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1992  
Executive Research Project  
A29

## Ethnic Conflict: The Case of the Kurds

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Fort McNair, Washington, D.C. 20319-6000

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## REPORT DOCUMENTATION PAGE

|                                                                                                                                                                                   |       |                                                          |                                                                                                                             |                                                   |                                                                    |
|-----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|-------|----------------------------------------------------------|-----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|---------------------------------------------------|--------------------------------------------------------------------|
| 1a. REPORT SECURITY CLASSIFICATION<br>Unclassified                                                                                                                                |       |                                                          | 1b. RESTRICTIVE MARKINGS                                                                                                    |                                                   |                                                                    |
| 2a. SECURITY CLASSIFICATION AUTHORITY<br>N/A                                                                                                                                      |       |                                                          | 3. DISTRIBUTION/AVAILABILITY OF REPORT<br>Distribution Statement A: Approved for public release; distribution is unlimited. |                                                   |                                                                    |
| 2b. DECLASSIFICATION/DOWNGRADING SCHEDULE<br>N/A                                                                                                                                  |       |                                                          | 4. PERFORMING ORGANIZATION REPORT NUMBER(S)<br><br>NDU-ICAF-92- A29                                                         |                                                   |                                                                    |
| 6a. NAME OF PERFORMING ORGANIZATION<br>Industrial College of the Armed Forces                                                                                                     |       |                                                          | 6b. OFFICE SYMBOL<br>(if applicable)<br>ICAF-FAP                                                                            |                                                   | 7a. NAME OF MONITORING ORGANIZATION<br>National Defense University |
| 6c. ADDRESS (City, State, and ZIP Code)<br>Fort Lesley J. McNair<br>Washington, D.C. 20319-6000                                                                                   |       |                                                          | 7b. ADDRESS (City, State, and ZIP Code)<br>Fort Lesley J. McNair<br>Washington, D.C. 20319-6000                             |                                                   |                                                                    |
| 8a. NAME OF FUNDING/SPONSORING ORGANIZATION                                                                                                                                       |       | 8b. OFFICE SYMBOL<br>(if applicable)                     |                                                                                                                             | 9. PROCUREMENT INSTRUMENT IDENTIFICATION NUMBER   |                                                                    |
| 8c. ADDRESS (City, State, and ZIP Code)                                                                                                                                           |       |                                                          | 10. SOURCE OF FUNDING NUMBERS                                                                                               |                                                   |                                                                    |
|                                                                                                                                                                                   |       |                                                          | PROGRAM ELEMENT NO.                                                                                                         | PROJECT NO.                                       | TASK NO.                                                           |
|                                                                                                                                                                                   |       |                                                          | WORK UNIT ACCESSION NO.                                                                                                     |                                                   |                                                                    |
| 11. TITLE (Include Security Classification)<br><i>Ethnic Conflict: The Case of the Kurds</i>                                                                                      |       |                                                          |                                                                                                                             |                                                   |                                                                    |
| 12. PERSONAL AUTHOR(S) <i>Jeffrey Q. Wagner</i>                                                                                                                                   |       |                                                          |                                                                                                                             |                                                   |                                                                    |
| 13a. TYPE OF REPORT<br>Research                                                                                                                                                   |       | 13b. TIME COVERED<br>FROM <i>Aug 91</i> TO <i>Apr 92</i> |                                                                                                                             | 14. DATE OF REPORT (Year, Month, Day)<br>April 92 |                                                                    |
| 15. PAGE COUNT <i>38</i>                                                                                                                                                          |       |                                                          |                                                                                                                             |                                                   |                                                                    |
| 16. SUPPLEMENTARY NOTATION                                                                                                                                                        |       |                                                          |                                                                                                                             |                                                   |                                                                    |
| 17. COSATI CODES                                                                                                                                                                  |       |                                                          | 18. SUBJECT TERMS (Continue on reverse if necessary and identify by block number)                                           |                                                   |                                                                    |
| FIELD                                                                                                                                                                             | GROUP | SUB-GROUP                                                |                                                                                                                             |                                                   |                                                                    |
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|                                                                                                                                                                                   |       |                                                          |                                                                                                                             |                                                   |                                                                    |
| 19. ABSTRACT (Continue on reverse if necessary and identify by block number)<br><br>SEE ATTACHED                                                                                  |       |                                                          |                                                                                                                             |                                                   |                                                                    |
| 20. DISTRIBUTION/AVAILABILITY OF ABSTRACT<br><input checked="" type="checkbox"/> UNCLASSIFIED/UNLIMITED <input type="checkbox"/> SAME AS RPT. <input type="checkbox"/> DTIC USERS |       |                                                          | 21. ABSTRACT SECURITY CLASSIFICATION<br>Unclassified                                                                        |                                                   |                                                                    |
| 22a. NAME OF RESPONSIBLE INDIVIDUAL<br>Judy Clark                                                                                                                                 |       |                                                          | 22b. TELEPHONE (Include Area Code)<br>(202) 475-1889                                                                        |                                                   | 22c. OFFICE SYMBOL<br>ICAF-FAP                                     |

**ETHNIC CONFLICT: THE CASE OF THE KURDS****Abstract**

This paper explores the question of the Kurds. One of the largest ethnic groups on the globe without a nation of their own, the Kurds living in the Middle East continue to struggle for some degree of self determination, especially so for those Kurds living within Iraq.

I have explored their history, social customs, and the varied political context in which the twenty million Kurds now live in Iraq, Turkey, Iran, Syria and Armenia. Focusing on the Iraqi situation, I also suggest several conditions I feel the Kurds must achieve in order to obtain the necessary international political support needed to achieve a meaningful autonomy agreement. I further suggest U.S. policy direction for this volatile region.

