# Urbanization, Privatization, and Patronage:
## The Political Economy of Iraqi Kurdistan

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*Introduction*

Analyses of the relations between the Kurds and the state in Iraq have tended to give pride of place to ethnicity as an explanatory factor. Such an ethnicity-based perspective, however, has difficulties explaining both the enduring conflict between the main Iraqi Kurdish parties and the political alliances between some Kurdish actors and their alleged ethnic opponents. Thus, to mention but the most famous of such apparent anomalies, the invasion by the combined forces of the Kurdistan Democratic Party (KDP) and the Iraqi army on August 31, 1996, and the subsequent (though temporary) ousting of the Patriotic Union of Kurdistan (PUK) from all of its strongholds in the region, left many observers bewildered. Most explanations of this dramatic development appealed to an alleged irrational and wholly personal rivalry between the KDP and PUK leaders, Massoud Barzani and Jalal Talabani; or to 'archaic' tribal divisions, or even to an allegedly primordial cleavage between speakers of the Northern or Badinani and the Southern or Sorani dialects; or at best to the cynicism of international power politics. Such attempts, however, risk conflating individual psychological motivations, processes of political decision making, and broader social developments; they tend to downplay the considerable autonomy the parties have achieved in acting out their political conflict. Thus, the infighting has misleadingly been portrayed as a conflict between the more rural Badini-speaking Northerners of the KDP and the more urban and sophisticated Sorani-speaking Southerners of the PUK. Although at times, the parties have indeed tried to mobilize the population among such quasi-ethnic lines, these attempts did not meet with any serious response; sympathies for either KDP or PUK do not at all unambiguously match ethnic, educational or dialectal background.[1] But despite the parties failure to mobilize the population along ethnic or tribal lines, the population has for its part not been able to pressure the parties into less violent policies. In other words, the problem to be explained is precisely how the Kurdish parties have been able to pursue policies that went against the interests and wishes of the population at large, but managed to get away with it.

While part of the reason for the persistent political cleavages and antagonisms in the region has undoubtedly been the interference by neighbouring and other states, there are

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[1]The results of the 1992 elections are telling in this respect. Although the PUK did not make any significant inroads into the Badinan, the KDP's traditional mainstay (it received less than 10% of the vote, the KDP over 80%), the KDP drew a solid 30 % of the vote in the PUK heartlands, the Sorani-speaking Sulaimaniya region (cf. Hoff a.o. 1992: 29).

also domestic, and structural, causes for these cleavages, and for the specific forms they have taken in recent years. It is on these local factors that I will focus here.[2] My perspective is informed by some of the theoretical concepts of political economy, and in particular by the notion of patronage. The paper's main emphasis lies with the transformation of systems of patronage in the contemporary cities of Iraqi Kurdistan; I shall try to describe how tribal and other 'traditional' structures have persisted, and even gained in importance, despite the enormous structural changes the region has undergone. Some of the main underlying socio-economic causes for this development have been, first, the rise of the private sector and the emergence of a form of state capitalism in Iraq from the 1970s onwards, and, second, the interaction between the region and the international market. The urban focus of the paper lies in the fact that the cities in Iraqi Kurdistan have become heavily dependent on state structures; tribal leaders and other patrons, I will argue, have become equally 'urbanized': they have turned these structures to their own advantage, accumulating wealth and power. After the 1991 uprising, they have been able to further extend their power. In other words, contemporary tribal and other divisions should not be seen as leftovers from traditional social structures, but as social strategies that have a function in a modern urbanized context as well. Given the lack of reliable quantitative social and economic source materials, however, I can do no more here than provide a preliminary and qualitative picture of these developments. [3]

*1. Theoretical Background: Ethnicity, Economy, Patronage*
The relative scarcity of substantial; social-scientific research on the Iraqi Kurds (as on the Kurds in general) is rather surprising, in view of the region's importance for the domestic and foreign policies of various countries. For the most part, both journalistic and academic Western-language writings, pay predominant, if not exclusive, attention to political factors; and few Kurdish authors have been in a position to publicize their views without the risk of being brandished as biased towards one of the conflicting parties. [4] As said, however, numerous social, economic, and even political developments do not at all fit in well with, and may actually remain largely hidden from view in such a simplistic personality- and ethnicity-based perspective. A more theoretically informed discussion may open our eyes to less obvious developments, and suggest a further line of investigation for the explanation of events that may otherwise seem difficult to

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[2] Also economically and socially, much of the region's predicament is, of course, conditioned by outside factors such as the UN embargo against Iraq as a whole, and by the internal blockade imposed in 1991 by the Baghdad government against the Kurdish-controlled area.

[3] For an interpretation of local politics prior to the Arbil invasion, see Leezenberg (1997b); for more detailed descriptions of new developments and long-term trends in the regional economy, see NKS (1996), Leezenberg (2000; forthc.).

[4] For some of the more important journalistic works, see Schmidt (1994a), Kutschera (1997), Randal (1999); for academic analyses see e.g. Gunter (1999), Ibrahim (1999). Dagli (1994) focuses on the October 1992 fights between the Iraqi Kurdish parties and the PKK; Aytar (1995), largely consisting of interviews with the protagonists, addresses the 1994 rounds of infighting between KDP, PUK, and IMIK. The numerous papers on Iraqi Kurdistan by Hamit Bozarslan (e.g., Bozarslan 1996) deserve mention for their analytical rigor and their thought-provoking perspectives.

comprehend. For one thing, it leads to a de-emphasizing of an ethnic or nationalist confrontation between Kurds and Arabs as the prime mover of domestic developments. While such nationalistic political considerations undoubtedly played a role, there have also been more strictly social and economic aspects to Iraqi government policies.[5] More in general, an implicit 'mosaic model' of ethnic identity can be recognized in a good deal of writing (and especially in journalistic work) about contemporary Kurdistan: the idea that ethnic or sectarian groups like the Kurds or Arabs are given once and for all, and that social behavior is determined primarily by one's being a Kurd, or Arab, or Sunni Muslim, etc. One should not, however, take ethnic groups like 'the' Kurds as fixed and immutable. Ethnic, sectarian, or tribal identity is not a fact of nature that unequivocally determines social behavior; rather, it can itself be manipulated for social or political purposes.[6] Further, one should not overemphasize the role of the political sphere, or of individual decisions by those in power, in social developments: government policy decisions may in part be constrained, or even thwarted, by wider socio-economic developments. This is not to deny the overwhelmingly strong influence of the political sphere in Iraq: needless to say, Ba'thist policies have intruded in an often dramatic manner into citizens' everyday lives. Still, one should avoid overemphasizing the role of the leaders' personalities in policy decisions.

