concern on their part about American intentions. The no fly zone and recent military exercises in Kuwait should have reduced this concern.

However, it is important to be aware of some of the structural problems that exist in the MCC's working arrangements in the future. As the main daily interface between the U.S. government and the Kurds and between the allied forces and the Iraqi military, it is important to consider the "messages" that those contacts might be sending to each. For example, when the allies are slow to respond to a situation that has obviously come to the attention of the MCC, the Iraqis may interpret it as a lessening of allied commitment. The MCC must be able to act quickly on various matters or the Iraqis may misconstrue a slow response as indecision or a lack of resolve.

This could be handled in two ways: first, provide a broader framework of guidance to the MCC and devolve a greater degree of decision-making on minor issues and; second, review possible Iraqi provocations under the present circumstances and state or restate what should be the allied policy and its most likely responses.

Another problem may be arising out of the routine work of the MCC. Every time an incident occurs, the MCC goes to the Iraqi military base at Faida (a small town that sits

on the line of demarkation south of Dahouk) to discuss it with the Iraqis. During the period of this study, some of the issues discussed were harassment of truck drivers passing from the Iraqi zone into Kurdistan; the detention and subsequent disappearance of several Kurdish teenagers who were taken at a checkpoint as they attempted to go north; a number of incidents resulting from the Iraqi blockade, including the practice of siphoning gasoline out of Kurdish vehicles as they go north; and an incident where several Iraqi soldiers had slipped across the fence near Faيدا into the restricted area (though apparently without hostile intent). The point is that the MCC is delving into the *minutia* of the situation and registering concern about issues that, in many cases, the allies can do nothing about. The USAF is certainly not going to bomb Iraqi positions over a kidnapping, the siphoning of fuel from Kurdish vehicles, or any of the other minor incidents. From these activities however, the Kurds may be led to believe that the U.S. has a greater interest than it does in Kurdish affairs.

The original role of the MCC was to monitor and report on *military* concerns, not to intervene with the Iraqis on day-to-day issues. While it would be legitimate for the MCC to address the Iraqis on the issue of the blockade in general, dealing with minor incidents related to the blockade would not. The dilemma, however, is how to bring the MCC back into its original monitoring role without intimating that the U.S. is losing concern about other aspects of the mission.

Another area of concern is the declining role of the MCC in the humanitarian assistance effort. Last year, the MCC administered a humanitarian aid budget of \$5 million for food, shelter and medicine. The MCC also was active in helping the agencies move supplies into Kurdistan from Turkey. That role, however, seems to be at an end. NGOs have complained that the MCC is no longer able to help them move supplies, intervene on their behalf with the Iraqis to obtain visas or other permits, nor provide them with other types of assistance that used to be available before the change of command. Giving the MCC authority to deal with the Turkish border authorities to allow supplies across the border will be even more important if the MOU is not renewed or the sanctions modified to allow supplies to go into Kurdistan.

It may seem odd to argue that day-to-day dealings with the Iraqis should be reduced while contacts and assistance to the humanitarian agencies should be increased, but the reality is that such contacts are vital to the work of the MCC. The MCC needs the cooperation of the humanitarian agencies and the information that they can provide about the situation, especially in areas outside the old security zone.⁵ By offering support, material, and other assistance to the NGOs, the MCC brings something into the unwritten bargain. Without a humanitarian assistance component, NGOs will view the MCC as strictly an intelligence gathering operation and most humanitarian agencies will quickly distance themselves from it.

Some officers in Washington have suggested that the MCC should be withdrawn. To do so at this time would be a major mistake. The Kurds would regard it as the

⁵ The MCC is limited to travel within the old zone.

beginning of the end of the allied commitment to protect them; it would be devastating to their morale and political position. The NGOs would see it as the end of the allied commitment to protect them and they would probably leave soon thereafter. The Turks would read it as giving them a free hand in Kurdistan and probably increase the bombing. Most important, it would send the wrong message to the Iraqis, who would interpret it as a sign that the allies were losing interest in the Kurds or unwilling to take risks on their behalf.

