

Kurdistan's Season of Hope

AFTER CENTURIES WITH NO HOMELAND AND FEW FRIENDS, THE KURDS HAVE FOUND A NEW RADICALISM-AND A FRAGILE LIBERATION

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THE MASS GRAVE HAD JUST BEEN DISCOVERed. As bulldozers unearthed the corpses of 54 Iranian POWs executed in 1983 by Iraqi troops in Saddam Hussein's long war, several Kurds from a nearby refugee camp looked on curiously. "They were just skeletons in uniforms," one refugee said later. Many of the captives' hands had been tied, noted another, remarking that the killings must have been hasty: Several uniforms still had loaded ammunition clips. One of the dead soldiers wore a canteen that was still full, nine years later. Someone unhooked it from the corpse's belt and emptied the water into the grave.

But what stuck in the minds of the witnesses last January was the sight of watches, inexpensive ones, on the wrists of two of the victims. The brand name was "Orient"; the watches were still ticking. "Everyone here was surprised," said one witness calmly, "that the watches could last so long underground."

Watches tick on skeletons. Husbands and sons disappear. Millions flee their homes for the mountains in winter, before they, too, disappear. Kurdistan is a paradox: searing images, seemingly indelible, that have faded quickly from public consciousness. I first went to Iraq in April, 1991, soon after the White House encouraged the Iraqis to rise up against Saddam Hussein. The Kurds did rise up, but without aid from Washington they were savagely crushed. Two million people ended up in the mountains of Iraq, Turkey and Iran. I followed their story in all three countries, then saw it fall out of the news.

Nine months later I returned. Tens of thousands of refugees remained in the mountains, living in tents and under plastic tarps, still terrified that Hussein's troops would return. But by then the majority of the Kurds had returned to their homes in Iraq, largely abandoned by the

world, but piecing together a future. After a quarter-century of forced relocation to "model villages," mass murder and widespread disappearances, the Kurds now are in the throes of a fragile liberation. For the first time in northern Iraq, they can travel and associate freely, share information, trace missing relatives, rebuild villages. Even today, sporadic fighting continues between Iraqi soldiers and Kurdish guerrillas. But each day, despite the misgivings of neighboring Turkey, Iran and Syria, as well as the United States, they are moving closer to forming a self-sufficient state.

Something in their spirit, if not their luck, has changed.

"THERE ARE NO KURDISH TOWNS IN TURKEY," A TURKISH GRADUATE student tells me on the first leg of the journey to Diyarbakir, a city in southeastern Turkey, about 160 miles northwest of the Iraqi border. Ever since the start of the Gulf War, Diyarbakir has served as a helicopter base for the U.S. Army, one of several American military installations in Turkey.

The student's statement was odd, since Diyarbakir is almost entirely Kurdish. What is more, the city is known as the headquarters of the Kurdish Workers Party (PKK), the separatist guerrillas who have been fighting for independence from Turkey for 15 years, half as long as their cousins to the south, the Kurdish rebels in Iraq. At least 13 million Kurds live in Turkey, about one-fifth of the total population. The fact is, Diyarbakir is regarded-unofficially-as the Kurdish capital.

The key word is "unofficially." Up until the Gulf War, the government called the Kurds "Mountain Turks," as if this ancient ethnic group-with its own dress, language and customs that some say date back more than 2,000 years-was an assimilated part of Turkey. Only since February, 1991, have the Kurds felt free to wear traditional clothing or speak their language in public.

The streets of Diyarbakir were clogged by old buses and trucks, horse-drawn carts and tractors pulling farm wagons. Sheep grazed in an open lot within sight of tall downtown buildings, surprising in a city of more than a million people. The air was full of diesel smoke, the smell of curbside fires, roasted chestnuts and kebabs and the constant noise of honking horns. It was freezing cold, but Kurdish

men in traditional balloon pants, wrapped at the waist by long sashes, stood outside storefronts drinking steaming tea from tiny glasses. A pair of Turkish-based U.S. warplanes passed to the south, screaming toward Iraq for their daily overflights.

As I waited for a bus to the Iraqi border, a local contact offered a friendly warning: Foreigners dealing with Kurds in Turkey ought to understand the mind-set of the government. Turkey regards the separatists as terrorists, and keeps a number of heavily Kurdish provinces in southeastern Turkey under emergency rule. Even now, though Turkey is struggling to deal more openly with its Kurdish minority, merchants still may not hang Kurdish signs in their stores.

