

THE KURDISH STRUGGLE, 1920-94

Also by Edgar O'Ballance

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The Kurdish Struggle 1920–94

Edgar O'Ballance

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Preface

It is often said that the Kurds have no friends, which unfortunately seems to be true. Having spent days and weeks at a time over the years with Kurds (who today probably number over 23 million), in their mountains and towns, at war, in victory and defeat and in exile, one is constantly surprised how a people, who individually are so delightful, cheerful, helpful and hospitable, can at the same time be so quarrelsome amongst themselves, so vindictive towards each other and so ready to change allegiances.

The plight of the Kurds dawned on Western awareness when Saddam Hussein attacked them with chemical weapons in their villages, and afterwards drove many of them to perish in the snow-clad mountains of northern Iraq, prior to which few in the West knew much about them. Since then Amnesty International has made the Western world aware that a very dirty war between the Turkish army and insurgent Kurds seeking ethnic recognition has been in progress since 1984, in the course of which over 11 000 people have perished. More recently Westerners have become aware that a Kurdish terrorist organisation has been attacking Turkish diplomatic and commercial premises in Western Europe; and in 1994 they began a terrorist campaign to destroy the Turkish tourist industry. Several foreign tourists, including British, have already been killed or injured.

So who are the Kurds, what do they want, and why have they been unable to obtain it? It is hoped that this brief account will give some insight into their background, the milestones in their continuing struggle for a political goal, and something of their many misfortunes.

Upon the break-up of the Ottoman Empire after the First World War the Kurds, an ancient race composed of tribes, tribal confederations and feudal groups with martial traditions, were promised – for the first time in their long history – an independent state in their own mountainous homeland under the Treaty of Sèvres of 1920. The appearance of what became the USSR caused this Kurdish dream to be brushed aside under the Treaty of Lausanne in 1922, whereby Turkey, in which half

the Kurdish race resided, was to be made into a bulwark against communism. The contiguous Kurdish homeland was abruptly divided into segments that fell into Turkey, the USSR, Persia (now Iran) and Iraq, separated by new international frontiers. This gave each of these countries a 'Kurdish problem', which they mostly still retain. After the brief appearance of 'Red Kurdistan' (1923–8), the Soviet Union moved most of its troublesome Kurds away from the Kurdish contiguity.

In unifying his new Turkey, Atatürk enlisted the aid of the Kurds to eliminate the Armenians, but when this was accomplished he turned against them, refusing to grant them minority status. Officially there are no Kurds in Turkey, not even to this day, only 'mountain Turks who have forgotten their own language'. Turkish Kurds, who live mainly in the south-eastern provinces, have periodically risen in rebellion and are in open rebellion today.

Iraq was a new country put together from parts of Mesopotamia and Kurdistan by the British. They tried to counterbalance minority groups to ensure that none became too powerful or gained too large a share of the oil fields. However, the Kurds soon became a destabilising factor. Arabs on the Mesopotamian plains feared the mountain Kurds, who in Ottoman times had descended to raid their towns, farms and caravans. The Kurds held the Arabs in contempt, while the Arabs considered that 'Allah sent three plagues – the rat, the locust and the Kurd'. During the interwar years the Arab Iraqi governments never really brought their Kurdish minority under control.

Kurds inhabiting the north-western corner of Iran were a frontier problem to the shahs, who retained their tenuous loyalty by bestowing titles, honours and bribes and used them as frontier mercenary troops. During the Second World War, when northern Iran was occupied by Soviet armed forces, the Kurds were left to their own devices. On Soviet instigation, in January 1946 a collection of Kurdish leaders set up the tiny independent Kurdish Republic of Mahabad, which lasted precisely one year before being extinguished by the shah's army, when the Soviet troops pulled out.

Tribal followers of a prominent Iraqi Kurdish chieftain, Mullah Mustafa Barzani, who had been accorded the rank of general by the Mahabad government, formed the effective part of a tiny Mahabad defence force. After the fall of Mahabad,

Barzani made a fighting withdrawal to the Soviet Union, where he remained for a few years, his fame in Kurdish legend established.