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| Availability Codes |                                            |
| Dist               | Avail and/or Special                       |
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## Introduction

For the past several years, the Kurds native to northeastern Iraq have been a hot news topic, raising the social consciousness of many westerners and earning sympathy from many for their plight. Two events in particular stand out:

- In March 1988, near the end of the bloody and disastrous (for both sides) Iran/Iraq war, Iraqi military forces attacked the Kurdish village of Halabja in Iraqi Kurdistan with nerve agents and mustard gas, killing approximately five thousand Kurds.<sup>1</sup> While estimates of the actual death toll vary significantly, the fact that this atrocity occurred is not in doubt. The Iraqi regime's use of internationally outlawed chemical weapons outraged world opinion. Recent news reports suggest that a much broader scale, "carefully planned and executed Iraqi government campaign against (their) Kurdish minority in the late 80s took tens of thousands, and by some Kurdish estimates more than 180,000 lives."<sup>2</sup>
- More recently, the aftermath of Operation DESERT STORM saw the Kurds "encouraged" to once again oppose Saddam Hussein. The Kurdish revolt was put down ruthlessly by Saddam, who was able to succeed in part (some felt)

when he was permitted in the war's aftermath to fly rotary winged aircraft to suppress the revolt.<sup>3</sup>

Operation PROVIDE COMFORT was born to protect the thousands of Kurds who fled to the rugged mountains to the north in Turkey. United Nations forces continue to provide refugee/humanitarian assistance through the establishment of the UN mandated buffer zone to this date.<sup>4</sup>

My purpose in this paper is to explore this people; their history, customs, political solidarity, and their frequently frustrated quest for autonomy. Can there be an independent or autonomous Kurdistan? In Iraq, Turkey, Iran, Syria, Armenia? As a united Kurdistan or as a state or states within the existing political boundaries? What would Kurdish independence mean to the future stability of the Middle East? What are the United States' policy interests with regard to the Kurds? Are they vital or important policy interests? Should we attempt to influence, either overtly or covertly, events as they unfold in Kurdistan? What are our policy options?

In order to place the Kurdish people into a context useful in discussing their future, I will, in the next three sections of this paper discuss their society, culture and economy; briefly explore the historical backdrop from which they emerged into today's headlines; and review "Greater Kurdistan" to explore

briefly the political context in the five states where the Kurds currently reside.

### **Kurdish Society, Culture and Economy**

The Kurds are an Aryan, non-Arab Islamic people. They are more closely related to the Persians than any of their other Middle East neighbors, and are intermingled to some degree with their neighbors and with the Mongols, who dominated their mountain home in the thirteenth century.<sup>5</sup> They are predominantly Sunni Moslem, although approximately 40 percent<sup>6</sup> of Iranian Kurds and about a third of Turkish Kurds are Shiite.<sup>7</sup> Generally, there has been little active friction between the Kurdish Sunnis and Shiites over the years.

The Kurdish way of life has evolved out of their mountainous environment. Until well into the nineteenth century, they were a semi-nomadic people, with animal herds of goats, sheep; and the donkey as their beast of burden. Their migrations had a seasonal rather than randomized pattern, and took place between summer and winter "homes" selected to exploit more favorable grazing conditions for their flocks.

The establishment of international borders at the close of the Great War served to hasten the Kurds' transition to a more stable, agrarian based existence. Tobacco, grain, fruit and vegetable crops were adopted and provided both subsistence and



some cash value as well, as the Iraqi Kurds exported these commodities to the Iraqi Arab population in order to import such goods as tea and sugar, both highly prized items in the Kurdish household.<sup>8</sup> Their diet was sparse but adequate . . . eggs, cheese, milk, a distinctive flat loaf of bread, and potatoes were staples. Meat (goat or mutton) was an infrequent treat, consumed only about once per week.

As Kurdish society was transformed into more permanent settlements in extended family or tribal units, the migration of the still-nomadic tribes was disrupted, and often was the source of conflict between such groups in the late 19th and early 20th centuries. Loyalty was important within these tribal/family units. Total allegiance was expected and demanded of the members. The tribal chief was called the Sheikh, who was also its religious head. The Sheikh's home was the focal point of the Kurdish village. It was the most sturdily built, of stone, while the remainder of village's homes were typically a combination of mud, stone and sod. An important part of the Sheikh's position made him the host for any and all visitors to the village. He was expected to feed and shelter the visitor for the duration of his visit, for which the visitor was expected to render appropriate gifts upon departing. This aspect of Kurdish life is very striking, as this host function carried with it enormous prestige. The Sheikh was the court of first and last resort, settling all disputes within the tribe. The moral code of

conduct between outside Kurdish peoples differed markedly with that expected of intra-tribal affairs. Within the tribe, honor was prized, whereas dealings with outside tribes was frequently marred by "bad faith and treachery."<sup>9</sup> Hence, the Kurds' long developed reputation as fierce warriors was developed over centuries of experience. The Persian view of the Kurds was rather contradictory; hate, fear and admiration rolled into a rather fascinating description translated by E. B. Sloan in 1908:

"Shedders of blood, raisers after strife, seekers after turmoil and uproar, robbers and brigands; a people all malignant, and evil-doers of depraved habits, ignorant of all mercy, devoid of all humanity, scorning the garment of wisdom; but a brave race and fearless, of a hospitality grateful to the soul, in truth and in honour unequalled, of pleasing countenance and fair cheek, boasting all the goods of beauty and grace."<sup>10</sup>

Their dress is distinctively Kurdish and is one of the two factors that distinguishes them as a people. The other is their Kurdish language.<sup>11</sup> Their dress consists of baggy pants tied at the shoe, a shirt with heavy belt and cummerbund, long embroidered jacket and a tribal-distinctive turban. The men also wore a Khanjar (curved dagger) on their belt to denote their warrior status.