The army has checkpoints almost everywhere, but this day the road was open. The trip to Silopi, the last town before the Iraqi frontier, was a cramped, five-hour ride in an old bus filled with the smoke of Turkish cigarettes. Near the triangle of land where Turkey, Iraq and Syria come together, the bus passed a security zone. Here, Turkey had fenced and mined the crossing from Syria to guard against Turkish guerrillas-Turkish Kurds-to whom Syria has given sanctuary for more than a decade.

Toward the end of the journey, I noticed something unusual about the approaching traffic. The northbound drivers would cross over to our half of the road, where the pavement was dry and gray-colored, remaining until the very last moment, when they would scoot back to their own lane, which was wet and dark-colored.

An English-speaking Kurd told me the reason: The northbound lane was covered with fuel oil. Turkish truck drivers had a deal with the customs post at Silopi to haul diesel from Iraq, where it cost the equivalent of only 4 cents a gallon. Back in Turkey, they sold it for about \$2 a gallon, making a profit of about \$1,000 a run. The trip took 10 days, most spent waiting to load at the refinery near Mosul, Iraq, or to get permission from the Kurdish guerrillas holding northern Iraq to recross into Turkey. The rebels get a portion of the diesel load, which they use to fuel their ongoing revolution and Turkish customs officials reportedly receive their own "tariff."

The truckers don't use oil tankers because they would make the violation of U.N. sanctions against Iraq too obvious. So the entrepreneurial drivers resort to using a variety of other trucks. Some operators weld tanks under their vehicles, and others graft huge saddle tanks onto the sides of the rigs. Some even rope 55-gallon drums onto flatbed trucks, the diesel oil sloshing from side-to-side. It was easy to see why the roadway was soaked and discolored. Everything was leaking.

THERE IS AN OLD SAYING IN THE MIDDLE EAST THAT "the Kurds have no friends."

Predominantly Sunni Muslims, like the majority of Iraqis, they speak Kurdish, a distinct language related to Persian, not Arabic. Many Kurds are European in appearance, and it is not uncommon to see children with blond or red hair. Since the 11th Century, they have been used by both allies and enemies to provide a balance of power in the region. During the Crusades, they fought alongside the Arabs to defeat the Christian armies. In the 17th and 18th Centuries, France, Germany and Britain curried favor with rival Kurdish tribes to secure and maintain trade routes to the East. The Kurds were known as powerful, even ferocious, fighters who, because of clan loyalties and outside alliances, often ended up on opposite sides of the battlefield. But still they were Kurds, and until World War I, when Turkey sided with Germany, their common land was Kurdistan.

The war put an end to the Ottoman Empire, which had controlled much of the Middle East for more than 600 years. In 1919, the victorious Allies redrew the boundaries of the Middle East, creating countries like Iraq, Kuwait and Syria. The Treaty of Sevres in 1920 seemed to guarantee the Kurds their own separate state. But there were huge oil deposits in some Kurdish areas, and Britain, through the League of Nations, insisted that Kurdistan be broken up. Denied their own state, the Kurds-a mountainous, nomadic people-were divided into five groups: Overnight they became residents of Turkey, Iraq, Syria, Iran and what was then the Soviet Union. Today, with a total population of about 25 million spread among those five countries, the Kurds are the largest ethnic grouping in the world without a country. Four million of them live in Iraq.

The British secured a mandate on oil-rich Iraq, and kept it until 1958, maintaining close ties with the Baghdad central government. After 1920, Kurdish uprisings broke out against the government sporadically, and on occasion were put down after aerial bombardment by the British Royal Air Force. At one point, Winston Churchill even advocated the use of chemical weapons against the rebels. In 1961, the Kurds launched a major guerrilla campaign against the government, one that has continued to the present day. By the time Saddam Hussein's Ba'ath Party came to power in 1968, Kurdish insurrection had been a fact of life in Iraq for almost 50 years.

Hussein began systematically depopulating Kurdish areas in 1975. He intensified the campaign in the mid-1980s during his U.S.-backed war with Iran, which began in 1980 and dragged on for eight years. All told, between 1975 and 1990, according to most estimates, the Iraqi army destroyed more than 4,000 Kurdish villages.