Kurds formed a very small minority in Syria, itself a country of minorities, and as they were in scattered groups – ‘colonies’ founded by mercenary soldiers or traders over the centuries – they presented little trouble to various Syrian governments.

Returning to Iraq in 1958, Barzani tried to negotiate a form of autonomy for the Iraqi Kurds. When this failed he gathered together certain tribes and fought a 15-year war against the central government. Latterly he was assisted by the shah of Iran, who secretly provided him with weaponry, ammunition and other necessities. As long as Barzani stayed in his mountains and was supported by the shah, he was secure, as the Iraqi army lacked the capability to defeat him.

Under the Algiers Agreement (1975) the shah ceased supplying arms to Barzani in return for concessions on the Shatt al-Arab waterway, part of the Iran–Iraq frontier. Once again Barzani had to make a fighting withdrawal, although he had gained formal recognition for Kurdish autonomy from the Baghdad government. Old and sick, Barzani was taken under the wing of the American CIA, to die in a hospital in America in March 1979.

The Islamic Fundamentalist Revolution in Iran brought Ayatollah Khomeini to power in February 1979, and internal chaos to that country. A strong centralist, Khomeini crushed Kurdish aspirations for autonomy, and upon their formation the revolutionary guards were given the Kurdish problem to deal with.

The next major saga in this region affecting the Kurds was the Iran–Iraq War (1980–8), which soon stalemated along a 600-mile entrenched defensive line that loosely coincided with the mutual border. Both countries subverted and used the other’s Kurdish factions. The Baghdad government paid Iranian Kurds to fight against the Tehran government, while the Tehran government paid Iraqi Kurds to fight against that in Baghdad. Kurds were also conscripted into the armies of both sides, and generally gave a good account of themselves in battle.

When the Iran–Iraq War ended through military exhaustion, both governments set about settling accounts with their rebellious Kurdish factions. In Iraq the government launched

punitive military expeditions into its northern Kurdish mountains, but with only partial success. In Iran the revolutionary guards, who were responsible for internal security, strove to bring rebellious Kurdish factions to heel, while a covert assassination campaign was mounted against insurrectionary Kurdish political leaders in exile. In both Iran and Iraq Kurdish factions fought against each other on their home ground.

During the latter stages of the war Saddam Hussein used chemical weapons against Iran, but these were deployed with greater intensity against his own rebellious Kurds, then fighting in the pay of the Tehran government. The main attack was against the Kurdish town of Halabja in March 1988, when a probable 5000 Kurds perished from chemical weapon effects.

When Saddam Hussein invaded Kuwait in August 1990 an Allied coalition was formed under UN authority to oust him, a task accomplished by March 1991. Kurds played no part in the Gulf War except as conscripted soldiers.

Anticipating the defeat of Saddam Hussein and his fall, an impromptu Kurdish uprising occurred in Iraq in March 1991. This had not been anticipated by Kurdish leaders, who were carried along with it, and it was probably the first 'popular' Kurdish uprising in which the people led the way rather than factional or tribal leaders. As soon as Saddam Hussein had dealt with a southern Shia revolt, he moved northwards to wreak vengeance on his Kurds, causing a mass exodus from cities, towns and villages. Fear that Saddam Hussein might once again use chemical weapons caused panic among fleeing Kurds, who sought refuge in remote mountains, and in Turkey and Iran.

The international media spotlight settled on Kurdish families freezing to death on snow-covered mountainsides, evoking a swell of sympathy in Western countries. Tardily, the American, British and French governments were pressed by public opinion to help the Kurds. 'Operation Provide Comfort' (called 'Operation Poised Hammer' by the Americans) was activated to provide aid and 'safe haven' camps for Kurdish refugees. Iraqi troops were ordered to remain south of the 36th Parallel, and Allied combat planes monitored what became a no-fly zone over Kurdish terrain.

Under Allied and then United Nations encouragement and help, the Kurds held elections within in the 'safe-haven' zone.