Kurdish women also wear distinctive dress, but are not veiled as in many other Middle Eastern Islamic societies. Kurdish women are more "liberated" than their Arab counterparts. In the countryside, women tend to perform physically demanding work,<sup>12</sup> such as farming and cultivation, and are heavily involved in child care, as Kurdish families are typically large,

with five to six children. Marriages are arranged, to a point. A young man would identify the woman he was interested in marrying and makes his desire known to his parents. If his parents approve, they would then approach the woman's parents with a marriage proposal. In rural areas, the woman's parents generally would make the decision to accept or reject without consulting their daughter. In urbanized areas, the daughter would be permitted to make her own decision, which would be relayed to the young man via both sets of parents. In either case, the convention of "dating" plays no role. The subsequent wedding is a cause for great village celebration, lasting 2-3 days.<sup>13</sup>

Language is the other factor that distinguishes the Kurds, who are culturally and ethnically closest to the Persians, sharing many of their literary and folk legends.<sup>14</sup> Kurdish is spoken in two primary dialects. Kermanji is spoken in Turkey, Syria, Armenia, and by 40 percent of the Iraqi Kurds. Gurani is spoken in Iran and by the remaining 60 percent of the Iraqi Kurds. Communication between speakers of these two dialects can be difficult, but they are mutually understandable, so language does not represent a barrier to Kurdish solidarity or nationhood.<sup>15</sup>

Aside from the agricultural resources mentioned previously, the greatest natural resource common to most all of Kurdistan is

water. The mountains feed much of the water for both the Tigris and Euphrates Rivers and Arab Iraq, and this has been developed for hydroelectric power.<sup>16</sup> There are large dams developed at the Dukan reservoir and at the Darbandi-Khan reservoir, both within Iraqi Kurdistan. In addition, Kurdistan has Iraq's largest oil field, in the vicinity of the Kurdish city of Kirkuk. The reality of this economic giant certainly plays a major role in Baghdad's treatment of the Kurds and in their view of Kurdish autonomy.

#### **Background/Historical Perspective**

The Kurds have lived for centuries in the landlocked mountains between the Tigris River and Armenia. In terms of today's political boundaries, they live in large numbers in Turkey, Iran and Iraq, with less significant populations in Armenia and Syria. Over the years, the Kurds have worked tirelessly for self determination or autonomy from the majority governments within current day political boundaries. A series of revolts have failed; being bloody, poorly coordinated and haphazard. Most of these efforts have occurred within Iraq, where conditions continue to suggest that, if it can ever be achieved, autonomy will first occur.

The first historical reference which identified the Kurds as a distinct people was made by Arab historians in about A.D. 943. They described conflict between Arabs and Kurds in A.D. 637 in

areas north of Baghdad.<sup>17</sup> Interestingly, the Kurds have never enjoyed exclusive rule over the area of Kurdistan for any meaningful period. Mongol, Turkoman, and Ottoman empires controlled the area of Kurdistan for hundreds of years, up to the period preceding World War I. It is worthy of note, however, that while the Kurds did not have political control of Kurdistan, they were by and large left to themselves by their overlords, owing primarily to their isolated mountainous homeland; hence, they enjoyed a significant degree of self determination and autonomy for hundreds of years. Kurdistan and the Kurds as a distinct people were widely recognized. After the Great War (WWI) the Ottoman empire was dissolved and the Allies signed the Treaty of Sevres with the Turks. The treaty explicitly provided that a homeland be created (Kurdistan) for the Kurds.<sup>18</sup> This treaty was negotiated in consonance with President Woodrow Wilson's famous Fourteen Points. The 12th point asserted that

" . . . other nationalities which are under Turkish rule shall be assured an undoubted security of life and an absolute unmolested opportunity for autonomous development."<sup>19</sup>

The Treaty was never consummated for two reasons. First, Mustafa Kemal (known as Attaturk) came to power in Turkey. His newly formed nationalist government repudiated the treaty signed by the puppet government that preceded him in power. The Turks undertook a war of independence, defeating the Greeks in 1923, becoming a significant military power in the process. The Allies then signed a new peace Treaty of Lausanne, which included no

provision for Kurdish autonomy.<sup>20</sup> The Turkish Kurds began a period of seventy years in which the Turkish government refused to acknowledge that the Kurds even existed as an ethnically distinct minority. Attaturk strove to create a new Turkish nation out of the remnants of the Ottoman Empire. He wanted Turkey to have its own Turkish national identity, with "Turkish only" policies in art, culture and politics.<sup>21</sup> He had no use for minorities. Turkish Kurds came to be known as "mountain Turks." Attaturk banned the Kurdish language, closed Kurdish mosques, and most everything that was ethnically Kurdish. Those who migrated to cities were assimilated and in many cases lost much of their identity to their Kurdish roots. Despite Attaturk's actions, the overwhelming majority of Kurds who remained in the mountains of eastern Turkey/Kurdistan retained their Kurdish lifestyle and language in spite of the government's suppression.

The Turkish Kurds were understandably upset with Attaturk and mounted a rebellion in 1924. After some early difficulties, the Turkish Army took overwhelming action to crush the revolt, which ended after only one month. The Kurdish leader, Sheikh Said of the powerful Nakshabandi tribe, and 46 of his supporters were executed after a Turkish military tribunal in June 1924. Thereafter, the Turkish army laid waste to the area, destroying more than 200 villages and killing 15,000 people. These revolts did, however, enable the Kurds to hone their mountain defensive

warfare techniques. Like the Afghans, they became proficient at the art of ambush.<sup>22</sup>

The second reason for the failure of the treaty provisions to be enacted was a change of heart on the part of the British. They had just created a new entity in the Gulf region - Iraq, and thought southern Kurdistan (which included significant oil resources) would be a good addition. A commission of the League of Nations agreed.<sup>23</sup> Thus, power politics on the part of the Turks and British doomed the Kurds. It is interesting to note that the population of Kurdistan exceeds that of the Iraqi state created by the British. It therefore is not a leap of faith to conclude that the boundaries were drawn solely in the British perceived self interests at that time, perhaps to create an Iraqi nation easier to control than the tough-by-reputation Kurds. Some assert that the Iraqi monarchy established by the British was a puppet for Britain until its overthrow in 1958.<sup>24</sup>

Since the 1920s, several opportunities, in limited respects have been presented to provide a degree of autonomy for some Kurds. At the close of World War II, Iranian Kurds formed the autonomous Kurdish Republic of Mahabad in northwestern Iran. Mahabad was supported by Stalin's forces, which were retreating from Iran at the end of the war under pressure from the west. Once Soviet forces were withdrawn, Iranian military forces quickly regained control of the area in late 1946. Its Kurdish

leadership was executed.<sup>25</sup>

More recently, Iraq has twice offered autonomy for the Iraqi Kurds within the political boundaries of Iraq. I will discuss these episodes in detail later, as I believe they are symptomatic of the infighting which has retarded Kurdish autonomy, and also more importantly the bad faith in which Saddam Hussein has dealt with the Kurds.