VI. PROSPECTS

UNCERTAINTIES OF THE CURRENT SITUATION

The current situation is full of ambiguities. There is no conflict but no peace. Kurdistan is not independent, yet it is not reintegrated into Iraq. The allies, and the U.S. in particular, would like to leave the area as soon as possible, yet fight hard to secure an extension of the agreement with Turkey which permits the protective overflights.

Each person's view of the situation is shaped by what he or she would like to see as the final outcome. For those who want to disengage American forces from the region, the situation appears to be a tar pit from which it is difficult to escape. Advocates of disengagement are faced with the real possibility that the Iraqis would reenter the area and again send thousands of people streaming toward Turkey.

The proponents of international protection for the Kurds are satisfied, for now, with the current arrangements. As one supporter of the allied air operations pointed out, it is probably the cheapest peacekeeping operation anywhere. They argue that the allied overflights and the small MCC mission are well worth the price of holding the line until Saddam Hussein is forced out of office.

At the moment, all parties are playing for time. The allies hope that Saddam Hussein will be forced out of power -- but even if that happens it is not clear if it will be possible to leave the Kurds on their own. Saddam Hussein is hoping the allies will get tired of protecting the Kurds and quietly withdraw or that he can convince the Turks to withdraw their support of the allied operations. To that end, he has been sending envoys to Ankara encouraging the Turks to normalize relations with Iraq. One offer that he can make is to withdraw his clandestine support of the PKK -- an offer that some in Turkey are willing to explore.

The Kurds themselves are in the best position to benefit from the stalemate in which the allies, Turkey and Iraq find themselves. While the others have to sit and wait, they are using the situation to solidify their position, build relations with Europe, and reorient their economy inward.

One factor in the equation is the American presidential election in November. While the Turks have agreed to a six month extension of the OPC II agreement, some observers

believe that the Turks only did it to help President Bush and that beyond November, the picture is subject to change. They feel that if President Bush is reelected, he may feel that he has more flexibility in withdrawing from the area. If Clinton is elected, the policy is also subject to change.⁶

The elections also introduce an element of uncertainty regarding Iraqi intentions. Some military analysts believe that Saddam Hussein might attempt to do something to the Kurds to embarrass President Bush just before the election.

The Kurds believe that a Bush win will be best for them. They believe, unrealistically, that Bush is committed to long-term support for their cause and they prefer to deal with the administration they know rather than one with which they have few contacts.

THE ALLIED APPROACH

Allied policymakers are in a dilemma. No one wants to risk withdrawing the allied protection at this time. Yet, as long as the situation remains as it is, Kurdistan continues to evolve into something more than an autonomous region and an implicit commitment to the Kurds grows.

In this situation, policymaking tends to be reactive, something that could be dangerous given the current situation. For example, in April the Iraqis began flying military aircraft in response to incursions by Iranian jets into Iraqi airspace. While the allied policymakers crafted a response, the Iraqis had established a precedent and by the time a decision was reached, it was felt that it was too difficult to tell them to ground the planes once again. Thus, because of circumstance, distance and time, the Iraqis were able to overcome a major restriction placed upon them by the allies.

MAJOR ISSUES FACING THE KURDS

The three principal issues for the Kurds are: how to solidify their political situation; how to improve their military situation; and how to rejuvenate and expand the economy.

Improving Their Political Situation

On the political question, the Kurdish Front appears to be holding together despite some recent rough going. On June 9, fighting erupted near Kirkuk between the KDP and

⁶ Source: Interviews with several Clinton foreign policy advisors.

PUK. Several people were killed and the situation became tense across Kurdistan. Both sides took action to control the situation and after a day both parties lowered their guns.⁷

Despite their rivalry, Talabani and Barzani have forged an alliance, at least for the time being. Nonetheless, Kurdish politics are fractious and the different styles and political aims of the two leaders are often carried to extremes by their followers and other incidents are bound to occur.