The two main groups – the Patriotic Union of Kurdistan (PUK) and its rival the Kurdistan Democratic Party (KDP) – jointly formed an administration to govern what became known as the Kurdish Autonomous Region (KAR). In May 1994 cordiality broke down, and hostilities re-erupted between the two groups. This continues to rumble on, giving weight to the allegation that the Kurds are forever quarrelling amongst themselves.

Existing precariously under UN military protection, the Kurds fear that the Allies are about to abandon the defenceless KAR at a time when the Iraqi army is mustering just south of the 36th Parallel.

Meanwhile, the faction-ridden Turkey of the 1970s and 1980s was additionally plagued with a discontented Kurdish population that constantly bordered on open insurrection. Several Kurdish resistance groups were active, but one – the Kurdish Worker's Party (PKK), led by Abdullah Ocalan – came to dominate the Kurdish scene. By 1980 its military arm, the People's Liberation Army of Kurdistan (ARGK), claimed a strength of some 12 000 guerrillas, who originally lived within the Kurdish community.

A Turkish military government (1980–3) cracked down on the PKK and its ARGK, killing many, making mass arrests, holding mass trials and (until 1983) carrying out mass executions. Survivors either went deeper underground or sought refuge across borders. Ocalan escaped and was given sanctuary by Syria, then in confrontation with Turkey over the distribution of the Euphrates waters and other matters. He was allowed to operate from Damascus, while remnants of his ARGK were housed in camps in the Lebanese Bekaa Valley, then under Syrian control.

In 1984 Ocalan declared war on the Turkish government and demanded independence. As his ARGK recovered and grew in strength, it seeped back into south-eastern Turkey to resume guerrilla activity. A very dirty war began and atrocities were committed by both sides. Amnesty International reports made horrific reading. The political section of the PKK established front organisations in Western European cities amongst Kurdish exiles, who issued propaganda and organised demonstrations to bring their cause to Western notice and attract support and sympathy.

When Saddam Hussein invaded Kuwait, Prime Minister (later

President) Ozal of Turkey eagerly joined the Allied coalition. The Allies were allowed the use of Turkish bases, for which Ozal expected material reward in due course, his eyes being on the oil fields of Kirkuk. After Saddam Hussein's technical defeat the Allies cooled towards Ozal and they certainly had no intention of rearranging international frontiers for his benefit.

Committed, and hopeful, Ozal assisted the Allies in Operation Provide Comfort, even though he was taking ruthless military action against his own Kurds. The ARGK became bolder, standing up to the Turkish army in the 'dirty war' but coming off second best in set-piece encounters. Eventually the ARGK was forced out of Turkey to seek sanctuary in the mountains of northern Iraq, which brought it into violent conflict with hostile Iraqi Kurds.

The PKK, which was regarded with some toleration by governments in Western Europe who were critical of the Turkish government's record on democratic rule and human rights, found that its policy of largely peaceful demonstrations was proving unsuccessful. In June 1993 attacks were mounted on Turkish diplomatic and commercial premises, followed in November by a fire-bombing blitz on them. Western attitudes hardened and the PKK found itself under intense police scrutiny, whereupon Ocalan switched his attention to attacking Turkey's booming multi-billion dollar tourist industry.

On several occasions Ocalan had sought political contact with the Turkish government, but he had always been ignored. Suddenly, in March 1993 he declared a unilateral cease-fire, by which time he had modified his political demand to that of autonomy. The Turkish army ignored the offer and battled on, but the ARGK remained passive, while the government seemed to sit back and ponder. This lull was abruptly shattered when the ARGK ambushed and massacred Turkish troops. The action was said to have been carried out by a maverick ARGK commander, without Ocalan's authority.

In April 1994 the PKK again appealed for a dialogue, emphasising that it was not speaking from weakness and boasting that it now had over 30 000 armed guerrillas. There was no response from Ankara. The Turkish army knew it was doing well, and thinking it had got the ARGK on the run it had no intention of stopping, overlooking the fact that a military

victory over the ARGK would not solve Turkey's Kurdish problem.

Turkey is in a precarious internal position, plagued not only by the PKK but also by the revival of the powerful left-wing Dev Sol movement and a revitalised Islamic Fundamentalist Welfare Party, which seeks to establish Turkey as an Islamic state, similar to that in Iran, and which had unexpected successes in local elections.