Over the years, the Kurds have been used - and abused - principally by the leadership in power on either side of the Iran/Iraq border. Saddam Hussein is by no means the first to do so. At various times, Reza Shah of Iran, the Ayatollah Khomeini of Iran and Saddam's Baathist Party in Iraq have used the Kurds as a buffer and paid "agent" between Persian and Arab Iraqi interests. Often the Kurds served by proxy as troops for one side or the other. Allies of convenience, the Kurds have always been highly regarded for their fighting prowess, especially so within the inhospitable mountains that make up Kurdistan. But once their usefulness was past, they would just as quickly be abandoned by their sponsors.

A good example is the protracted revolt by the Iraqi Kurds during the 60s. Mullah Mustafa Barzani, the Kurds most inspirational and charismatic leader, had returned to Iraq with great fanfare from several years exile in the Soviet Union after



the fall of Mahabad in 1946. Barzani was the leader of the tough, independent Barzani tribe of mountainous northern Iraqi Kurdistan. Upon his return to Baghdad, the Iraqi leader Abdul Karim Kassem, who deposed the monarchy via a military coup in 1958, attempted to co-opt Barzani into supporting the Iraqi government and into making peace.<sup>26</sup> In the meantime, Kassem hedged his bet by arming Barzani's Kurdish foes in order to minimize his power. Kassem also played other Kurdish tribes off against Barzani through bribes - buying some loyalty.<sup>27</sup> Hence, the conflict of the 60s, an on again - off again fight, began with only Kurds bearing arms on both sides.

Another example of intra-Kurd distrust occurred in December of 1961. The Kurdish Democratic Party (KDP), headed at the time by Jelal Talabani, an educated and more urbanized Kurd, joined with Barzani in the revolt. Their mutual distrust, however, prevented the combined forces from fighting in the vicinity of one another for fear of clashes among the various Kurdish tribal factions present. Another coup took place in Baghdad in late 1963 and changed little. A 100,000 British pound reward was offered by the Baathists for Mullah Mustafa Barzani - dead or alive. Iraqi army units and aircraft were used extensively, advancing during the summer months and in the plains where mechanized units could maneuver. But the winter and the hills belonged to the Kurds. It was during the 60s conflict that the first permanent professional military organization was

established by the Kurds, known as the Pesh Merga. Previously, Kurdish fighting forces were formed from men based on their tribal affiliation. After a second Baath coup in Baghdad in 1969, a major offensive by the Iraqi government forces commenced with 60,000 troops committed. Although outnumbered by six to one, Barzani's forces fought valiantly. While nearly overwhelmed by the sheer power of the Iraqi forces, the Kurds gave ground grudgingly and doggedly, and remained in position to resist in their mountains once winter set in, and the Baathist offensive stalled.<sup>28</sup>

At this point, the Iraqi government made the apparent decision that taking Kurdistan would be too hard and offered, on 11 March 1970, a fifteen point settlement with some key concessions to the Kurds:

- Appointment of a Kurdish Vice President of Iraq;
- Establishment of Kurdish as one of two official languages;  
and
- Representation of Kurds in the government, army, police, legislature, and universities in proportion to their numbers.<sup>29</sup>

On closer examination, this "autonomy" agreement was hollow. Local government officials in the Kurdish autonomous zone were to be appointed by Baghdad. While Kurds, they were the government's Kurds. There was no provision for self government via free elections. De-facto control certainly would have remained in the

hands of Baghdad. As for the Vice Presidency, the Iraqi government system made this a purely figurehead position, with no real power. Again, someone under the control of the Arab majority.<sup>30</sup>

The proposal was made academic when the Baathists reneged on several key points, including the disposition of Kirkuk, Kurdistan's oil rich region within the borders of an autonomous Kurdistan. Kirkuk is a very emotional issue for the Kurds. It is the home of Jela Talabani and is fiercely held as an integral part of Kurdistan. The feeling is that there can be "no Kurdistan without Kirkuk."<sup>31</sup> The Baathist regime had also established an "arabization" policy in key regions of Kurdistan, especially in and around Kirkuk with the objective of diluting and displacing Kurdish populations in the oil rich areas. Shortly thereafter the Kurds' movement collapsed when the Shah and Iraq's Saddam Hussein agreed to collaborate to shut the border to Kurdish movement . . . no weapons traffic, no refuge. Barzani surrendered and fled to Iran. (He later died in the United States in 1979.) The Iranians had agreed to terms with the Iraqis at an OPEC conference in 1975 which resolved several border disputes in Iran's favor. Since the Shah no longer had any use for the Kurds, he abandoned them.<sup>32</sup> As a postscript, Iraq unilaterally decreed the "settlement," establishing on paper a Kurdish autonomous region. It included only the mountainous, primitive regions of Kurdistan and excluded Kirkuk, not