On March 16, 1988, Iraqi warplanes circled low over Halabja, one of the largest cities in Iraqi Kurdistan, with a population of 65,000. Kurdish guerrillas had overrun Iraqi positions inside the city a few weeks before, then had withdrawn to the outskirts of town, near the Iranian troops. Now Saddam Hussein was retaliating. The planes dropped cluster bombs, sending people scurrying to fallout shelters. Then a second formation appeared, these planes ejecting a different sort of capsule.

A yellow cloud arose and the air filled with the smell of garlic. It was cyanide gas. As the poisonous cloud descended, streets and shelters filled with corpses. When it was all over, said a 1991 U.S. Senate report, 5,000 Kurds were dead.

"How many of you Americans remember what happened that day?" a Halabja merchant named Sardar, who had lost many relatives in the attack, asked me. "Do you know that this is our Hiroshima, the Kurdish Hiroshima? If the U.S. had noticed (it), maybe Saddam could never have invaded Kuwait."

But the international community paid scant attention, and the Kurds were unable to mobilize world opinion for even minimal measures against Iraq. In Washington, the Reagan-Bush Administration blocked

Senate trade sanctions against Iraq. The Administration, it later turned out, was underwriting Hussein's war against Iran and, indirectly, his campaign against the Kurds.

Unbeknown to the American people, President Bush later signed a top-secret directive paving the way for \$1 billion in new aid that helped make possible the Iraqi aggression that spun the world into war, and later drove the Kurds to their death in the mountains. Classified government documents indicated that the United States footed the bill for more than \$2 billion in loans to Hussein. When U.S. officials worried that the loans were indirectly financing the Iraqi military and that they would never be repaid, the Bush Administration overrode their concerns.

AT THE HEIGHT OF the refugee exodus after the Gulf War, I backpacked with Kurdish guerrillas over the Zagros Mountains from Iran into Iraq. Everywhere we went, we saw bombed-out buildings, downed electrical and telephone wires, and the carcasses of animals. Bands of Kurdish rebels, the peshmerga (literally, "those who face death"), roamed about with no apparent mission or formation. Many of the roads were blocked by abandoned cars and trucks, cannibalized vehicles with smashed fenders and bullet holes through the windows, stripped of tires, engine parts and whatever else could be carried off. With the exception of an occasional army helmet, canteen or military boot, there were few signs of the Iraqi troops, who by then had retreated.

Hundreds of fresh graves lined the Hamilton Road, the highway blasted through the mountains by the British in the 1940s, which last year was a major escape route to Iran for tens of thousands of Kurds. Most of the dead were children, victims of typhoid, dehydration or dysentery; some had been blown up by Iraqi land mines. At one point last year, according to some reports, an estimated 2,000 Kurdish refugees were dying every day.

On one mountainside, I watched a father bury his baby daughter, her tiny body wrapped in a woven Kurdish blanket. His carriage was erect, his face almost expressionless as he lowered the child into a hole his friends had dug in the rocky earth. I was a stranger, but he

walked up after the burial to embrace me, thanking me in Kurdish and Arabic for coming. I could feel him trembling.

Kurdistan was awash in pestilence. Dysentery, typhoid and bronchitis were everywhere: Coughing, spitting adults in filthy clothes sat on the roadsides next to hacking kids who were wearing the wrong size shoes or just pieces of shoes. Flies clung to the remnants of dirty food on dirty plates and utensils, swarming over emptied cans of donated tuna fish.

"What do you do with all the pictures?" one refugee asked through a translator, as I photographed Kurdish children in plastic sandals walking through the freezing mud at the Sayed Sadeq refugee camp. "We want bread," she said. "Why picture, picture, picture?" The question itself seemed to form a picture, and for the moment it seemed that the camera had changed hands.

There wasn't enough for anyone to eat. The Allies had bombed the sewage treatment and water sanitation facilities. At almost every turn were hungry children, barking dogs and the wretched stench of burning rubbish. The water was polluted. People were dying. While yellow ribbons flew in American yards, Baghdad was regrouping. The war wasn't over here but carried on and on, like one long day at the end of the world. It looked like a scene from "The Road Warrior."

THROUGHOUT IRAQI Kurdistan, there are reminders of the Gulf War. There are also signs of the abortive uprising by the Kurds last spring and the resulting rakirdin, the Kurdish word for the mass flight to Turkey and Iran of 2 million refugees driven from Iraq by helicopter gunships that had been exempted by the Allies from cease-fire resolutions.