As long as adjacent countries continue to give sanctuary to PKK activists the Kurdish insurrection in Turkey will remain almost unquenchable. Like the Kurds, Turkey has no real friends. Sustained by funds gained from controlling a piece of the main Asian-Caucasian-European drug route, the PKK can sustain its present tempo almost indefinitely. The same cannot be said for the Turkish government. A political solution means a form of autonomy within Turkey for its 12-14 million Kurds. An unlikely, but not impossible, future scenario could be one in which the PKK sides with the government against the Dev Sol and the Welfare Party, the PKK's price being autonomy. Much will depend upon whether Ocalan is able to hold the PKK together, and on a steady political and military course.

EDGAR O'BALLANCE

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A major part of the research for this book has been gained from my visits over the years to Iran, Iraq, Syria and Turkey, where I had a series of briefings, interviews and discussions with VIPs, combatants and others involved with or interested in the Kurds. These included visits to mountain camps, coverage of the Kurdish revolt in Iraq and other Kurdish insurgencies. Where material has been obtained from other sources, and used, due credit is given within the text. All comments, deductions and opinions are my own, and at times these may differ from current, generally perceived wisdom.

Map sources include *The Times Atlas of the World*, *The Times*, the *Daily Telegraph* and *The Middle East*.

List of Abbreviations

ANAP	Motherland Party (Turkey)
ARGK	People's Liberation Army of Kurdistan
CDKPR	Committee for the Defence of the Kurdish People's Rights
CENTO	Central Treaty Organisation
CHP	Republicans' People's Party (Turkey)
CIA	Central Intelligence Agency (US)
DAWA	Islamic Call
DDKD	Cultural and Democratic Revolutionary Association
DDKO	Organisation of Revolutionary Kurdish Youth
DEP	Democratic Party (Turkey)
DYP	True Path Party (Turkey)
EC	European Community
EEC	European Economic Community
ERNK	National Liberation Front of Kurdistan
GAP	South East Anatolia Project
HEP	People's Labour Party
HEVA	Kurdish Nationalist Party
ICO	Islamic Conference Organisation
ICP	Iraqi Communist Party
IISS	International Institute for Strategic Studies
IKF	Iraqi Kurdistan Front
ILK	Islamic League of Kurdistan
IMIK	Islamic Movement of Iraqi Kurdistan
INC	Iraqi National Congress
IRC	Islamic Revolutionary Council
KAR	Kurdish Autonomous Region
KCP	Kurdish Communist Party (Turkey)
KDF	Kurdish Democratic Front
KDP	Kurdistan Democratic Party
KDPI	Kurdistan Democratic Party of Iran
KDP (PC)	KDP (Provisional Committee)
KDP (PL)	KDP (Provisional Leadership)
KDP(T)	Kurdistan Democratic Party of Turkey
KDPS	Kurdistan Democratic Party of Syria
KNA	Kurdish National Assembly

KPDP	Kurdistan People's Democratic Party
KSP	Kurdistan Socialist Party
KUK	Partisans of Kurdish National Liberation (Turkey)
KUP	Kurdistan Unity Party
NAP	National Action Party (Turkey)
NDPF	National Democratic and Patriotic Front
NLA (I)	National Liberation Army of Iran
NRC	National Resistance Council
NSP	National Salvation Party (Turkey)
OHRI	Organisation of Human Rights in Iraq
OPEC	Organisation of Petroleum Exporting Countries
PKK	Kurdish Workers' Party (Turkey)
PRF	Popular Resistance Force
PUK	Patriotic Union of Kurdistan
RAF	Royal Air Force (British)
RCC	Revolutionary Command Council (Iraq)
RDF	Rapid deployment force
RP	Welfare Party (Turkey)
SAVAK	Security and Information Organisation (Iran)
SCIRI	Supreme Council of the Islamic Revolution of Iraq
SHP	Social Democratic Popularists (Turkey)
TIKKO	Turkish Workers' and Peasants' Liberation Party
UKDP	United Kurdistan Democratic Party
UN	United Nations
UNHCR	UN High Commissioner for Refugees
USSR	Union of Soviet Socialist Republics