It has been argued that a political economy perspective, which focuses on the development of class relations and the specific modes of production associated with each social formation, can help social studies of the Middle East get rid of outdated and Eurocentric assumptions (e.g., Farsoun & Hajjar 1990). For Iraq and Iraqi Kurdistan, the major study written from such a perspective is, of course, Hanna Batatu's monumental *The Old Social Classes and the Revolutionary Movements of Iraq* (1978), which describes the transformation of old status groups, like shaykhs and tribal leaders, into new social classes based on private ownership of land and mercantile capital. In analytical terms, such approaches mark major advances over the crude 'mosaic' models noted above, as they can in principle take the changing nature of ethnic and tribal loyalties in the face of social and economic transformations into account. A popular variety of such a political-economy approach is that of dependency theory, which emphasizes the importance of developing countries being incorporated in the world market. This broader context of international capitalism leads to 'dependent development' in third-world countries, which is largely determined by foreign capitalist influences: they typically produce raw materials for the world market, and import technological know-how and industrial products from abroad. A dependency-theory perspective can yield important insights into the development of the Iraqi economy as

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[5]Thus, for example, the land reform promulgated in Law no. 90 of 1975 did not exclusively, and perhaps not even primarily, target rural Kurdish strongholds as Kurdish nationalists claim, but also aimed at changing the class structure of Iraqi society in that it stimulated small peasants and cooperatives.

[6]Leezenberg (1997a) discusses how the ethnic identity of two heterodox and multilingual groups in Iraqi Kurdistan, the Shabak and the Kakais, has been a focus of competing political claims to hegemony.

primarily dependent on oil exports.[7] However, it tends to overemphasize external factors at the expense of internal economic and social dynamics. This is especially problematic in cases where state influence on the domestic economy has been as strong as in Iraq: it is the Iraqi state that since the mid-1970s has been the main economic actor, both as investor and as customer of privately produced goods; moreover, it very ably diversified its foreign sources of goods, arms, and funding, and can thus be characterized as 'dependent' only in a rather generic sense.[8] More in general, the use of the classical categories of political economy leads to a relative neglect of other factors like ethnic, sectarian and tribal loyalties (although Batatu (1978) himself is well aware of these dimensions, and in his analysis rarely loses sight of them). One should not take ethnic and sectarian categories for granted, but one should equally beware of ignoring or downplaying them in one's analysis.[9]

A significant challenge for classical approaches of political economy is the fact that in Iraqi Kurdistan, class consciousness and primarily class-based social behavior do not seem to have developed very much, despite the Marxist- inspired official ideology of many local parties, and the still widespread appeal of vaguely socialist slogans (as elsewhere, the 1980s and 1990s have witnessed the increasing appeal of islamist ideas, but these hardly refer to notions like class, or even to economics at all). This will be a starting point of the present analysis. Its perspective is essentially that of political economy, but it pays specific attention to other factors that interfere with processes of class formation. These factors, it seems, can best be broadly indicated with the generic label of *patronage*. Patron-client relations are asymmetric power relations that differ as much from kinship-based organization as from power relations in centralized, lawful bureaucracies. They are rarely perceived as wholly legitimate. They cut straight through class relations, and tend to occur "where no corporate lineal group... intervenes between potential client and potential patron" and "where the formal institutional structure of society is weak and unable to deliver a sufficiently steady supply of goods and services" (Wolf 1966: 17-18; cf. Gellner 1977; Roniger & G nes-Ayata 1994). This characterization may seem at odds with the conditions pertaining in Ba'thist Iraq, which not only had strong and affluent state institutions until at least 1990, but also featured persistent tribal structures. I will argue, however, that both economic developments and

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[7]Thus, the chapter on economy and society since 1958 in Farouk-Sluglett & Sluglett's history of republican Iraq (1990) is clearly informed by the general concepts of dependency theory, without, however, being dogmatic in this respect.

[8]In fact, the very prosperity of Iraq and the other oil-producing nations presents something of an anomaly for a dependency-theory framework, according to which developing countries remain poor as a consequence of international capitalist development. Cf. Ismael (1993) on Kuwait as a comparable 'anomaly'.

[9] Thus, Haj (1997: 146-7; 150), while rightly criticizing essentialist views of sectarian cleavages and tribe-state relations, seems to overstate her case when she claims that tribal and ethnic divisions "did not constitute discreet entities" in pre-colonial times, and are, as significant institutions, by and large the product of the British mandate period.

state policies have actually *encouraged* the transformation of tribal loyalties into patron-client relations of a more restricted nature.[10]

On a consensus model of society, in which all relations and institutions are primarily taken as contributing to social integration, patronage forms a kind of mediation between the individual and the state (or, in the case of shaykhs and other religious patrons, the divine). Gilsenan (1977) has argued, however, that patrons do not arise as a kind of 'social glue' or as mediators when 'gaps' appear in the social order, that is, when a genuine need for mediation between the individual and the state arises, but rather as the result of socio-economic transformations. On his perspective, patronage relations serve to maintain existing forms of political domination in the face of structural economic changes. Thus, contemporary patron-client relations should not be seen as just remnants of 'traditional' social relations, like tribal or religious loyalties, in a 'modern' state: they can actually be shaped by the specific characteristics of modern states. Neither is clientelism exclusive to 'poor' countries: there appears to be no direct relation between economic development and the strength of patron-client relations (cf. Rooduijn 1987, Arlacchi 1983). A final significant characteristic of patronage relations from a conflict perspective is the fact that they may well work against the best interests of the clients, in that they tend to perpetuate existing unequal divisions of material and other resources, and hence tend to keep the clientele dependent on patronage.

Now what is specifically urban about the problems to be discussed here? To begin with, Iraqi Kurdistan, and indeed Iraq as a whole, had become thoroughly urbanized in the years following independence. This steady urbanization, which had already started in the 1930s, has constituted a momentous social transformation, but its effects have hardly been studied. At first, it was largely caused by the worsening conditions of living in the countryside, but it continued with the development of new opportunities for work, education, and social mobility in the cities. Already by 1965, more than half of the Iraqi population was living in the cities; by 1980, this percentage had increased to over 70 (Farouk-Sluglett & Sluglett (1990: 246; cf. 227)). The Kurdish region lagged behind in this urbanization process: by 1977, 51% of the local population was still rural (cf. Marr 1985: 285). The subsequent years, however, witnessed a continuing process of both voluntary and forced migration, mostly to cities and *mujamma' t* or resettlement camps in the region.[11]

It should be stressed that strictly ethnic or political considerations on the side of the government were only one among many factors that led to this urbanization. The progressive 1975 land reform was never fully implemented, and in any case, its effects were largely undone by the privatizations of the early 1980s, notably Law. no. 35 of 1983, which allowed for the leasing of large tracts of lands by Ba'th party adherents

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[10]These claims are in line with Silverman's (1977) observation that patronage is in itself a folk concept rather than a theoretical tool, and may have different characteristics in different socio-economic contexts.