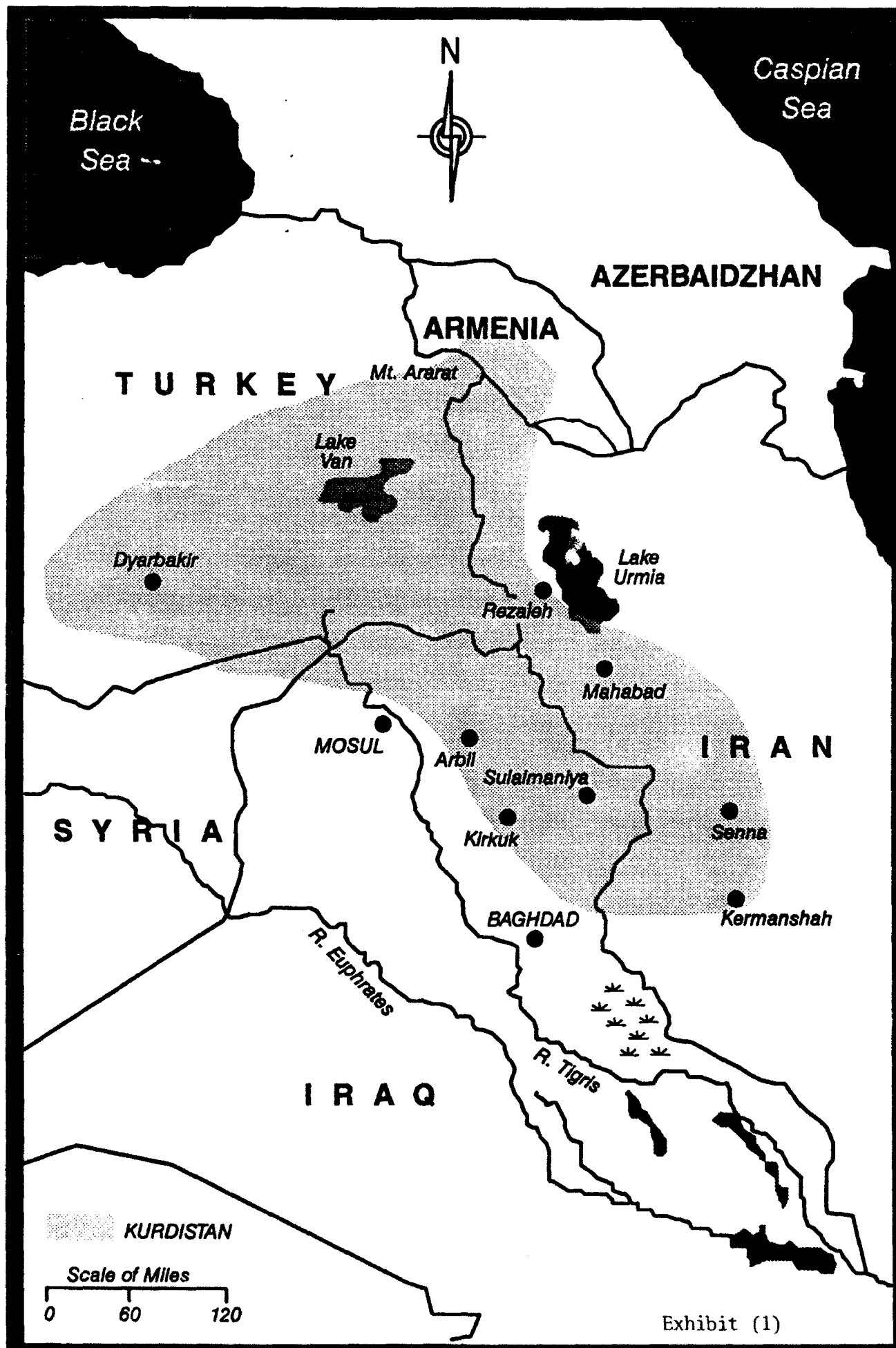
surprising in the context of the 1973 run-up of oil prices.

### **Greater Kurdistan: In the Modern Geopolitical Context**

As mentioned previously, the Kurds live in five different countries; Iraq, Turkey, Iran, Syria and Armenia. In this section, I will describe the modern context in which the Kurds exist, to include the political realities in which they now live, both internal to the Kurds and those powers external to the Kurds, both their overlords and those world powers and organizations that impact on any Kurdish attempt at independence or autonomy.

Kurdistan encompasses more than 200,000 square kilometers of mostly mountainous territory, an area greater than several Middle Eastern nations, such as Syria, Kuwait, Bahrain, Jordan, Lebanon and Israel. Exhibit (1) provides an approximation of the area traditionally considered to be that of historical Kurdistan.

The population of Kurds within these five nations is another matter altogether. Estimates vary wildly, from a low of under ten million<sup>33</sup> to a high of thirty million.<sup>34</sup> Their numbers are heavily concentrated in Turkey, where most agree that somewhere between one-half to two-thirds of all Kurds live. Next most populous is Iran, with about 20 to 30 percent of the total, then Iraq, with 15 to 20 percent. Syria (2-5 percent) and Armenia (less than 2 percent) have much less significant populations of

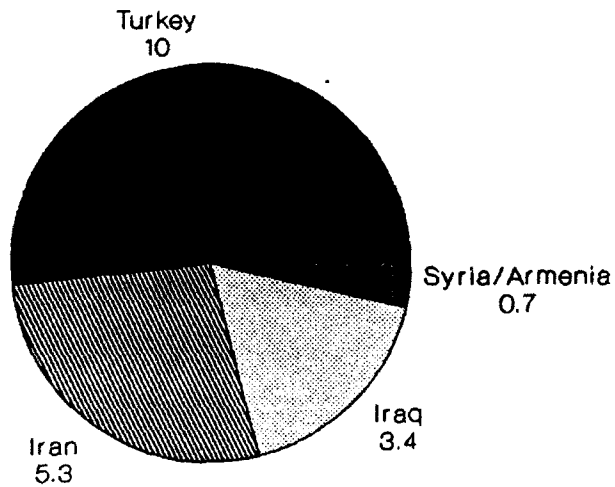


Kurds who, as I will discuss later, have played little or no role in the Kurdish autonomy movement. Exhibit (2) depicts the concentration of Kurds in Turkey, Iran, Iraq, Syria and Armenia. Exhibits (3), (4), and (5) reflect the Kurds' minority status in the three countries where they have a significant population.<sup>35</sup>

The Kurds in Turkey, as described earlier, are by far the most numerous, comprising approximately 17 percent of Turkey's population, by far Turkey's largest minority.<sup>36</sup> About one million Kurds live in Istanbul alone, along with a large number in Ankara, underscoring the fact that large numbers of Kurds now live outside their traditional mountain origins.<sup>37</sup>

