

WHO ARE THE KURDS?

September 6, 1996

Many of us are aware that an Iraqi military incursion into a UN designated Kurdish "safe haven" in northern Iraq last weekend, caused President Clinton to order missile attacks this week on Iraqi military installations in Southern Iraq, to teach Saddam Hussein "a lesson". The "safe havens" had been set up the last time the Kurds had entered the Western consciousness, following the Gulf War in 1991, when Iraq crushed a Kurdish uprising, killing thousands, and creating 2 million refugees.

It seems that we only hear of the Kurds at times of crisis. What do we really know about these people? Here are a few quick facts:

- Ethnic Kurds comprise 22 million people in 6 countries - 10 million in Turkey, 5.5 million in Iran, 3.5 million in Iraq and pockets of population in Syria, Azerbaijan and Armenia.
- They have lived for 2,000 years in the roughly 74,000 square mile mountainous territory that they inhabit.
- They speak a language related to Farsi.
- The majority of Kurds are Sunni Muslim.
- Following WW1 the Kurds were promised their own state, carved out of the former Ottoman Empire. This was thwarted by the British, French and Turks after oil was found in the territory.
- In 1988 thousands of Kurds were killed in Northern Iraq when Saddam Hussein ordered gas attacks against them.
- One of the most famous Kurds was the warrior Salladin, who recaptured Jerusalem from the Crusaders in the 12th century.

The Kurds have been kept apart by different nations but also by factionalism. Part of the reason that Iraqi troops entered the "safe haven" was at the request of Kurdish Democratic Party (KDP), who were facing opposition from the Kurdish Union of Kurdistan (PUK). Here are some facts on them:

- The KDP is the largest faction in Iraq. It is led by Nashwirwan Barzani, who is the grandson of a legendary guerrilla leader.
- The PUK broke away from the KDP twenty years ago. It is heavily armed and it's leader, Jalal Talabani views it as a vehicle in continued hostility against Iraq.

One aid worker in the "safe haven" described the Kurds this way, "When elephants fight, it is the grass that suffers, when elephants make love, the grass also suffers. That proverb fits the Kurds perfectly. They are the grass in this part of the world."

Our Forum asks: What is the role of Kurds in the Middle East dynamic? When Kurds themselves invite help from the Iraqi military, do they deserve US military support? Is there a solution for ethnic Kurds who are dispersed over six nations similar to one discussed for Palestinians? How has the history of Western policy toward the Kurds affected the present scenario?

Our Forum guest is [Dr. Salah Aziz](#). An Iraqi Kurd by birth, Dr. Aziz is the founder and director of the only academic based center for Kurdish studies in the US: [Kurdish Studies Program](#) at the Florida State University.

Ken Niemi of San Francisco, CA asks:

(1) What is the basis for the division of the Kurds into factions? Strategic/tactical differences? Religious differences? Egos/desire for personal power?

(2) Given their continued internal struggles, do the Kurds themselves think of one state as a goal or do they think of many small states?

Dr. Salah Aziz replies:

Geographically, the Kurds have been divided between Safawi State and Ottoman State since the beginning of the 17th century . After the First World War, the Ottoman Kurdish area divided one more time into three newly formed states - Iraq, Syria and Turkey. Religiously, the majority of the Kurds are Muslim Sunni. This factor has not played a major role in dividing the Kurds. Linguistically, although the Kurds have one Kurdish language, it is divided into dialects which make it difficult for each dialect group to communicate with the other dialects. Lately, this factor has become increasingly important. Politically, the majority of the Kurdish political parties seek solution to the Kurdish problem within the boundary of their state. Therefore, there are state-based Kurdish movements such as in Iraq, Iran, Syria and Turkey. Within each state, political organizations have formed for reasons such as ideology, economy, and history.

Ashur Jacob of San Diego, California asks:

(We received a number of letters on the Assyrian minority in Iraq, such as the one below. We asked Dr. Aziz to comment.)

I am an Assyrian, and would like to emphasize that the Assyrians have struggled along the side of the Kurds for freedom in the north of Iraq. Since Mr. Barazani's time there have been Assyrian fighters such as Margaret and Hormiz Malik Chiko and many other Assyrians. Currently the Assyrians again have taken their place in the fight against Saddam's regime along the side of their Kurdish brothers. Please don't forget our struggle and please mention in your speeches that northern Iraq has other minorities that have struggled and were also promised a country by Britain and other allies.