[11] These *mujamma' t* can be considered specifically urban structures in so far as their population has become totally dependent on state infrastructure and government handouts.

(Springborg 1986; cf. Leezenberg 1997b: 47-8). Between 1975 and 1979, the lack of rural development after the 1975 land reforms forced many Kurds to migrate to the cities of Northern Iraq (Farouk-Sluglett & Sluglett 1990: 187). In Iraq as a whole, agricultural production has dropped dramatically since the early 1970s, and urbanization has been a nationwide phenomenon.

Already in the late 1970s, the failure of the successive land reforms had become apparent; much land had been lost for agricultural production, either through salinization or through deliberate destruction. At the same time, the city, as the main beneficiary of state spending, became ever more attractive for those seeking employment: in the 1970s and 1980s, urban wages, especially in the private sector, steadily increased. The cities were also attractive because of their much better developed health and education infrastructure. The displaced rural labor was largely absorbed in the 'notoriously unproductive' services sector, in which the state was an important employer (Stork 1982: 42). In a sense, then, much present-day research on Iraqi Kurdistan must have an urban focus by default. Even studies on agricultural development cannot avoid paying attention to such specifically 'urban' phenomena as the commercialization of agrarian production, absentee landlordism, etc.[12]

Moreover, in their new urban context, patronage relations have arguably taken on a number of novel characteristics. Here, I will focus on the character of the (partly informal) social relations obtaining in the cities, in keeping with Lapidus (1967), who has argued that one should not study the 'Islamic city' itself, but rather focus on social forms and relations in such cities. On his view, informal ties of ethnicity, kinship, and religion remain a constant factor amid the rapid economic transformations. While it remains to be assessed in how far such informal ties have themselves been influenced by economic developments, their very persistence indicates that one should remain heedful of simple dichotomies between 'urban' and 'rural', 'traditional' and 'modern', and the like.


*2. Urbanization, Class Structure, and Patronage in Ba'thist Iraq*
During the monarchic period, the traditional landowning and mercantile classes of Iraq largely failed to develop a class consciousness, largely because of sectarian, ethnic, and other divisions among themselves, but also because they had been insufficiently integrated in the Iraqi state to grasp the importance of the rapid socio-economic developments. The 1950s saw new social trends such as the development of an urban proletariat, and the upward social mobility - largely through the army - of the petty bourgeoisie. Oil revenues led to a steady rise in state income and autonomy. After the 1958 revolution, the successive governments tried (with varying degrees of determination and success) to break the political power of the landlords, especially through the promulgation and (at least partial) implementation of several successive land

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[12]For example, mechanized and commercialized agricultural labor is not autonomous with respect to the urban centers of wealth and power; farmers in present-day Iraqi Kurdistan are often (though by no means always) sharecroppers for landowners who themselves live in the cities.

reforms. The instable 1960s witnessed a protracted power struggle among the different segments of the new ruling elites; the old landowning elites, by contrast, seemed to be losing ever more of their power base. After the coup of 1968, the new Ba'th government carried through new land reforms, especially through laws no. 117 of 1970 and no. 90 of 1975, which aimed at further weakening the traditional landowners. Agriculture, however, was not a priority of Ba'thist economic policies. The nationalization of oil income in 1972 had created unprecedented possibilities for state spending; most of the funds that became available were allocated in urban contexts, and especially in industry and construction. Already during the 1970s, construction exceeded the share of agriculture and manufacturing in both the gross domestic product and in government investment. The oil wealth and the rise of the state sector announced the speedy development of an affluent welfare state with a form of state capitalism: the private sector was not discouraged, and trade unions remained under strict political control.[13] By the late 1970s, the accelerated urbanization, with its new potentials for education and social mobility, the land reforms, and the increase in state power in general, put an unprecedented pressure on the landowners and tribal leaders. In fact, most observers at the time held that the rise of the Iraqi welfare state was likely to lead to a continuing decrease in the social importance of the traditional ruling strata. Thus, according to Batatu (1978: 1116), the power base (notably, the private possession of land) of these strata had largely been destroyed by the late 1970s. More in general, Iraqi social policy in the 1970s had the proclaimed aim of 'transferring political allegiance from kinship structures to the state'; it did not aim at eliminating class differences, however, but rather at social reform within the framework of the welfare state (Ismael 1980: 241; 247-8).[14]

It seems, then, that rural tribal structures based on landownership were undergoing a serious crisis in the 1970s and early 1980s.[15] But this trend, if such it was, was reversed by the developments of the 1980s and early 1990s in Iraqi Kurdistan, and possibly in Iraq as a whole. By the late 1980s, (part of) the Kurdish tribal leadership had been given a new lease of life,- but this time in an overwhelmingly urban context. The reassertion of tribal relations was encouraged by a combination of socio-economic and political factors. To begin with, the privatizations of the 1980s created advantageous conditions for private investment. Tribal leaders loyal to the government found new opportunities to increase their wealth as traders and as contractors for the profitable state-commissioned infrastructure projects. Many tribal leaders thus became urban entrepreneurs;

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[13]This overview is largely based on Batatu (1978); cf. Stork (1982), Farouk-Sluglett & Sluglett (1990: 215-27).

[14]Article 42 of the Baath Party constitution of 1947 explicitly states that 'the party aims at abolishing class differences and privileges' (cf. Ismael 1980: 237); but as Farouk-Sluglett & Sluglett (1990: xv, ch. 7) note, Baathist policies have never been socialist in the strict sense of the word.

[15]There are indications that traditional loyalties were undergoing a change in character already in earlier years of the republican period. Rural Shabak, for example, remained loyal to their urban patrons in Mosul, no longer for ritual reasons, but for more restricted economic purposes (Rassam 1977).

construction projects were particularly lucrative, as they provided ample opportunities for corruption. These conditions helped the transformation of the erstwhile 'pre-capitalist' landowning stratum into a more strictly capitalist class; the possession of capital became a main source of power and prestige.

In this period, a large part of the urban population became directly or indirectly dependent on the state, either by being employed in the state services sector, or by working for one of the private companies that carried out state-commissioned projects.[16] The mobilization of a large part of the male population for active military service created an acute shortage of personnel, and brought large numbers of women in the urban labor force. To some extent, an ethnic division of labor also developed: many foreign unskilled workers, especially from Egypt and the Sudan, became employed in the urban informal sector (notably in construction, in shops, and in restaurants), whereas Iraqi nationals more often worked in the state-related services sector. On the whole, the affluence provided to society at large by the nationalization of oil income in 1972 enabled the government to create a mixed economy, in which neither the state nor private capital predominated. These government policies have (whether or not intentionally) tended to prevent the development of a strong class consciousness among the population (Springborg 1986: 46, 51-2). Thus, no serious class-based challenges to either the government or to the aghas-turned-entrepreneurs arose.