Hussein's troops still block all roads into Iraqi Kurdistan, and only small amounts of food and gasoline are permitted to pass through. "Benzene," as gasoline is called here, cost a few pennies a gallon before the war. Now, if you can find it, fuel costs about 10 times more, and cars line up for more than a mile to get it. "Imagine," said one guerrilla, "what it feels like to be out of benzene in a country of benzene."

Shortages are especially acute in the south of Kurdistan. (The northern border with Turkey is now open.) There is some smuggling from Iran: Fruit, eggs, tea and a few vegetables fill the void from last year's ruined harvest when farmers became refugees and could not plant their crops. But rice, the staple of the Kurdish diet, is painfully expensive. Before the war, it cost 1 dinar a kilo, the equivalent of 10 cents for a little more than two pounds; now the price of rice is over 7 dinars for the same amount. The average wage is a few hundred dollars a year.

The effects of the Iraqi blockade were clear the day I visited a hospital in Sulaymaniyah, in southern Kurdistan near the isolated Iranian border. There was no electricity because there was no fuel to power the generator. That meant blood could not be refrigerated, that nighttime operations had to proceed by candlelight. "About 20% of the hospital beds in Kurdistan are taken up by victims of land mines," said Dr. Azad Jalal, one of the resident surgeons. "All our lands are undermined with bombs, five to six feet on the sides of all the roads," he said as he inspected the cavernous leg wound of a 12-year-old boy.

Because of the embargo and the lack of medical supplies, Jalal said, "we just cannot cope with a large number of (land mine) patients." The wounded boy had lost two fingers and most of his left shinbone in an explosion near Kalar, a four-hour drive from the hospital. The boy's friend, walking ahead, was killed.

About 1.5 million Kurds live in Sulaymaniyah, one of three Kurdish governorates in Iraq. At the moment, all three governorates enjoy a precarious liberation. But Sulaymaniyah lies outside the "safe haven," the buffer zone on the Turkish border that was carved out by the terms of the cease-fire at the end of the Gulf War. More important, it is south of the 36th Parallel. North of that line, the United States and its allies control the skies, barring any Iraqi flights. What the Iraqis do south of the 36th Parallel apparently is considered an internal matter.

Sulaymaniyah is also the name of the governorate's main city, a metropolis of 1 million Kurds located a three-hour drive north from Baghdad. The city is an epicenter of Kurdish culture and nationalism. Unlike the Kurds in Turkey, who were forced to hide their ways, Iraqi

Kurds have always sung their own songs, spoken their own language, gone to their own schools and worn their traditional clothes. Here, the government's target was not the Kurdish culture; it was the Kurds themselves.

In March, Middle East Watch and the Boston-based group Physicians for Human Rights released a joint report entitled "Unquiet Graves: The Search for the Disappeared in Iraqi Kurdistan." The report estimates that 180,000 Kurds had disappeared in the 1980s, during the Iraqi army's infamous Anfal campaign. Anfal is an Arabic term taken from a chapter in the Koran in which the followers of Mohammed raided and pillaged lands of nonbelievers; it refers to booty-money, clothes, jewels and livestock-captured from the infidels. The government apparently chose Anfal because it suggested a religious justification for crimes against the Kurds. To some, the very use of the term is sacrilegious. "We are both Muslims, the Arabs and us," my guide Abdul told me. "In our mind, Saddam does not respect the holy book."

It is nearly impossible today to enter a Kurdish town without someone stepping forward with a story of personal tragedy and an anguished plea to the visitor for help. In the town of Kalar, where a long line of Iraqi tanks defines the Kurdish frontier, dozens of women surrounded my taxi. When I got out of the car, they pressed at me with photos of missing family members, many of the women wailing in grief and clawing at their faces. "We have only 4 million people," Abdul said of the Iraqi Kurds after the encounter. "This is our Holocaust." Indeed, more than one in 20 Iraqi Kurds is missing, the presumed victims of government murder.

The Iraqi Security Headquarters in Sulaymaniyah is a sprawling, fortified complex of buildings that once included a dreaded prison and torture cells for suspected dissidents. In the first week of March, 1991, soon after the end of the Gulf War, it was attacked spontaneously by civilians. News of the attack brought the peshmerga down from their mountain hide-outs, and the headquarters was captured after 2 1/2 days of intense combat. As many as 500 secret policemen were killed, and tales of the bloody uprising have been emblazoned in the oral history of the Kurds. I

heard several versions of one widely told story-a knife-wielding mother avenging her son's death on a captured Iraqi guard.