Their contemporary movement in Turkey has its origins in the 1970s in the form of the Partiya Kardaren Kurdistan (PKK), Kurdish Workers Party under the leadership of Abdullah Ocalon. Its members were drawn from the underclass and the Kurds who were most oppressed. Ocalon's objective was the achievement of independence for Kurdistan. In 1977 the PKK produced a document calling for Turkish Kurdistan to play a leadership role in a free Kurdistan revolution. The PKK had a leftist, Marxist, then later Maoist orientation and had developed connections with Moscow for support, though most financing was accomplished through theft and bank robbery.<sup>38</sup>

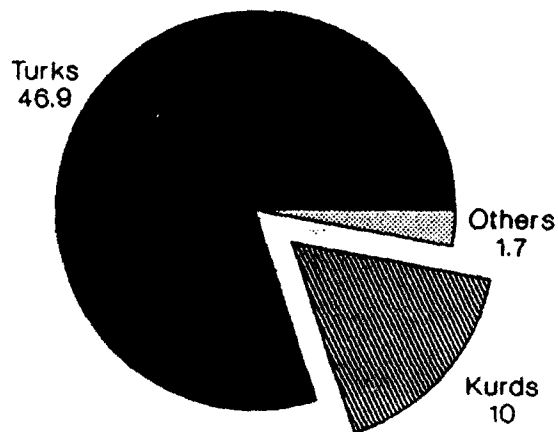
## Greater Kurdistan Population (1991, in millions)



Source: The World Factbook, 1991

Exhibit (2)

## Turkey Population Divisions, 1991 (millions)



Source: The World Factbook, 1991

Exhibit (3)

After a brief interruption in the movement in the early 80s, the PKK continued a campaign of violence and intimidation. For a brief period, they were allied formally with the KDP in Iraq, which provided great tactical advantage to the Turkish Kurds, who could exploit their southern border with Iraqi Kurdistan as a sanctuary. The PKK pattern had been to use guerrilla intimidation tactics to prevent non-PKK Kurds from cooperating with the governmental authorities, in addition to attacking Turkish military and government officials on a hit and run basis.<sup>39</sup>

Cooperation with the KDP was terminated in 1987, a significant setback for the PKK. The KDP's decision to pull out of the agreement was twofold; first, they objected to the brutal tactics employed by the PKK, which included attacks against women, children, and even some KDP members.<sup>40</sup> Perhaps the more important and more profound reason was political. The KDP's objectives in Iraq became complicated when they had a hostile Turkish government, a NATO member, to their north.

The PKK movement's hit and run tactics continue to this day, with occasional bombings in Ankara or Istanbul, along with periodic retaliation by the Turkish army.<sup>41</sup> Their major victory has occurred at the political level, with the government finally acknowledging the existence of the Kurds as a people.



The depth of feeling on the part of both Kurds and Turks is striking. I visited Ankara and Istanbul in March 1991, and during a meeting with several Turkish Navy Admirals, the subject of the Kurds was alluded to. The Turkish flag officers visibly bristled and abruptly set the subject aside, remarking that Turkey would never surrender any more territory. I recently heard this aptly described as the Turks' "shared trauma," resulting from the breakup of the Ottoman Empire of pre- World War I.<sup>42</sup>

I find it paradoxical that oppressive Turkish nationalism refused all these years to accept the premise that the Kurds even existed, but accommodated those Kurds as near-equals when the Kurd abandoned his Kurdish roots. Hence the Kurds living in the cities of Turkey were "completely assimilated" into Turkish society.<sup>43</sup>

While a portion of traditional Kurdistan includes northeastern Syria, the population there, only about 500 thousand,<sup>44</sup> represents a tiny minority of the population. Many in fact are descendants of Kurds who migrated to Syrian territory to escape Attaturk in the 20s and 30s. Damascus has apparently not felt threatened by their Kurdish minority, as the PKK often held their meetings there. The Syrian Kurds are not a politically significant group at the present time, and their small numbers suggest they are probably incapable of becoming one.

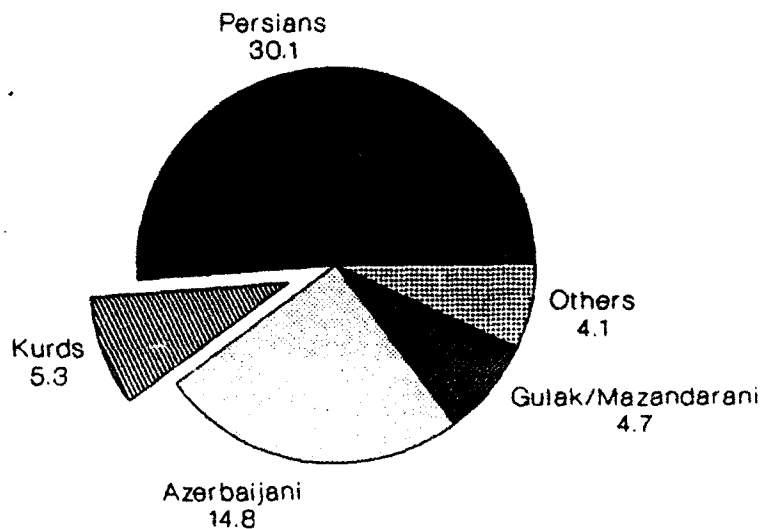
Even smaller numbers of Kurds, not more than about 200,000, live in Armenia, formerly a Soviet Socialist Republic. The Armenian Kurds have never enjoyed self government, but (ironically) were permitted to flourish culturally under their communist authoritarian government than were those in the rest of Kurdistan.<sup>45</sup> The Soviets permitted and even encouraged Kurdish language to be a part of the education process and fostered cultural retention by use of the state publishing apparatus. Even more so than the Syrian Kurds, the Armenian Kurds are not a political factor in Kurdistan. They are physically isolated from the remainder of Kurdistan and were ideologically isolated for many years, at least since the departure of Mullah Mustafa Barzani in 1958.<sup>46</sup>

Iran's Kurdish movement is also less active than we see in Iraq and Turkey. The Iraqi and Turkish Kurdish minorities are significant, making up about one-fifth of their respective populations.<sup>47</sup> In Iran, the Kurds make up less than ten percent of the population. Further, their Kurds are a much smaller minority than are the Azerbaijanis, as depicted in exhibit (4).