But there were also political factors that encouraged the reassertion of tribal and quasi-tribal structures. The most important of these were the outbreak of the Iran-Iraq war in 1980 and the subsequent renewal of large-scale Kurdish guerrilla activities. During the 1980s, the Iraqi government systematically reinforced tribal structures through the installation of so-called *mustashar* troops (Kurdish irregulars), and paradoxically though it may seem at first blush, in the formation of new *urban* structures, the *mujamma' t*. The troops of irregulars were installed to protect the northern governorates without having to withdraw too many regular army forces from the war front. Tribal leaders could enlist their followers as forming such a militia, and would receive generous rewards from the government. But also individuals without a specific tribal status could receive such awards if they brought together a number of armed men. Having, or creating, a quasi-tribal militia became a lucrative business: often, the numbers of those enlisted were wildly exaggerated, and not all of them countered the Kurdish guerillas as actively as they were supposed to do. According to McDowall (1996: 354-7), quoting Massoud Barzani, the Kurdish parties to some extent even encouraged locals to join the irregular troops, as they argued they could not accommodate more guerrillas. To those enlisted, this system brought few financial awards, but at least they were exempted from front duty, and they could allay government suspicions by keeping up a semblance of loyalty. Among the many tribes who created such irregular troops or *jash* ("donkey

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[16]Farouk-Sluglett & Sluglett (1990: 249), in fact, suggest that the state-sponsored private sector was the main urban employer at this time, even outdoing the massive state bureaucracy.

foal"), as Kurdish nationalists disparagingly called them, were the Surchi and the Bradost; but there were also men without a tribal background who acquired prominence by becoming *mustashar* were, e.g., Mamand Qashqai and Tahsin Shawais. In other words, the *mustashar* system actually contributed to the creation of new quasi-tribal relations.

Deported Kurdish villagers were resettled in the quasi-urban *mujamma' t*. There, they were completely cut off from their former means of making a living, and became wholly dependent on state handouts. These were supplied primarily through the *mustashar* leaders, who were placed in charge of food redistribution. These could thus further reinforce their social and political position, once again with generous rewards and ample opportunities for corruption and clientelization.

The 1988 ceasefire brought a deep economic crisis to Iraq, which seriously threatened the repressive welfare state that had been created in the preceding years. The government had amassed enormous foreign debts, and the demobilization of large numbers of soldiers carried with it the risk of a steep rise in unemployment and social unrest. The depth of the crisis led the government to engage in a radical, if not reckless, reform program that has been characterized as a form of economic 'shock therapy' (Chaudhry 1991), as it seriously threatened the economic and social well-being of the urban population, which had already been under pressure due to the vast war expenses. Price ceilings on basic foodstuffs were lifted, and numerous workers were fired. Apparently, the government tried to divert, or channel, the social unrest by initiating a violent campaign against foreign workers (primarily Egyptians), who were an easily identifiable target for local antipathies. Many of the Egyptian workers were chased out of the country in the winter of 1989-1990. According to Egyptian press reports, local thugs killed between 1,000 and 2,000 Egyptian workers during this period. They appear to have been instructed by the Iraqi government to scare them into leaving.

According to some analysts, such as Chaudhry (1991), it was likewise economic considerations, notably the crushing debt burden and the social upheaval caused by the economic reforms, were among the main considerations that led to the Iraqi invasion of Kuwait in early August 1990. Subsequently, the UN imposed an economic embargo on Iraq; at once, the country's oil revenues were cut off. In order to stimulate the agricultural sector, and thus enhance the country's economic self-sufficiency, the government then started leasing lands in the northern governorates to (often city-based) *mustashar*s, who were thus further strengthened by the state.

The 1980s, then, marked the active encouragement of (quasi-) tribal social relations in Iraqi Kurdistan; but these relations were now reproduced in a largely urbanized environment, and against the backdrop of an internationalized and commercialized economy. Why did the Ba'th regime, with all its socialist and modernist rhetoric, not develop a more formal and less patronage-prone style of government? A main factor may have been its concern with political security, which was pursued by a policy of

stick and carrot. Although the Ba'th regime's merciless persecution of real and alleged opponents has been amply documented, the patrnage-like complement to this repression has received rather less attention. Yet, in so far as any government can rule by the sheer terrorizing and atomization of its population at all, the Iraqi Ba'th regime does not unambiguously fit this picture of a monolithic form of purely repressive state power. In cities and countryside alike, as in the *mujamma' t*, the regime tried to create dependence on, and hence loyalty to, the state through middlemen who could rely on and strengthen, and in some cases even create, tribally-based claims to authority through the monopolization of food supplies. In other words, Iraqi government policies of the 1980s have stimulated a form of patronage imposed from above. This development does not fit in well with the more traditional conceptions of patronage as primarily emerging in the absence of a strong state. Likewise, in a tactic that is at odds with the picture of the Iraqi state as based on a near-total concentration of power in the hands of Saddam Husayn's extended family, the Iraqi government actually *delegated* power and means of coercion to locals with the implementation of the *mustashar* system. Even though the dubious loyalty of the mustashars was well known and well documented by the intelligence services, the government actively contributed to their local strength.[17]

*3. The 1991 Uprising and the Attempts at Civilian Rule*

The popular uprising that took place in the Kurdish regions in the aftermath of the Gulf War may have been a revolution in the political sense, but socially, it left much as it was. In the days following the uprising, urban councils (*shuras*) had been established in Arbil and Sulaimaniya by communist-inspired groups; but these attempts at urban self-government quickly succumbed to the returning Iraqi army, and to the pressure of the Iraqi Kurdistan Front (IKF) parties (Schmidt 1994b: 160; cf. Leezenberg 1997b: 53). At the same time, the IKF announced a general amnesty for all former government collaborators; moreover, relief programs by the UN and others tended to use mustashars as middlemen for food distribution in the *mujamma' t*. Collaborators who had become rich in the preceding years were thus set to strengthen their economic position even after the uprising, even though many of them were politically discredited.

The IKF faced the virtually impossible task of replacing the strongly centralized and highly cost-inefficient (not to say corrupt) state apparatus on which a large part of the population had become dependent. At first, there were high hopes for a more democratic polity, but the May 1992 elections did not bring the population any concrete rewards. Humanitarian aid was largely concentrated on the rural sector, and directed towards the reconstruction of villages and the rehabilitation of subsistence farming; but the privatization and commercialization of agriculture in the 1980s, combined with the continuation of subsidized food imports by the UN and foreign

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[17] This development predates by a decade the trend towards 'neotribalism' which Baram (1997) sees emerging in the 1990s, as a result of Iraqi government policies in the face of the continuing UN embargo.