According to most accounts, about 120 of the 150 prisoners were saved. "I was in my cell when I heard the Kurdish language shouted from the streets," said Jamal Aziz. "They were yelling, 'We are your brothers, and we have come to free you from the Iraqis!' I was afraid the guards would kill us right away, but I wept for joy that my people finally had risen up."

Aziz, a teacher, was a member of a clandestine network in Sulaymaniyah that provided food and supplies for the peshmerga in the surrounding mountains. He was arrested by the secret police eight months before the uprising, after a colleague broke under Iraqi torture and revealed Aziz's name. "My friend was so ashamed when I was brought to the prison" Aziz said, "that I never again saw his eyes looking into my eyes."

The peshmerga have done little to alter the security police headquarters: The walls are still riddled with bullet holes, abandoned and burned police cars are rusting away in courtyards behind blown-down iron gates. High above the fortified front entrance hangs the symbol of the Iraqi security system, a three-foot piece of green steel in the shape of a human eye.

In one 6-by-4-foot concrete cellblock, an old message from a prisoner is scrawled on the wall in Kurdish: "There were two of us in here. The guards tortured my friend: He admitted he was a peshmerga. They killed him. They tortured me, too, but I did not admit it. I am still here."

The main interrogation cell has steel hooks on the ceiling. "We were ordered to climb a little set of stairs made of automobile tires, up to a chair where we had to stand," Aziz said. "Our hands were tied behind us-that is how they attached us to the hooks, or to the fan" that was used to spin the bound prisoners. "Then the guards kicked the chair away. You were swinging from above, your arms and shoulders were breaking behind you, and the guards were hitting your legs with sticks." On one wall was a crudely scribbled message, in English: "They hanged men here."

The Iraqi guards also used electrical torture, Aziz said. "They put wires on our tongues, in our ears and on our private parts. I can still hear one woman screaming in the night, 'Oh, God, no, my breasts! Oh, God, no!'"

"My only chance with the guards was to fake a medical condition," Aziz said. "They had a cleverness to take you near the point of death, and then to pull back. You could not give them information if you were dead, so they needed to keep you alive until you broke. When I could hold out no longer, I lied that I had a bad valve in my heart. It may have kept me from telling what I knew. I was screaming in my pain and I was so close to talking. That man who gave my name was transferred to a Baghdad prison. I am sure he is dead by now."

In the largest cellblock, a room approximately 20 by 40 feet said to have contained 50 prisoners, there are mementos on the rusted iron bars. After the liberation, mothers and family members of the Kurdish prisoners tied small, colored cloths knotted in an Islamic symbol of thanksgiving for deliverance of their loved ones. An expatriate Kurd, visiting his hometown of Sulaymaniyah for the first time since the early 1960s, was overcome with emotion when he emerged from a self-guided tour of the captured prison. "Someday this will be a museum, like Dachau or Auschwitz," he said haltingly. "I hope they don't touch a thing."

THE DINGY LOBBY OF THE SALAM HOTEL IN SULAYmaniyah has a single portable heater, a stinky kerosene burner that gives off more fumes than heat. Several men wearing overcoats are seated, talking and drinking piala, sweetened tea in miniature glasses, their AK-47s propped up against the lobby tables and couches. The hotel electricity is out again, and the only light comes through the steamed-up lobby windows past the X patterns of masking tape on the glass, a reminder of shelling last fall by the Iraqi army.

The clerk at the reception desk is bundled up in a wool scarf and a white London Fog trench coat. He is smoking a long, filter-tipped cigarette and calmly reading a scrap of paper by the dim light of an oil lamp. He seems a little too urbane for these surroundings, a David Niven sort who maintains an air of privilege whatever the adversity. The clerk's name is Mohammed and, in fact, he has worked in the

"better hotels" of both Baghdad and Basra. He is the clerk the other hotel people rely on for the infrequent occasion when an English-speaking guest shows up.

We have an exchange going, Mohammed and I. He often asks for information on getting U.S. visas and for other suggestions on how he and his family might get out of Iraq. In return, he sells me Iraqi dinars at the attractive black market rate and lets me use a scanning device behind the reception desk that is supposed to detect counterfeit money. (With both the CIA and Iran flooding Iraq with phony bills to destabilize the economy, counterfeit dinars are rampant.)

Mohammed also gives me tips, warning me, for example, to double-check bottles of drinking water to make sure the seals are unbroken. The water is particularly dirty since the Allied bombing of the treatment plants. Some unscrupulous vendors, he says, are refilling the blue plastic bottles with ordinary tap water. This is not a good place to get sick.