The elections and the establishment of the Kurdish parliament have unified the Kurds as never before. The compromises that were worked out before and after the elections have satisfied virtually everyone and, far from being a divisive factor as elections are in many countries, the Kurdish elections have given the Kurds a sense of identity that is unprecedented. The success of the elections in this regard impressed virtually all Western observers. Instead of becoming an obstacle to political progress as elections have been in some countries, Kurdish elections appear to have made a number of activities more feasible. For example, in dealing with foreign countries, the parliament can speak for all the Kurds.

Resumption of negotiations with the Iraqis is probably now more difficult than before. The Iraqis preferred to deal with the two main parties because they could play one against the other. Now leaders have a clear mandate not to resume negotiations unless certain pre-conditions, such as the removal of Saddam Hussein, are met.

The elections appear to show a hardening of the line toward Iraq. Barzani, who campaigned on a platform of keeping the negotiations open, was expected to garner up to three quarters of the vote. But Talabani, who campaigned on a much tougher line on the negotiation issue, won a surprising 43 percent and ended up with an equal number of seats (50) in the assembly as Barzani. Even accounting for possible problems with the voting (several hundred thousand Kurds living in Kirkuk and more than a million in Baghdad, Mosul and other parts of Iraq obviously could not vote) the strong showing of Talabani indicates that the Kurdish populace is wary of dealing with the current Iraqi administration.

Some westerners had hoped that a strong win by Barzani would lead to a resumption of the talks between the Kurds and Baghdad. It is clear that Barzani could not do that now without wrecking the democratic structure that has served to legitimize the Kurdish movement.

The next stage for Kurdish democracy is to select a leader. Originally, this was to be accomplished by a runoff election within two months after the general election but since the vote was so close, both sides seem willing to let it slide for the time being. They believe that in the interim the assembly can act as an executive body itself authorizing individuals to act on its behalf on most matters.

⁷ The incident broke out when a former collaborator who has been accepted into the KDP was accused of spying by the PUK.

It is probably wrong to conclude from the elections that Talabani is on the ascendancy and that his election gains represent a major shift in the Kurds' long-term outlook. Kurdish politics are still largely a matter of clan loyalties, and on other issues Barzani is likely to regain political ground, mainly because his clan is larger and has more enduring affiliations with other Kurdish groups than Talabani. However, the strength of Talabani's position on the singular issue of negotiations is impressive and is probably the prevalent position of the majority of the Kurds in the free areas.

'Improving their Security Situation

The Kurdish leadership sees two priorities on the security front; unifying the *peshmerge* and turning it into a credible force; and protecting the lowland cities. The new parliament has established a committee to examine ways to unify the *peshmerge*, if not under a single command, at least under the control of the parliament. Barzani and Talabani also are giving unification a high priority. In the near term, probably the best that can be achieved is to find a way to coordinate the various forces, something that could be accomplished through a joint general staff. Other things that are feasible now are standardization of weaponry and organizational structures, improved communications between the two groups, and a sharing of intelligence. But turning the *peshmerge* into a stronger, credible force will require much more -- principally arms to counteract Iraqi aircraft and armor -- and it is not likely that they will get them from the allies.

The key to Iraqi Kurdistan's military viability is the *peshmerge's* ability to deny their airspace to the Iraqis. This is crucial for three reasons:

1. Helicopter gunships can effectively contain the *peshmerge's* ability to wage small unit actions, and fear of the helicopter gunships' attacks would quickly depopulate the countryside undermining *peshmerge's* support;
2. The civil population is vulnerable to chemical attack and even the mere presence of helicopters in the area would likely spark a mass evacuation of the civil population; and
3. Inability to control the airspace would permit the Iraqis to effectively seal off access to the mountains and prevent a renewed massive exodus toward Turkey. (Such an exodus would stimulate renewed Western intervention.)