NGOs and the high local transportation costs made the long-term success of these agricultural rehabilitation projects unlikely.[18]

Far fewer aid projects aimed at generating jobs and income in the cities, where - as noted - the majority of the population was living. Attempts to get people to leave the relocation camps for their former villages could at best solve a fraction of the urban labor problems. The steadily worsening economic crisis had created a large urban proletariat of unemployed and underpaid people. Not all of the new urban poor, however, belonged to the labor class: many were, or had been, civil servants whose wages were now insufficient to cover the basic costs of living, others were internally displaced persons from Kirkuk and other government-held areas. Political events had caused the collapse of what little formal sector there was; because of the UN embargo and the Baghdad blockade, industry suffered badly. Factories had to reduce or even discontinue production for lack of spare parts and raw materials.[19]

At the same time, the informal sector expanded. In the cities, large numbers of small-scale street vendors appeared. Many people resorted to selling part of their furniture or other possessions as a way of making ends meet; some even tore down part of their houses and resold the construction materials. But a much more momentous trend in the informal economy was the rapid development of cross-border trade. The semi-clandestine transport of petrol from Iraq to Turkey through the Kurdish-held Ibrahim Khalil border crossing was by far the most important activity; but the region also became a main transit zone for the smuggling of various luxury items (notably cigarettes, alcohol, and narcotics) to Turkey, Iran, and Iraq. In particular the trafficking of refugees became a highly profitable business: people wishing to leave would pay up to US$5,000 to local 'travel agencies', and often had to pay hundreds of dollars for Turkish transit visas and bribes for Kurdish border officials.

These kinds of trade primarily benefited a small group of people who, often with the use of party networks and militias, could protect their business. The KDP and PUK quickly realized the economic potential of this cross-border trade, and both progressively tried to monopolize the profits that could thus be made. There have also been reports that a small group of party-backed entrepreneurs has gained control over the domestic markets, and could thus influence consumer prices for basic foodstuffs and petrol. At one point in 1995, PUK leader Talabani optimistically announced that Iraqi Kurdistan was set to become a Middle-Eastern equivalent of free trade zones like Hong Kong. In fact, however, a model for Iraqi Kurdistan during this period is more readily found in Lebanon during the 1970s and 1980s, when the collapse of central government

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[18]Moreover, the food distributions that were to be part of the 'food for oil' - deal concluded in May 1996 between the UN and the Iraqi government directly threatened this hard-won agricultural rehabilitation. The very announcement of the deal caused a marked fall in commodity prices, and led many farmers to reduce the amounts of seeds they purchased for the next harvest.

[19]In any case, the industrial sector in the Kurdish region was far less developed than that in, e.g., Baghdad, Basra, and Nineveh governorates (cf. Marr 1985: 269-70).

power equally enabled local warlords and military officers to engage in totally uninhibited smuggling and other profiteering activities.

The worsening economic crisis, the absence of a monopoly of violence, and the KDP-PUK conflict that erupted in May 1994 created a climate of fear and uncertainty, in which assassinations were rife. While many of these assassinations seem to have been motivated by the political conflict between the KDP, the PUK, and the Islamic Movement, some of them appear to have involved more strictly economic motives. [20] Among these are the assassinations of an investigating judge who was engaged in bringing legal proceedings to several people accused of involvement in drugs trafficking in the Badinan area, the assistant general director of the Sulaimaniya cigarette factory, and a Sulaimaniya businessman with communist sympathies (A.I. 1995: 89-98). Several trade union activists have equally been assassinated, especially in the Badinan region up to late 1994. Although the Badinan was the traditional KDP stronghold, that party by no mean had the uncontested hegemony over the region. Politically, it was made insecure by the presence of large numbers of PKK guerrillas and by the regular Turkish army incursions.

With the collapse of the strong Ba'thist state in 1991 and the ensuing economic crisis, the lower strata of the urban population have become ever more dependent on patronage as a means for survival. The regional government has, for various reasons, not been able to replace the Ba'thist state institutions, let alone creating new loyalties that transcend those to tribal chief, shaykh, or party. But this very collapse of the state and of public security belies the view of patronage as a form of mediation between the individual and the state. Rather, local patrons have in large part created the dangers against which they subsequently offered to protect the population, and profited from the protection they offered citizens against real or self-created dangers. The main political parties, locked in fierce competition for political hegemony, not only engaged in attempts at clientelization themselves; they also tried to co-opt rather than to replace the regional tribal leaders and other patrons.


*4. Arbil*

Because of its location and specific characteristics, Arbil has been a main arena of competition not only between the KDP and the PUK, but also for various other forces active in the region. Consequently, certain tendencies may have come out more clearly in this city than elsewhere; but the main points of this analysis also apply to the other major cities of Iraqi Kurdistan.

Since 1974, Arbil had been the seat of the regional government, and until late 1992, it could boast of the only university of the Kurdish region. In Arbil governorate, as opposed to Duhok and Sulaimainiya, there was no clear majority for either the KDP or

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[20]At times, the political motivations may be difficult to separate from the economic interests involved. Needless to say, the Iraqi government has been blamed for many of the assassinations and bombing assaults.

the PUK in the 1992 elections: the KDP received 45,3% of the vote, the PUK 44,2% (Hoff a.o. 1992: 29). Civilian government quickly appeared ineffective, especially in the face of the parties' military might. In April 1993, the PUK politburo member Kosrat Rasul, a peshmerga leader who had maintained his own militias, and thus retained an independent power base, replaced the civilian Fuad Massoum as prime minister.[21] Until at least January 1995, when PUK troops ousted all KDP personnel from the city, both parties competed fiercely for political and social hegemony. Ethnically, too, the population was more heterogeneous than that of Sulaimaniya or Duhok: it consisted of Kurds, Arabs, Assyrians, and Turcomans. The numerical proportions of these respective groups are difficult to assess; at present, however, the population of the city seems predominantly, if not overwhelmingly Kurdish. Practically all Arabs, most of whom had been employed as Ba'th government officials, had left by October 1991. The Assyrians in the city are largely confined to the Ain Kawa suburb, while most Turcomans live in the older quarters. The Turcomans, most of whom descend from the former Ottoman elite, are primarily active in trade and crafts; as one elderly local Kurd put it: "the Turcomans are the capitalists, the Kurds are the workers".[22] The Turcomans traditionally had high social prestige, but little political influence, and tended to comply with whatever authority was in power.