I think that in order for Iraq to live in peace and be at peace with itself, is to have the three major Ethnic groups (Arabs, Kurds and the Assyrians) have their autonomy in a federal system where each group will have a piece of land and will govern its self and longer will Arabs control the government of Iraq.

Dr. Salah Aziz replies:

Assyrian are among the indigenous peoples of Kurdistan. After the First World War, Assyrians chose to be closer to Britain when it conquered the region and oppressed the Iraqi Kurds. After the Barzani new movement of 1916, Assyrians joined the movement. As I recall twenty-five years ago, we used to see photos of Margaret (Assyrian) in Kurdish cities. She was an example of the heroic contribution of female peshmarga to the Kurdish movement. In 1992, Assyrians represented by four political organizations, United Kurdistan Christian Party; Chaldean Assyrian Democratic Party; Democratic Christian Party; and Assyrian Democratic Movement, participated in parliamentary elections. They competed over five seats which were designated for them regardless to their population. When a government was appointed in Kurdistan, one Minister (out of 15) was Assyrian.

In the last four years, few members of the Assyrian community have been killed along with thousands of the Kurds. I don't think these members were killed because they were Assyrians rather they were victims of the U.N. stability and lack of authority in the area. For example, in the last week Father Ala Din was killed when his home was shelled during the Kurdish-Kurdish in-fighting.

Kurds tolerated the existence of many minorities in Kurdistan. I believe every group should have the right to preserve its religion, culture, and language as well as have the right to participate in political life of the area.

Orde W. Lawrence of Victoria, British Columbia asks:

In your estimation, do the US raids on Iraq really have anything to do with the Kurds, or are the Kurds simply a good excuse to take a shot at Saddam Hussein in an election year? Outside of the bombing, how involved is the US administration with the Kurds in Iraq and elsewhere?

Dr. Salah Aziz replies:

The U.S. responded to the KDP - Iraq attack on the City of Arbil in the way that serves the U. S. national interests. While we are hearing that the U.S. was satisfied by these measures, the fighting among the KDP and PUK continues and the Iraqi threat to the Kurdish area remains.

Tony Stimson of Los Angeles, CA:

How could the KDP (Kurdish Democratic Party) invite the aid of Saddam Hussein in their factional war in northern Iraq? Given Hussein's treatment of Kurds in the past, i.e., mustard gas attacks in 1988, isn't this like the Jews turning to Hitler for help? How much popular support amongst Iraqi Kurds would there be for such a move?

Dr. Salah Aziz replies:

In their struggle for power, KDP and PUK sought aid from Baghdad and Tehran respectively. That increased the tension in the Kurdish area and was negatively viewed by many Kurds. The interference of these countries along with Turkey into the Iraqi-Kurdish political situation could only complicate the Kurdish issue and increase the suffering of the Kurds. In the absence of a national and unified goal among the Kurdish political organizations in Iraq, one would not be surprised in seeing alignment between a Kurdish party and a neighbor state to achieve short-lived goals.

John D. Powers of Atlanta, GA:

The Kurdish populations are in something of an apolitical situation. They are minorities just about everywhere they reside, and their only autonomy seems to come through active resistance. Is it the responsibility of the United Nations, under the Universal Declaration on Human Rights, to intervene militarily to prevent repressive actions, and what do the uncooperative attitudes of other nations (especially Turkey, in this particular situation) mean for future United Nations attempts to pursue such actions?

Dr. Salah Aziz replies:

The UN mission as was stated in its documents: To maintain international peace and security; to achieve international cooperation in solving economic, social, cultural, and humanitarian problems and in promoting respect for human rights and fundamental freedoms; and to be a center for harmonizing the actions of nations in attaining these common ends.

So one should notice that: First) The UN "promotes" human rights as were described in the Universal Declaration for Human Rights, but do not force its members to implement them. Therefore, UN can not prevent its members from violating human rights which has been conducted for decades. Second) The UN acts on events which lead to disturb stability and peace of its members, if the Security Council orders and finances that action. A positive example is when the UN issued resolution 688 of 1991 to call upon Iraq to stop its oppression on the Kurds and Shia'. A negative example is when Iraq launched an operation known "al-Anfal" to destroy the infrastructure of the Kurdish area, including using chemical weapons.

To conclude: There is no country among the UN members to carry the Kurdish issue to the UN and seek a solution for it. Until that happens, the Kurdish problem remains an "internal issue" within the boundaries of the countries where the Kurds reside.