Improving their Economy

At the moment, the economy of Kurdistan is highly dependent on agriculture. Kurdistan was virtually an economic colony of Iraq. It produced and exported agricultural products in return for manufactured goods produced or imported by the south. The few industries that did exist revolved around processing agricultural products. For example, one of the major industries was a cigarette factory that processed tobacco grown in the regions. If the Kurdish economy is to sustain itself, it will have to begin exporting something in order

to earn foreign currency. Cigarettes are the most immediate prospect, though with time, other goods also could be manufactured and exported. The export of grain to countries other than Iraq is not feasible since Turkey is a major producer of grain and exports it to its neighbors. Iran does not appear to be a good candidate for grain though some vegetables and fruit, such as strawberries, could be exported if Iran was willing to buy.

To improve the economic situation, the Kurds are receiving foreign aid, especially technical assistance, to help identify items that could be manufactured and sold. But they also need the machinery and tools to process those commodities. So far, only a few NGOs have been willing to take up the matter and their assistance is generally limited to small-scale, community-based activities.

VIABILITY

Considering independence for Kurdistan would have been impossible if the Soviet Union and Yugoslavia were still intact. Since that time, 15 new republics have sprung up out of the ruins of the USSR and three, going on four, have come out of Yugoslavia, and more changes are eminent. This has led some people to theorize that Kurdistan may be faced with a unique moment in history when aspirations for self-determination could be fulfilled and, possibly, an independent Kurdistan could evolve.

The current weakness of the economy leads naturally to the question of the viability of an independent Kurdistan. The answer to that question revolves around two additional questions: Does Kurdistan have the requisite resource base to establish an economy and can Turkey accept a Kurdish state on its borders?

The resource question is the easiest to address. There appears to be sufficient resources for the Kurds to build a viable economy. Many countries have survived and prospered on far less. The area grows enough grain and other agricultural commodities to feed itself and still have sufficient surplus to export to other areas. There are sufficient natural resources, especially minerals, that mining could become an income earner. The region has abundant water and could generate far more hydroelectric power than it needs.

A lingering question is petroleum. The main oil fields and refineries are located in and around Kirkuk. The city is still under Iraqi control and the object of bitter contention between the Iraqis and Kurdish authorities. The main pipeline to Turkey, now closed under the U.N. sanctions, originates in Kirkuk. The smaller oil fields of Ain Zaleh and Khanaquin (which is not functioning because of extensive damage inflicted during the Gulf War) are also in Kurdish areas under Iraqi control. It is clear that the Iraqis are not going to give the Kurds the oil producing areas. The area now controlled by the *peshmerge* has potentially rich fields under its control at Koy Sinjaq, but they cannot be developed as long as the U.N. sanctions continue to weigh on northern Iraq.

While a measure of assistance will be needed to stimulate northern Iraqi agriculture (seeds, insecticides, fertilizers, building material, some machinery and some infrastructure), heavier investment will be required to develop the industrial capacity of the region,

especially in the oil sector. Beyond that, however, all Iraqi Kurdistan needs to survive is a guarantee of physical access to export markets. With that access Kurdistan could be an economically successful entity.

POLITICAL VIABILITY

The real question about Kurdistan's viability is whether or not the Kurds' neighbors, especially Turkey, would acquiesce to a Kurdish state. Iran is certainly opposed and would likely try to prevent it, though probably not by military means, at least for now -- with the breakup of the USSR, it has enough minority problems internally without igniting the Kurdish issue. Syria would not welcome an independent Kurdistan but the number of Kurds in Syria is relatively small and it is not certain that Syria would be able to do much about the issue directly. Other Arab countries have expressed opposition.