The city also had its slums, partly the direct and intended result of Iraqi government policies, like the Jezhnikan, Baharka, Daratou, and Bani Slawa *mujamma' t* several miles to the north and southeast of the city. Anfal victims from various areas had been deported here by government forces in the summer of 1988, without any provisions (cf. Human Rights Watch 1995: 124-7). The aftermath of the 1991 uprising witnessed a further influx of large numbers of internally displaced persons, notably from Kirkuk governorate. Some of these settled in temporary shelters on vacant spots or in former government buildings; the Kirkuki refugees, it appears, largely resettled in the Bani Slawa *mujamma'a*. These internally displaced persons formed a particularly vulnerable and destitute group; their presence placed a further burden on the city's scarce resources, and created the potential for social conflicts.

In Arbil, the two main political parties have behaved as the most important patrons; the political conflict between them has tended to mask their common economic interests. The main political parties in Iraqi Kurdistan were hardly marked off from each other by specific class interests or ideological differences. The often-heard claim that the KDP is 'tribal',' and the PUK more 'urban', should not blind us to the structural similarities between the two. After the 1991 uprising, and especially after their 1992 election victory, both parties have been active in creating extensive patronage networks, at the

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[21] Kosrat quickly became the strong man of Arbil city and its surroundings. His rising political power led the KDP to accuse him of massive corruption after it had been ousted from Arbil,- a charge that has regularly been leveled against people in power.

[22] Cf. Batatu (1978: 48), who points out that, during the monarchical period, several Kurdish villages surrounding Arbil were owned by urban Turcomans.

cost of developing a more democratic polity. First and foremost, the parties have probably become the main employers in the region: enlisting as a peshmerga was practically the only employment option open for the large numbers of unemployed young males. The parties also bound the relatives of martyred peshmergas to themselves by giving them monthly allowances. Further, after both parties had emerged from the 1992 elections with 50 seats in the regional parliament, the party politburos forced an equal distribution of cabinet seats, and indeed on all newly created posts for civil servants, notably policemen and teachers. This 'fifty-fifty' policy strengthened the hold of both parties on society at large, and tended to paralyze the elected political institutions. Parliament and government did not just consist of KDP and PUK straw men, however. In a special parliament session in August 1994, both party leaders were severely criticized by representatives for their inability to bring their armed conflict to an end. The outbreak of fighting in May of that year not only marked an escalation of the rivalry between KDP and PUK, but also reflected the increasing power imbalance between the elected structures and the party politburos (Leezenberg 1997b; cf. Aytar 1995).

Most of the other parties had far fewer opportunities for such patronage. The Islamic Movement of Iraqi Kurdistan (IMIK) was the only other party that booked substantial successes in the mobilization, and clientelization, of the poorer urban population, especially through its various welfare activities.

Apart from these party-linked labor opportunities for peshmergas and civil servants, the parties also tried to increase their power base by associating themselves with former mustashars, and with tribal chieftains in general. Already from 1991 onwards, they had became involved in an ever-stronger competition for alliances with local power brokers, whether tribal chieftain or men who had only gained positions of importance in the 1980s. In their attempts to instrumentalize the existing patronage networks, they indirectly strengthened the position of these local patrons. The loyalties thus created have been rather precarious, however: it has occurred that one part of a tribe sided with the PUK and another with the KDP (some tribes have simultaneously even maintained ties with Baghdad). Tribes could also switch sides rather easily, if they had come to feel the other party had more to offer; such switching sides has repeatedly been the direct cause for the outbreak of major clashes between PUK and KDP. Thus, the May 1994 infighting between both parties was triggered off by a land conflict near Qala Diza between tribal landowners and nontribal peasants. Likewise, in November 1994, the fact that (part of) the Herki tribe switched allegiance from the KDP to the PUK was one of the main events that triggered off the subsequent battle for control over Arbil (Leezenberg 1997b: 66; cf. McDowall 1996: 386-7). [23] In general, tribal leaders could profit most by maintaining an ambivalent position between the parties.

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[23] The tribal dimension of these conflicts should not be seen, however, as the fundamental one; tribal divisions are but one of the potential fault lines in society that can be, and have been, instrumentalized

Between the KDP and the PUK, ideological differences and primarily class-based action hardly played a significant role in the political competition before and after the elections. Many communist groups had offices in Arbil (e.g., the ICP, the Toilers Party, and various other Marxist-Leninist splinter groups, such as the Labor Party for the Independence of Kurdistan and the Communist Current) but their very number betrays the illusory character of these parties' attempts to take unified action on behalf of the poorer strata. Some of these parties have preferred to align themselves in various ways with the bigger parties in order to increase their political leverage.[24]

Even the Kurdistan Conservative Party, which was headed by Husseyn Agha Surchi and received political and organizational support from Great Britain, can hardly be called a class-based party, despite the facts that it main proclaimed political aims were the preservation of the political role of the tribal leaders and, significantly, the attraction of foreign investment. It consisted mainly of those tribal chieftains who had been mustashars, and were unable or unwilling to affiliate themselves with either the KDP or the PUK.

Two other parties played an important role in public life in Arbil. Both have been active in instrumentalizing the population's economic predicament to further their own ends (which partly coincided with those of their foreign sponsors). The Islamic Movement of Iraqi Kurdistan, backed by Iran and Saudi Arabia, created an extensive program of support for urban orphans and those who took care of them, reconstructed mosques and stimulated Islamic education.[25] One of the Turcoman parties, the Iraqi National Turcoman Party (*Irak Milli T rkmen Partisi*, IMTP), received large sums from Turkey, and tended to work together with the Turkish Red Crescent. In order to strengthen its claim that most of the Arbil population is of Turcoman background, it opened schools and cultural institutes, and created relief aid programs open only to Turcomans, or those who were willing to declare themselves Turcoman. In the dismal economic situation, such projects could have considerable success, as the urban population would turn for help to anyone with food or funds.

Apart from the political parties, other patrons emerged in Arbil: various urban entrepreneurs, tribal leaders, and upstart mustashars were able to turn the economic and political crisis to their advantage. Apparently, a number of the non-tribal entrepreneurs who had made their fortunes during the Ba'th years left the city for Baghdad before the uprising; but others were able to continue their activities. During the 1980s, they had made their fortunes through trade in cigarettes, alcohol, and foodstuffs, and some of

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for concrete goals. The specific alliance of the rival parties with respectively landowners and peasants in this specific conflict should not be seen as an indication of general ideological differences.

[24]Thus, the Toilers Party, which holds that no industrial proletariat, and thus no labor class proper, exists in Iraqi Kurdistan, participated in a joint list together with the PUK. It split in 1994, after two of its four representatives in parliament joined PUK, following Talabani's appeal to all urban leftist groups to join into a progressive front under PUK leadership.

[25]In fact, however, IMIK has concentrated its activities in the area surrounding Halabja, which constituted its traditional heartlands. In 1997, it was given free reign in the area in the wake of an Iranian-brokered ceasefire with the PUK, and imposed *hudud* or strict Islamic legislation there.

them still maintained business offices abroad, e.g. in Turkey. Some of these (formerly) Arbil-based merchants still engaged in international trade; there was a story of one Baghdad-based merchant, who managed to export dates from southern Iraq to Qatar by way of the Kurdish region and Iran, in violation of the UN embargo. Undoubtedly, there were many other cases of such continuing commercial activities.