Six armed guerrillas collect me at the hotel and drive me to the mountain headquarters of their leader, Jalal Talabani, the head of the Patriotic Union of Kurdistan. Two of the guerrillas work in the Sulaymaniyah hospital, which explains why we are riding in a large ambulance that, incidentally, bears Kuwaiti license plates. Apparently, the Kurds captured it from the Iraqi army, which in turn had captured it from Kuwait. The shiny ambulance is a 1990 Chevrolet, distinguished by a bullet hole in the windshield and a stretcher full of machine guns in the back.

Talabani's PUK is one of the two major political parties in Kurdistan. There are at least eight parties, which until Hussein's gas attacks in 1988, were independent of one another. But in the fall of that year, with winter approaching and more than 100,000 refugees already in the mountains of Turkey and Iran, they formed a unified umbrella group, the Kurdistan Front. It was a political, not military, move. Since then, the Kurds have elected a legislature, voted in a prime minister and established a capital in Erbil. But the eight small tribal armies in Kurdistan remain independent and uncoordinated, with no centralized

command. The Front hopes to remedy that within the next month, when the final leadership elections are held.

Talabani, 57, is building his organization with modern technology and political techniques. His office is equipped with a photocopier, a satellite telephone and a fax machine. In the past year, he has set up one radio transmitter and three television stations to get across the PUK message, no small feat considering the scarcity of technicians and parts. The TV stations, which once belonged to the Iraqi government, now broadcast a crude assortment of patriotic marches and stirring anthems, Kurdish dances, songs and weddings, PUK demonstrations and Talabani speeches, as well as grainy old films and cartoons with Sylvester the Cat. They have also broadcast videotapes captured from Iraqi secret police that show the beating and executions of Kurdish prisoners.

Talabani's followers see him as a self-made man who built, rather than inherited, his leadership. His critics see him as an expedient diplomat, courting the Americans with tough anti-Baghdad talk but willing to be photographed in the capital by Iraqi television, as he was last summer, greeting Saddam Hussein with a ceremonial kiss.

Both Talabani and Masoud Barzani, Talabani's rival for the leadership of the Kurds, had agreed last summer to sign an autonomy pact with Baghdad if Hussein had met their demands. But as far as Talabani is concerned, the off-again, on-again negotiations are finished for good. "Negotiation with a dictatorship is useless. We cannot reach any kind of agreement with a dictatorship," he says.

Talabani is angry, even bitter at the manner in which the Gulf War had ended. "The Allies-Saudi Arabia, Egypt and (former Soviet leader Mikhail S.) Gorbachev-deceived Mr. Bush," he tells me. "They deceived him and convinced him to stop the war. And the United States of America did not know the realities of Iraq. It was afraid of Shiites in the south and Kurds in the north. It was afraid there would be chaos in Iraq, Saddam would collapse, and perhaps there would be a fundamentalist movement connected with Iran. And, for this reason, they preferred to keep Saddam Hussein in power."

IN ITS GLORY DAYS, THE SALAH AD DIN WAS A THREE-STAR HOTEL and gambling casino in the resort town of the same name, about 180 miles northeast of Baghdad. Last year, when the Allies were busy bombing Baghdad, a number of wealthy Arabs fled the capital and used hotels like the Salah ad Din as a safe retreat.

The main lobby is filled with chatter, hustle and bustle, a constant coming and going of men in red and white head-scarfs, Soviet-made Kalashnikov rifles slung over their shoulders. Some carry small pieces of paper for their seated commanders to read and initial, the messengers then hurrying off with a look of urgency. At the far end of the room, under a motionless ceiling fan and an unlit chandelier, there is a huge oil painting of Mulla Mustafa Barzani, the founder of the Kurdish Democratic Party and father of the man I had come to meet: Masoud Barzani, Talabani's rival.

I also wanted to renew acquaintances with the man they call Za'im Ali, Barzani's military commander, whom I had met last spring during the rakirdin. Traditionally, the peshmerga have not employed a military ranking system, and Ali is the only rebel to carry the title of za'im-general-special recognition from Barzani for remaining with his followers in the Iraqi mountains to wage a fierce hit-and-run campaign against Hussein's troops even after the 1988 gas attacks.