The principal neighbor of concern is, of course, Turkey. The Turkish position may not be as cut-and-dried as it was thought to be previously. There have been some surprising developments over the last year. Both President Ozal and Prime Minister Demirel have told senior foreign diplomats that they would never again allow the Kurds to be subjected to mass annihilation as they were in 1988 when Iraq used chemical weapons on Kurdish villages. Demirel, in particular, has repeatedly told foreigners that he would not permit "another Halabja⁸." This has led to speculation by some Turkish specialists that civilians in the government are more flexible than the military on the question of an independent Kurdistan and that it might be possible to encourage the Turks to undertake the role of protector of the Kurds in northern Iraq.

What could be done to alleviate Turkish concerns and give the Kurds time to work out their own solution to the problem? It is clear that whatever happens, the situation will have to evolve slowly. If the Turks are confronted with a sudden change that crosses an unstated threshold toward independence, it is likely they would react. The cosmetics of a "free Kurdish state of Northern Iraq" or "Northern Iraq" are essential to Kurdistan's diplomatic viability.

For the time being, the Kurds can probably continue to handle the issue cosmetically, as they have done by flying the new Iraqi flag at the parliament building and by insisting that they are seeking to find a solution within the framework of a united Iraq. But beyond that, the Kurds need to engage in a series of confidence building measures to reduce the likelihood of Turkish obstruction, or worse, intervention. Some of these measures might include:

1. Further increase official contacts between the Kurds and Turkish military. Two recent moves have helped: the assignment of a Turkish officer to the MCC and the establishment of a Kurdish liaison office in Diyarbakir to coordinate with the Turkish military and government authorities on matters pertaining to the PKK.

⁸ One of the principal Kurdish towns where the Iraqis used chemical warfare.

2. Provide assistance to the Turks in controlling the PKK. Barzani and the KDP have already taken several minor steps to try and control the PKK in northern Iraq, including military action against the PKK cadres. Talabani has been more circumspect (and is suspected by the Turks of having an alliance with the PKK).⁹ If the Iraqi Kurds are to win the favor of the Turkish military, they will have to go far beyond liaison and small unit actions against the PKK.
3. Recall Kurdish refugees from Turkey. There are still 25,000 refugees remaining in Turkey from 1988 and 1991. A portion of these people will soon be resettled to other countries, but a residual population will remain. The refugee presence is a sore issue with Turkey and one measure that could be taken to build goodwill would be for Barzani and Talabani to publicly and actively encourage the refugees to return to Kurdistan.
4. Help to undermine PKK support in southeastern Turkey. Several Turkish parliamentarians have said that the best way the Iraqi Kurds can win the support of the government is to undercut the popular support of the PKK in southeastern Turkey. It is not clear how this could be done. Given the sympathies that many Iraqi Kurds have for the situation of their kinsmen in Turkey, most Kurdish politicians believe that the best, and most practical, thing that the Iraqi Kurdish leadership can do is to stay out of Turkey's internal affairs (much the way that the Irish government has chosen to stay out of the situation in Northern Ireland).
5. Encourage the Turks to assume the role of Kurdistan's protector. Some Kurds believe that a political accommodation can be reached with Turkey to give it a large role in the protection of Kurdistan. They argue that since Turkish influence is on the ascendancy in Azerbaijan and Central Asia, that Turkey could be encouraged to extend its influence so that Kurdistan would become a *de facto* protectorate of Turkey. They argue that most Kurds would be willing to accept the Finlandization of Kurdistan as a preferable alternative to reunification with Iraq.

It is vital that the Turks be involved as much as possible in OPC II as it gives the Turks firsthand experience with the Iraqi Kurds and increases the contact in a positive way. Recent moves to include Turks on the MCC are a good start.

The allies, especially the U.S., might also consider providing intelligence on PKK movements through the OPC structure. It is clear that the U.S. has the ability to increase the level of intelligence on PKK activities using assets that are available in the region. By using OPC as the channel, the Turks would have to give the operation more support.