The mustashars had been granted an amnesty after the uprising, and had maintained their armed forces. Consequently, some of them emerged as local warlords, both in the countryside and in the cities. Rather than trying to trying to create a monopoly of violence, however, the KDP and PUK actively strengthened the position of such local war lords in their competition for alliances. The most famous (and most violent) of these urban war lords were Mamand Qashqai, a former peshmerga-turned-j ash, who skilfully manoeuvered between the KDP and PUK, and maintained a large measure of control over the Azadi quarter of Arbil, until he was killed or, according to some sources, severely injured, in early 1995. Ali Qalala, another earlier mustashar leader, was likewise associated with KDP; he was reportedly killed in a clash with PUK forces. But there were also local bosses who had sided with the PUK; one of them was a certain Faruq, nicknamed Faqa, in Kesnezan, who was killed by KDP militias.[26]

In a sense, one might with equal, if not better, justification characterize numerous party officials as war lords, in so far as they actively profited from the eeconomic stability and could maximize their profits using the military means at their disposal. But the very persistence and flourishing of these smaller independent bosses is indicative of the social anarchy into which the region was sliding. Details about the activities of these warlords are not known, as are the activities of urban organized crime in general. There have been incidental reports, however, about the threat they posed to civilians. According to local informants, even cases of outright extortion occurred. Local gangs would visit the houses of the more prosperous families and threaten to kidnap or assassinate their children or relatives, unless a substantial amount of money was paid for protection. At one point in 1994, it was reported, one gang cut off water supplies in (part of) the Azadi quarter, and only reinstalled them after locals had made substantial payments. It seems that party militias themselves at times also engaged in extortion. There have been reports that, during the protracted fights for control over the access roads to the city, privately owned cars were confiscated at party checkpoints, and sold off to Iran. The fights that raged during the summer of 1994 further increased the social chaos, and the crime rate rose even further. As the governmental police force collapsed, the Assyrian Democratic Movement, together with the Communists and the Toilers' Party, then set up urban guards, which would patrol some quarters at night.[27]

## 5. Urban Protest and its Limitations

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[26] Despite his violent character, the PUK are reported to have subsequently erected a monument for him. One Ghafa in Eski Kalak seems to be another local warlord who had sided with the PUK.

[27] According to some sources, they were actually paid for doing so by the richer quarter inhabitants.

In the face of both parties and warlords, urban protest was bound to remain weak and ineffective. There have been various protest movements and organizations, which were not (or not primarily) party-linked or party-based, and in fact acted against the interests of the parties, but they faced an unequal battle. There is little information about their activities, precisely because they tried to operate outside the main party networks. At best, they were affiliated with the smaller parties, which on the whole were more concerned with the restoration of parliament and civil rule than the KDP and PUK (or, for that matter, the Islamic Movement and the IMTP).[28] In general, they were hampered by a severe lack of funds, and consequently did not have much to offer to their members. Here, I can only give a few examples.

In the face of the exceedingly high urban unemployment, which according to some may have been as high as 70%, a Union of Unemployed was formed in November 1992 (cf. Schmidt 1994a: 170-7; 1994b: 165ff). Although it seems to have been based primarily in Sulaimaniya, there have been activities in other cities as well; the number of its members is unknown. Although the interests it defended repeatedly brought the Union into conflict with the governing parties, it does not appear to have had any concrete social program or plans of action: people joined it out of desperation, -rather than because of any clear ideas about the realization of their social right Schmidt 1994a: 175). A Union of Refugees, which was active on behalf of internally displaced persons, seems to have faced similar difficulties.

The women's organizations in Iraqi Kurdistan had great difficulties in developing their own course of action, as they were for the most part linked to one of the political parties. Nonetheless, in September 1993, several organizations presented a petition with over 30,000 signatures to parliament, demanding an improvement in the legal status of women. The proposals never made it to parliament, however, because the KDP fraction and conservative representatives refused even to have them discussed. In these and in other cases, a collusion of interests among the parties and the conservative elites carried the day against attempts to create a greater social justice in the region through the elected bodies.

There were various forms of more restricted and ephemeral social protest. Between the summer of 1994 and the winter of 1995, numerous peace demonstrations were organized, but these were to no avail. During a special parliament session concerning the fraternal fights in August 1994, hundreds of people demonstrated in front of the parliament building for peace and the creation of new employment opportunities. Simultaneously, factory workers in Arbil (or at least those sympathetic to the ICP and the other organizing parties) went on strike. In August, hundreds of women organized a

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[28]Officials of these latter two parties paid lip service to the need for peace and normalization, but appeared to be more concerned with the pursuit of their own political agendas, which had little to gain by the restoration of the regional parliament. Significantly, an IMTP representative stated that putting an end to the KDP-PUK fights was "not their business" despite the fact that the population of Arbil, which his party claims is predominantly Turcoman, was severely at risk (interviews, August 1994).

march from Sulaimaniya to Arbil. In January 1995, a group of intellectuals threatened with collective and public self-immolation in protest against the urban clashes in which the PUK was to oust the KDP from Arbil. According to the London-based daily *al-Hayat*, a further 10,000 people demonstrated against the renewal of fights. In other words, popular discontent with the parties' violent confrontation was widespread and vocal, but it failed to materialize into an effective organized protest. The various demonstrations had great popular support, but failed to change the parties' stance, which was becoming increasingly autonomous and indifferent to the population's wishes.

For the most part, then, urban protest organizations seem to have had restricted goals and short-term programs, and were small and weak. Although they also addressed economic issues, they hardly featured any articulated class factor; as noted, most of the population had been employed in the state and private service sectors, and had developed no class outlook; by 1994, urban unemployment had become staggeringly high, and had led to an increasing dependence on the informal economy and on patronage. Moreover, the Marxist-Leninist movements in the region were themselves fragmented; and as noted above, party affiliation or participation in activities organized by specific parties is typically influenced by various other factors as well. Their lack of funds and the increasingly violent political climate, in which access to the media was severely restricted, made it difficult for such movements to gain a more influential position, and to let their voice be heard by the outside world.