Chronology

7th century	Kurds converted to Islam
12th century	Saladin and the Crusaders
1504	Safavids conquer Persia
1514	Battle of Chaldiran
1603	Treaty of Zohab
1907	Anglo-Russian Entente
1908	Young Turks Revolution
1909	Persian Revolution
1914	First World War begins in August; Turkey enters war in October
1916	Sykes-Picot Treaty
1917	Russian Revolution
1918	First World War ends in November
1920	Treaty of Sèvres
1921-2	Simko Rising: Persia
1922	Treaty of Lausanne
1922	Sultanate abolished in Turkey
1922-3	First Sheikh Mahmoud Barzanji revolt: Iraq
1924	Caliphate abolished in Turkey
1925	Sheikh Said revolt: Turkey
1926-30	Khoybun revolt: Turkey
1930-38	Dersim revolt (Turkey)
1931	Second Sheikh Marmoud Barzanji revolt: Iraq
1939-45	Second World War
1942	Komola formed (Soviet sponsored): Iran; Heva formed: Iraq
1943	Said Biroke revolt: Turkey; Diyana ambush: Iraq
1945	KDP formed: Iraq; Mullah Mustafa Barzani revolt: Iraq; KDPI formed: Iran
1946	(January-December) Kurdish Republic of Mahabad; (March) Mullah Mustafa promoted to general; (June) Battle of the Mashashah Heights
1947	(February-May) Barzani's fighting retreat to the USSR
1952	UKDP formed: Iraq; Kurdish revolt: Iran

- 1958 (July) Kassem coup in Iraq; (September) Mullah Mustafa Barzani returns to Iraq
- 1959 (April–May) Kurdish unrest: Iraq; (July) Kirkuk massacre
- 1960 (January) KDP supercedes the UKDP: Iraq; (April–May) Kurdish unrest in Iraq; (May) Military coup in Turkey, failed Kurdish revolt in Turkey, Fifth Kurdish Congress
- 1961 (March) Barzani returns to the mountains: Iraq; (September) Kurdish revolt in Iraq begins, Iraqi First Offensive
- 1962 (March) Barzani's spring offensive; (April) Barzani's manifesto; (July) Turkey creates frontier 'security zone'
- 1962 (July) Iraqi plane shot down by Turks
- 1963 (June–October) Iraqi Second Offensive; battle for Ruwanduz Gorge
- 1964 (February) Cease-fire: Iraq
- 1965 (April–September) Iraqi Third Offensive
- 1966 (January) Iraqi commando raid to Panjwin; (February) Talabini plot; (May) Iraqi Fourth Offensive, Mount Handrin ambush; (June) The 12-Point Programme
- 1969 (January) Iraqi Fifth Offensive; (March) Barzani's counterattack: Iraq; (August–October) Iraqi Sixth Offensive, Komala formed in Iran
- 1970 (March) 15-Point peace settlement, Iraqi President announces 'War with Kurds is over'
- 1972 Soviet–Iraqi Friendship Treaty; PKK formed in Turkey
- 1974 (March) The Autonomy Law: Iraq; (April) Barzani raises insurrection again: Iraq; (April–October) Iraqi Seventh Offensive, DDKD formed in Turkey
- 1975 (March) The Algiers Agreement, Iraq resumes Seventh Offensive, Kurdish insurgency in Iraq collapses; (June) PUK formed in Iraq
- 1976 KDP splinters: Iraq
- 1978 (November) PKK commences operations: Turkey