⁹ Talabani denies an alliance, but believes that the PKK can be controlled in northern Iraq by "non-violent means" such as repopulating the border areas, though it is unclear how those measures could stop the PKK.

TURKEY'S OPTIONS IN TRYING TO CONTROL IRAQI KURDISTAN

If Turkey were to decide that the Iraqi Kurds had gone too far, they would have several courses of action.

First, they could simply close the border (this is how they "send messages" to the Kurds now) and prevent the Kurds from receiving supplies. To be completely effective, this strategy would require the cooperation of Iran, but if the past is any guide, the Iranians would cooperate. There is a danger in this approach for the Turks. Such a move would probably force the Iraqi Kurds into an alliance with the PKK and could actually work against Turkish interests.

The second, and more drastic option, would be for the Turks to strike a bargain with the Iraqis. First the Turks would abrogate the OPC II agreement, then seal the border. When Iraqi troops moved in, the Turks would not only stand by and do nothing, they would prevent the allies from coming the Kurds' aid.

In the present circumstances, such a scenario would be devastating to the Turks. It would certainly affect their chances of joining the European Community and could result in a substantial curtailment of their role in NATO.

All other options that the Turks might consider are not practical. Aerial bombing would inflict damage but, without ground action, would have a negligible affect and would only harden the resolve of the Kurds. A coordinated military action by the Turks and Iraqis would be very costly to the Turks, not only in a public relations sense, but also in casualties and again, could incite an uprising in southeastern Turkey. If the Iranians were involved, the public relations consequences for Turkey would be enormous.

Thus, while Turkey does have some options, they are not particularly good and any decision to use these would have to be considered carefully against Turkey's more important long-range interests.

PROSPECTS FOR ENDING ALLIED PROTECTION

As much as allied policymakers would like to quit Kurdistan, realistically, there are only a few scenarios under which it could be done without risking subsequent reoccupation by the Iraqis. They are:

1. A change of administration in Baghdad. Unfortunately, this is the least likely in the immediate future. While there is some hope that an anti-Saddam alliance may yet emerge, it does not seem all that likely in the near-term.¹⁰ Furthermore, a change of administration will not necessarily help the Kurds. In another Iraqi military man were to replace Saddam Hussein, he would likely to continue to advocate reclaiming

¹⁰ Recently, a coalition of anti-Saddam groups met in Vienna.

the Kurdish areas. The situation is only likely to change if a democratic civilian government was to come to power.

2. Conclusion of an agreement with Baghdad. While it is not completely out of the question, it is highly unlikely that the Kurds will reenter negotiations with Saddam Hussein, unless there is a major change in the situation. The allies might use the resumption of talks as a pretext for withdrawing but, at this stage, doing so would undermine the Kurds and eliminate their main bargaining chip. While such a move was possible a year ago, today it is not.
3. Providing the *peshmerge* with the means to defend themselves. Several congressmen have suggested that the best way for the allies to withdraw is to give the Kurds sufficient arms to protect themselves against the Iraqis. The *peshmerge* themselves are confident that they could hold out against Iraqi if they could defend themselves against low-flying aircraft, especially helicopters that carry chemical weapons. In addition, they would like to have more sophisticated anti-tank weapons (such as TOWS). The main obstacle to providing these weapons, of course, is the Turks. Anti-aircraft missiles, such as the Stinger, could not only be used against Iraqi aircraft, but also Turkish planes. Even if the Kurds did have these weapons, they would not likely be able to hold on to the cities in the face of an Iraqi assault, but there is also no doubt that those weapons would make an attempted Iraqi penetration of the mountains extremely difficult.

Other possibilities have been discussed including the replacement of the allied presence with a UN military mission; the possibility of a Kurdish alliance with Turkey; and the threat of a total embargo on Iraq. All of these options might be feasible if circumstances change dramatically, but again, none appears workable in the near future. Thus, it is unlikely that any of the preconditions for ending the allied presence will be met in the next six months and quite possibly much longer.