Their treatment over the years by successive Iranian governments seems to walk a line between the experience of Turkey and Iraq. While the Persians acknowledged the Kurds existence, and permitted Kurdish to be taught in the schools, they rejected the idea of ethnicity being a factor worthy of consideration.

## Iran

### Population Divisions, 1991 (millions)

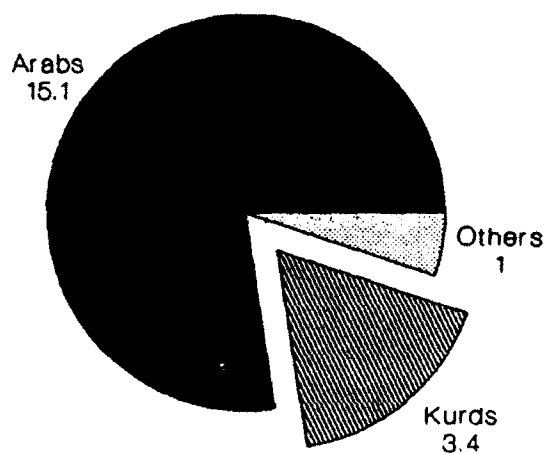


Source: The World Factbook, 1991

Exhibit (4)

## Iraq

### Population Divisions, 1991 (millions)



Source: The World Factbook, 1991

Exhibit (5)

Ayatollah Khomeini's views are instructive:

"Sometimes, the word minorities is used to refer to people such as the Kurds, Lurs, Turks, Persians, Baluchis and such like. These people should not be called minorities because this term assumes that there is a difference between these brothers. In Islam such a difference has no place at all. There is no difference between Muslims who speak different languages, for instance the Arabs or the Persians. It is very probable that such problems have been created by those who do not wish the Muslim countries to be united."<sup>48</sup>

Ethnicity was by definition subordinated to Islam in the eyes of the Shiite fundamentalist leader.

While politically less active than their counterparts in Iraq and Turkey, the Iranian Kurds' political party, the Kurdish Democratic Party of Iran (KDPI) is the oldest Kurdish political organization, dating to the pre-Mahabad days of 1944.<sup>49</sup> The current version of the KDPI has rather modest objectives, and is less threatening to the Iranian government. The KDPI aspires to:

- maintain Iran's territorial integrity; and to
- Kurdish autonomy within the Iranian federal system.<sup>50</sup>

This modest agenda spawned some ideological friction as one might expect among some of the more radical elements, who formed the Kurdish Toilers of Iran (KOMALAH), a Marxist/Maoist revolutionary group. The two political parties have continued their infighting over these fundamental ideological differences, resulting in a minimally effective Kurdish political apparatus within Iran. Government troops control all of Iranian Kurdistan.<sup>51</sup>

As noted earlier, the Iraqi Kurds' movement has enjoyed the greatest degree of vigor over the years. The Iraqi government has, at least to some degree, offered a degree of autonomy, even going so far as to unilaterally enact it in 1974. Whether the Baathists are sincere in their intent is an entirely different subject. The gassing of 1988, systematic Arabization of key (Kirkuk) regions of Iraqi Kurdistan, and the recently uncovered evidence of genocide against the Kurds suggests that the Kurds have more than a few data points to justify their deep distrust of the Baathists and Saddam. Politically, they are a paradox in Iraq. While they enjoy the greatest political depth of the Kurdish people, a long standing friction has separated the two leaders of the movement, Jelial Talabani's Patriotic Union of Kurdistan (PUK) and Massoud Barzani's KDP (Massoud succeeded his father, Mullah Mustafa as KDP head upon the elder's death in 1979.)<sup>52</sup>

There is a long history of distrust between Talabani and Barzani. When one wanted to bargain with the government, the other refused. As indicated earlier, their respective movements' ideological foundations are fundamentally different in outlook. Talabani is urban, educated. Barzani is tribal and rural, with the tougher soldiers. Barzani suffers by comparison to his father. Mullah Mustafa was a charismatic, inspirational leader, a person who would be followed fervently by his people, with

little or no question. Massoud lacks this charisma.<sup>53</sup> A unifying force is probably needed if the Iraqi Kurds hope to achieve some sort of autonomy.

Reuter's news service reported in January that the Iraqi Kurds had suspended autonomy negotiations with the government in order to elect an undisputed leader of the Kurdish movement along with a Kurdish National Assembly.<sup>54</sup> These elections are imminent and if successful could provide much needed leadership focus for the Kurds.

#### **The Future**

The future of the Kurds, and prognostication in general is a tough business - just ask the old Sovietologists. So rather than predicting the future, I intend to approach this section from the standpoint of conditions. What conditions would most likely permit autonomy for the Kurds of Iraq? In addition, I will lay out a few policy options, along with my recommendation for maximizing U.S. security interests in this volatile region.

First, I think it is necessary to acknowledge the legitimacy of the Kurds' drive for self determination. By any reasonable measure - population, way of life, land area, their history - the Kurds qualify for some type of nationhood. They are, in fact, the largest ethnic group on the planet without a state of their own. Remember that the Iraqi state itself is the product of

British royal mapmakers in post World War I. Kurdistan may have been included simply for its oil resources in the vicinity of Kirkuk.<sup>55</sup>

If we accept the notion that the Kurds' drive for self determination is legitimate in the same way that the Lithuanians, Croatians and Palestinians is, we can then speculate on the conditions that might have to occur in order for their quest to be realized. First, although the Kurds have been burned by their "allies" many times in the past, one must admit that they need at a minimum the political support of the community of nations. I believe the post-cold war environment offers the Kurds their best chance ever to obtain that support. The Kurds were a buffer for years, used even by the United States on occasion as a chip in the U.S. - Soviet confrontation context. Example: The U.S. supported the Kurds via the CIA and the Shah of Iran in the 70s for a short period. The motivation was to counter the Soviets, not to altruistically help the Kurds. The Shah had argued for U.S. support to counter the 1972 Iraq/Soviet agreement.<sup>56</sup> The Cold War is over. Second, human rights are important to the world community. The flood of sympathetic press reports, especially over the last year since the end of the Gulf War, has created a new worldwide recognition of and sympathy for the Kurds plight.