- 1979 (February) Islamic revolution in Iran;
(March) death of Mullah Mustafa Barzani in the USA
- 1979 (March–October) Kurdish uprising in Iran;
(July) Saddam Hussein becomes President of Iraq; (November) Islamic Students seize US Embassy in Tehran; (December) Soviets begin military occupation of Afghanistan
- 1980 (April–June) Kurdish uprising in Iran; (September) another military coup in Turkey, Iran–Iraq War begins
- 1981 (March) Iranian incursion into Turkey;
(April) KDPI spring offensive: Iran; (June) President Bani-Sadr impeached: Iran; (October) political parties in Turkey dissolved
- 1982 (April) Gotbzadah plot: Iran; another KDPI spring offensive: Iran
- 1983 (March) Abortive KDPI offensive: Iran, Iraqi–Turkish hot-pursuit agreement; (May) Turkish incursion into Iraq; (July) Iranians seize Haj Omran; (October) Iranians attack Panjwin; (December) PUK makes agreement with Iraqi government, Turkey returns to civilian rule
- 1984 (February) Thrust towards the Dardani Khan Dam: Iraq; (June) Pasdaran attack KDPI and Komala; (August) Iraqi offensive against KDP, PKK declares war on Turkish government, Operation Comfort: Turkey; (October) Iraq–Turkey cross-frontier agreement, Operation Sun: Turkey, Iraq breaks agreement with PUK
- 1985 (February) Saddam Hussein announces a general amnesty: Iraq; (March) Turkish–Syrian anti-terrorist agreement
- 1986 (March) Iranian penetration into Iraqi Kurdistan; (May) Iraqi action against liberated zones; (June) UN Resolution condemns Iraq for using chemical weapons; (August) Turkish air-strikes into Iraq
- 1987 (April–September) Iraqi army pressure

- against PUK and KDP; (November) general Election: Ozal returned to power in Turkey
- 1988 (March) chemical weapons used against Kurds in Halabja: Iraq; (June) PKK offers a cease-fire: Turkey; (August) cease-fire in Iran–Iraq War
- 1989 (June) Death of Ayatollah Khomeini: Iran; (July) Ghassemlou, leader of KDPI, assassinated; (November) Ozal becomes President: Turkey
- 1990 (April) Extra security measures; Turkey; (August) Iraq invades Kuwait
- 1991 (January) Allied air offensive: Kuwait; (February) Allied land offensive: Kuwait; (March) cease-fire in Gulf War, Kurdish Uprising: Iraq, Ocalan admits dissension in the PKK; (April) safe havens established: Iraq
- 1991 (April) ‘Operation Provide Comfort’: Iraq; ‘Operation Poised Hammer’: Iraq
- 1992 (March) Bloody Nowruz celebrations: Turkey; (May) Kurdish elections: Iraq; (June) Kurdish National Assembly established: Iraq; (October–December) Turkish incursions into northern Iraq
- 1993 (March) PKK declares a unilateral cease-fire; (April) death of President Ozal: succeeded by Demirel; (May) Bingol ambush – end of cease-fire: Turkey; (June) Ocalan again declares war on Turkish government, Tansu Ciller becomes prime minister of Turkey, PKK mounts demonstrations in Western Europe; (October) Ciller changes policy towards Kurds; (November) PKK fire-bombing in Western Europe; (December) DYP Congress: Turkey
- 1994 (January) Turkish cross-border raid into Iraq; (February) cease-fire in fighting in the KAR: Iraq; (April) UN helicopter shot down in KAR: Iraq, PKK ask for a dialogue: Turkey, PKK begins terrorist campaign against tourists; (May) PUK–KDP fighting in KAR: Iraq

The Kurds: Approximate Numbers and Locations

<i>Country</i>	<i>Total Population</i>	<i>Kurds</i>
Turkey	59 200 000	12–14 000 000
Iran	58 900 000	6 500 000
Iraq	18 400 000	3 500 000
Syria	13 800 000	800 000
Armenia	3 400 000	300 000
Lebanon	2 700 000	60 000
Germany	79 700 000	330 000
Elsewhere in the diaspora		20 000
Total		23 530 000

Sources: IISS, Kurdish Life, Kurdish Times, The Middle East.

Note that these figures represent a consensus of assessments and claims. Accuracy cannot be guaranteed, but in the absence of anything more reliable they form a rough guide.

Kurds are Muslims, some 85 per cent being of the mainstream Sunni sect, the remainder being Shia or other minority sects, such as Yezedi.

In the UN there are 135 nations whose people number less than the Kurds (*Kurdish Life*).