Ali is trim and fit as an athlete, a result of his 17 years in the mountains. He is of medium build with black hair and a black mustache. His head is wrapped in a checkered Kurdish scarf, and he wears a U.S. Army fatigue jacket left behind by American troops. Under the jacket, he carries a side arm holstered over his peshtwen, the wide, ruffled sash Kurdish men use for a belt. Ali, 44, served as an officer in the Iraqi army. After autonomy talks with Iraq broke down in the early '70s, he sided with Mulla Mustafa Barzani, who had asked Kurdish officers to join him for the fight at home. Ali escaped to Kurdistan, where he integrated his inside knowledge of the Iraqi military with Barzani's guerrilla techniques. Those were heady times, Ali says. "We had the Americans behind us and we had weapons for about 100,000 peshmerga."

In fact, the CIA was funding the Kurds through the Shah of Iran, though the American public knew nothing about it. As a favor to the

Shah, Secretary of State Henry Kissinger had arranged for the CIA to supply \$16 million to bankroll a Kurdish uprising against Saddam Hussein, the Shah's longtime nemesis. But the funding was a ploy that played the Kurds as a pawn, according to a study by the House Select Committee on Intelligence. The United States never wanted the Kurds to win, the once-secret report said: Funding continued only until Kissinger brokered a deal with Hussein to cut off support for the Kurds in exchange for Iraqi land concessions to the Shah.

Iraq, knowing in advance that aid would be cut off, was able to launch a search-and-destroy campaign against the unsuspecting Kurds only one day after the agreement was signed.

Had the United States not encouraged the Kurdish rebellion, the House report said, "the insurgents may have reached an accommodation with the central government, thus gaining at least a measure of autonomy while avoiding further bloodshed. Instead, our clients fought on, sustaining thousands of casualties and 200,000 refugees."

Once again the Kurds had no friends. The Richard M. Nixon Administration refused to extend humanitarian assistance to the refugees it had helped to create and Iran forcibly returned approximately 40,000 Kurds to Iraq. According to the House report, a "high U.S. official," apparently Kissinger, remarked to a staff member at the time: "Covert action should not be confused with missionary work."

Masoud Barzani meets me in the hotel dining room near one of the portraits of his father, who died in exile in the United States in 1979 with Masoud at his side. Barzani is 45, a small, soft-spoken man who chooses his words carefully-at least with an American visitor. The Kurds will never have security in Iraq, he says, unless there is an agreement for autonomy. While the Kurds need outside assistance, like that of the United States, they cannot count on it. As such, the peshmerga simply cannot defend the people against the superior forces of the Iraqi army.

A few weeks before my visit, Turkish pilots flying U.S.-made jets had bombed northern Iraq, purportedly targeting sanctuaries of the PKK,

the Kurdish guerrillas seeking independence from Turkey. No guerrilla bases were hit, Barzani says, but a dozen civilians-Iraqi Kurds-were killed in the attacks. The Turkish Kurds, with their long history of both alliance and conflict with the Barzani clan, had pledged that they would not use Iraqi territory for raids into Turkey. The PKK was honoring the agreement, according to Barzani. He says he is both angered and saddened by the bombing, but, of course, he can do nothing about it.

Barzani draws his greatest support from the territory where Turkey, Iran and Iraq meet. (Talabani's support base is farther south.) Barzani's detractors view him, in the words of one, as "less scientific" than Talabani, and they argue that time has passed by the Barzani clan. They see him as a leader of semi-feudal bands of mountain fighters, a man who lacks the political savvy to guide the Kurds toward statehood and the 21st Century. But Barzani knows that the Kurds continue to be cornered by the "balance of power" strategy in the Middle East. His people remain stuck in hostile Iraq between the Turkish and Iranian governments, both strong regional powers that view the notion of an independent Iraqi Kurdistan as a destabilizing force for separatists in their own countries. It is a double bind: adversaries inside and adversaries outside.

Hussein's oppression of the refugees last year generated tremendous publicity, a mixed blessing for the Kurds. Humanitarian aid from the West helped, says Barzani, but he stresses that the central question for the Kurds is political, not humanitarian. He does not want to see the fate of his people echo that of the Palestinians, with successive generations born into camps and never achieving a homeland. "We are thankful for the blankets and the food," he says, "but we do not want the world to remember us as refugees."

IN THE ONGOING WAR between the Iraqis and the Kurds, the front is a line that zigzags almost 300 miles, from the bottom of the Sulaymaniyah governorate, near the Iranian border, all the way north to the Turkish frontier. In some places the sides are so close they can view each other. Near Kalar in the south, where the Kurdish guerrillas are dug into earthen bunkers over a long ridge, you can look across a shallow valley and see the Iraqi Republican Guard. You are close enough to hear the Iraqi tanks start and stop their motors.