The Kurds need to exploit the goodwill out there, and need to start by cleaning up their own act. Specifically, they need to:

- Demonstrate the capability to govern. The current Iraqi embargo of Kurdistan has left the infrastructure of normal government services in a shambles. The Kurds need to step up and fill this vacuum.<sup>57</sup>

- Embrace democratic principles. The world community is much more likely to actively support the Kurds and pressure the Iraqi government to seriously negotiate autonomy if the Kurds are able to shed their reputation as lawless and as a people unable to reach consensus within their own community . . . witness the longstanding Talabani/Barzani rivalry for power. The elections mentioned earlier for April 1992 seem to me to offer a fantastic opportunity for the Kurds to achieve an important linchpin to their legitimacy in the eyes of the civilized and increasingly democratic world. I view the success of these elections as critically important to the future of the Kurds. The two primary rivals must agree to abide by the results of the elections and to support, in deed as well as word, the government that emerges from this process.

- Do not threaten the Turkish and Iranian neighbors. This is a tall order, since they would understandably fear the actions of their own Kurdish minorities if the Iraqi Kurds were to achieve autonomy. For this reason, the "i" word - independence - needs to be avoided like the plague. The elected Kurdish leader



must ensure that the Iranians and Turks understand that their objectives are for autonomy within existing national political boundaries. In addition, contact with the Kurdish political organizations within Turkey and Iran must be avoided.

- Be willing to negotiate and compromise. As emotional as Kirkuk is to the Kurds, they must recognize the importance of the petroleum of the region to the economy of Iraq. To achieve true autonomy, it appears imperative that some degree of compromise on the oil issue relating to Kirkuk is essential.

If the conditions above are achieved, and they are largely under the direct control of the Iraqi Kurds themselves, the last significant impediment, in my view, is Saddam Hussein and the Baathist Party of Iraq. I believe the past twenty some years have conclusively demonstrated that Saddam and his boys are anti-Kurd. The Baathist atrocities speak for themselves. Only with the support of the world community can the Kurds hope to leverage the Baathists, and only by demonstrating the conditions outlined above can the Kurds hope to develop that support.

#### **United States Policy Options**

For the short term, I believe U.S. policy interests are best served by merely continuing support of the peacekeeping buffer zone efforts embodied in United Nations resolution 688. I believe it a reasonable standard to expect the Kurds to pass the "test" outlined above, and to demonstrate the stuff of which

orderly democratic societies routinely see in their governments before supporting Kurdish autonomy goals. Other options, whether covert or overt, would, in my judgment, fail unless and until the Kurds pass the test.

Assuming the Kurds are successful, what then? Using the recent proliferation of democracy around the world as a model, it seemingly is inconsistent to deny American recognition of the Kurds' right to autonomy when we have already recognized the inherent right of others in similar circumstances to self rule. As threatening as this movement may be to the Turks and Iranians, we should be consistent, in the absence of vital national interests to the contrary, in our support of basic democratic principles, and work to the extent we can to see that whatever changes take place are bloodless. I do not necessarily subscribe to the belief that Turkey will react violently to Iraqi (or even their own Kurdish minority) movement for autonomy, especially if the autonomy occurs within existing national boundaries. Remember that Turkey's government is democratic, and recently achieved an orderly civilian parliamentary transfer of power from Turgut Ozal to Suleyman Demiral. This event underscores the fact that democratic principles are important to the Turks. In addition, the Kurds no longer serve as a shock absorber between NATO Turkey and the Soviet Union. The Turks can no longer repress their Kurdish minority and expect to avoid negative repercussions. World and especially European Economic Community

opinion matter to the Turks, who covet membership in the EEC. Therefore, I see many reasons why the prospect of an autonomous Iraqi Kurdistan can be less threatening to Turkey now than it ever was in the past. The Turks have, however, clearly demonstrated in recent days their continued opposition to an autonomous Kurdistan within Turkish borders, as the level of conflict between the PKK and the Turkish Armed Forces has escalated dramatically.<sup>58</sup>

In terms of vital U.S. national interests, it is my opinion that the only vital interest involving the Kurds encompasses the broader issue of Middle East petroleum. Stability of the region and access to its freely functioning oil market clearly is a vital national interest. The Kurds surely can destabilize the region in a peripheral way, but simply do not have the economic, political or military resources to destabilize the region as a whole. We should however, as a matter of national principle, retain our commitment to democratic principles and actively pursue, with U.N. sponsorship, the protection of the Kurds from Iraqi oppression and to further their autonomy objective if and when the "tests" suggested earlier have been successfully achieved.

I believe the United States should maintain its present course, protecting the Kurds' basic rights over the short term through U.N. relief efforts, while continuing to pressure the regime of Saddam Hussein, whose collapse may be an essential ingredient to the eventual establishment of an autonomous Kurdistan within Iraq.

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14. Hooglund, 21 February 1992.

15. Dosky, 3 February 1992.
16. Adamson, p. 15.
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18. Article 62 of the treaty provided local autonomy in a part of Turkey where the Kurds were in the majority. Article 64 read:  
"If within one year from the coming in to force of the present Treaty the Kurdish peoples within the areas defined in Article 62 shall address themselves to the Council of the League of Nations in such a manner to show that a majority of the population of these areas desires independence from Turkey, and if the Council then considers that it should be granted to them, Turkey hereby agrees to execute such a recommendation, and to renounce all rights and title over these areas. If and when such renunciation takes place, no objection will be raised by the principal Allied Powers to the voluntary adhesion to such an independent Kurdish State of the Kurds inhabiting that part of Kurdistan which has hitherto been included in the Mosul wilayat (province in northeastern Iraq)." This forms the basis of Kurdish nationalists' claims to an independent Kurdistan, as it specifically recognizes the Kurdish people and their entitlement to a homeland. Pelletiere, p. 57.
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