In Kifri, a village near Kalar, the rebels gladly guide me across the rooftops of Kurdish houses, getting so close to an Iraqi checkpoint that it's possible to shoot the soldiers with a camcorder. Occasionally somebody in the distance lets go with a burst from a machine gun, but that is the exception. Iraqi artillery periodically snipes around the edges of Kurdistan, somewhere along the front, at times even above the forbidden 36th parallel. But the last major battle was in October, 1991, in Sulaymaniyah. The Iraqi army's morale was low at that time, and more than 1,000 troops surrendered without a fight. Then, in an incident that shocked Kurdish leaders, members of one peshmerga unit summarily executed more than 60 Iraqi POWs. Kurdish leaders regard the massacre as an isolated occurrence, noting that nearly all the Iraqis they have captured have been safely returned. They have promised an investigation into the incident, but to date nothing has been done.

The POW incident gets at a truth that is easily missed in reports from the region. In the past year, a line has been crossed, a point of no return has been passed. Last year's refugee nightmare, coupled with the revelation about the 180,000 Kurds who disappeared at the hands of the government, has triggered a new radicalism in Kurdistan.

In the wake of the Gulf War and the refugee catastrophe, Iraqi Kurds for the first time find themselves in control of the majority of their lands. Hussein has, for the time being, yielded about 80% of Iraqi Kurdistan, an area larger than New Jersey and Massachusetts put together. There are still plenty of roadblocks, but the checkpoints are controlled-proudly-by the guerrillas. For Kurds in Iraq today there is no similar moment in memory, perhaps no comparable turning point in their history.

In the winter, dozens of Kurds went on hunger strike in Sulaymaniyah, setting up a protest camp at the local headquarters of the United Nations guards in charge of relief supplies. The strikers wanted to pressure the United Nations to enlarge the existing safe haven, a buffer zone for the Kurds on the Turkish border that was carved out by the terms of the cease-fire at the end of the Gulf War. The goal was not accomplished, but Kurdish support of the hunger strike was overwhelming. For a period of several weeks, tens of thousands of

Kurds poured into the narrow streets around the U.N. complex. Well-wishers showered flowers on the strikers who huddled by fires outside the walled building. While U.N. guards watched from the roof, the crowd swelled at times to an estimated 60,000, pushing and jockeying for a glimpse of the fasting protesters.

Most Iraqi Kurds had never seen a public display of dissidence, much less participated in an actual demonstration. And new Kurdish newspapers celebrated the marches, with stories of all the placards, the banners and the chants of the neophyte demonstrators. Instead of breaking the Kurds, Hussein's blockade seemed to be uniting them.

I sensed the new spirit at a Kurdish wedding with the frenetic dancing of the guests, as they twisted around, waving colored pieces of cloth in the air. A guerrilla was getting married. "Before, there was no time for this kind of thing," his friend told me, as the band played and dancers in traditional costumes spun around the room. "They were in the mountains before, hiding. Now they take time to marry. There is no more hiding."

By now, no one wants to go back to the mountains. Nearly everyone is armed, both young and old. Kurdistan has become a guerrilla society, still no match for the poised Iraqi troops along the front but so deep in rebellion that resistance cuts across all social and economic lines. There will be no going back, even if what lies ahead is a blood bath.

For the moment at least, the Kurds are running their own country. The genie is out of the bottle. To paraphrase the philosopher Camus, the slave starts to be free the first day he says "No." For the Kurds, that day has come.

[Illustration]

PHOTO: COLOR, The Kurds are emerging from years of Iraqi oppression that destroyed thousands of villages and took the lives of more than 180,000 people.;

PHOTO: COLOR, The Persian Gulf War displaced nearly half the population of Iraqi Kurdistan, forcing about 2 million people into squalid refugee camps, like this one in Iran.;

PHOTO: COLOR, At a Sulaymaniyah protest, bread symbolizes resistance.; PHOTO: COLOR, Guerrillas in a truck captured from the Iraqi army. Kurdish insurrection has been a fact of life in Iraq for close to 70 years. / KEVIN MCKIERNAN / SIPA Press;

MAP: COLOR, Kurdistan/Iraq, Anders Ramberg / Los Angeles Times