The predominant forms of social action in Iraqi Kurdistan, then, involved different levels of patronage: individuals could, or had to, seek support either from tribal leaders, urban entrepreneurs, or directly from the main political parties. To some extent, tribal leaders affiliated with one of the parties, fulfilled a mediating function (e.g., in influencing voting behavior during the 1992 elections); but in general, this 'mediation' tended to benefit the old and new power elites rather than the population at large. As long as the KDP-PUK conflict lingered on, numerous tribal leaders could maintain a power base of their own, in urban as well as in rural areas. Thus, the collapse of state power has led to a further decline in the mediating function of tribes, although this pattern was visible already in the earlier years of Ba'thist government; conversely, not all mediating practices disappeared overnight. As noted, the prime activity of party-related, tribal and other patrons has become capital accumulation, for which the establishment of an area under Kurdish political control created unprecedented potentials. In all kinds of economic activities (smuggling of goods and people, trade in food stuffs, and the contracting of reconstruction projects), party structures and unquestioning tribal loyalties created considerable competitive advantages.


*6. 1996 and after: curtailing tribal power?*


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In the new political constellation, the regional government appeared weak and ineffective. The main parties increasingly resorted to violence, and increasingly, their internecine fights hit civilian targets and led to civilian casualties; for example, in the battles for the Kesnezan checkpoint on the outskirts of Arbil, the nearby Rizgari hospital was severely damaged; there also were incidents of looting of hospital supplies and equipment, and of the private property of local civilians.

This period of outright urban warfare was relatively brief, though. After the PUK ousted the KDP from Arbil in January 1995, it came in a better position to impose an effective monopoly of violence in the city, and it appears that the position of these warlords gradually weakened in consequence. There seems to have been a crackdown on some of the (organized) criminal activities, and most of the strong men mentioned above seem to have been killed or ousted during this period. Clearly, the PUK takeover reduced the war lords' room for manoeuver between the two parties which had until then been competing for supremacy in the city. This process of stabilization in Arbil, and indeed in the Kurdish region as a whole, appears to have largely continued following the events of August and September 1996. Some independent sources and foreign aid workers claim that the KDP rule over Arbil actually marked a further improvement over the PUK one-party administration in terms of efficiency; but such claims may be difficult to substantiate.

The anarchy between 1994 and 1996 repeatedly drove the political parties into armed conflicts with some of the larger tribes that had retained their independence. These conflicts, however, are not indicative of any wish on the parties' side to curtail tribal power in general as of more restricted strategic goals. The tribal leaders, who had a long-standing claim to authority, differed in several respects from the local warlords, many of whom had risen to dominant positions only in the 1980s. The Surchis, one of the most important tribes in Arbil governorate, were not known for particularly violent behavior in the city, but they had long been an important political force by virtue of their riches, and after 1991 played a predominant role in the Conservative Party. In the 1980s, the Surchi chieftains had amassed fortunes by their activities in trade and construction, and by supplying the government with large (and largely imaginary) forces of Kurdish irregulars. They had also accepted orders for government construction projects, which they would pass on to others, while themselves pocketing a fair amount of the allocated funds. After the uprising, they bought off the construction materials of the Bakhma dam site for an estimated 20 million dollars, and subsequently sold them, again with huge profits, to Iran. While Husseyn Agha, the most important Surchi leader, does not himself appear to have been engaged in other forms of trade, some of his relatives had long been active in international trade, and even had offices in London.

The Surchi's local influence, however, was suddenly and violently crushed in the months preceding the KDP takeover of Arbil. In June 1996, KDP forces destroyed the Surchi's rural power base at Kilken, in the Harir plain North of Arbil. They killed Husseyn Agha

and an estimated 30 other members of the Surchi clan, destroyed the village and took numerous women and children hostage. At the time, local media like *Turkish Daily News* described this event as a clash between the KDP and the KCP *as parties*. However, although the precise course of events remains unclear, the incident does not appear to have been either a purely political confrontation or a more 'traditional' kind of tribal shootout. According to several observers, the KDP had clear strategic and economic motivations for its operation, notably the wish to gain control over the Surchis' traditional territory, the Harir plain, which linked the KDP headquarters at Salahuddin with their main military base at Spilk; and the prospect of control over the redistribution of supplies within the framework of the food-for-oil deal which had been reached between UN and Iraq in the preceding month. At the time, KDP propaganda denounced the Surchis as traitors for their alleged dealing with Baghdad, even though the KDP was itself less than three months away from openly collaborating with Iraqi government troops in its invasion of Arbil; but there are also indications that at the time, the Surchis were moving closer to the PUK, a move perceived by the KDP as a clear threat to its interests.[29]

Other tribal leaders themselves remained outside the urban context, and had their interests in the cities taken care of by close relatives; some of them appear to have continued to balance successfully between the different local political forces. Thus, Karim Khan Bradost, who himself continued to reside in his traditional rural stronghold near the Turkey-Iraq-Iran border triangle, was known to have maintained with all of the political forces in the region: KDP and PUK, as well as Turkey, Baghdad, and the PKK. One of his sons had settled in Baghdad after the uprising, but another one became a member of parliament for the PUK. The latter could increase his fortunes by supplying a large percentage of the goods for foreign aid organizations active in Kurdistan.

In the years following the 1991 uprising, then, the power base of these tribal chieftains not only had not been adversely affected, but had actually strengthened. At least up until the establishment of two distinct, and relatively stable zones under the *de facto* hegemony of, respectively, the KDP and the PUK, numerous tribal leaders and other middlemen were able to balance between the two rival parties, and even to exploit it to their own advantage. Subsequently, it appears, their role as economic middlemen returned to the foreground.

Following the establishment of effective one-party rule in Arbil, at first by the PUK and subsequently by the KDP, the worst urban anarchy seems to have abated. Indeed, the region as a whole regained a modicum of political stability and security. There are different reasons for this development. First and foremost, although popular discontent was in itself unable to stop the unprecedented violent urban infighting, it did lead to increasing support for parties like IMIK and the PKK, and even for the idea of a return

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[29] For a description of events from the perspective of Hussayn Agha's son Jawhar, see the London-based oppositional paper *Hetaw*, issue 4 &5 (June-July 1996); cf. also McDowall (1996: 451).

of the Baghdad regime. In the face of such alternatives, the KDP and PUK could ill afford to wholly alienate the population at large. Economically, the conclusion and subsequent implementation of the Food for Oil deal between Iraq and the UN (a significant part of the revenues of which were earmarked for the Kurdish-held region) promised substantial new sources of income; but a measure of political and administrative stability was required for the commissioning and successful implementation of UN projects. The main Kurdish parties thus had both political and economic interests in a return to a semblance of normality, though these interests did not lead to a more active pursuit of the restoration of shared structures of civilian and elected government.

Following the PUK recapture of Sulaimaniya in October 1996, a demarcation line was established which — despite various minor and some major skirmishes up to the autumn of 1997 — remained largely stable. In the course of 1996 and 1997, it appears, both parties realized they had more to gain by settling for a ceasefire than by a protracted armed confrontation. Following several further rounds of fighting, both party leaders — under intense American pressure - signed the so-called 'Washington Agreement' in September 1998, which was to initiate a process of normalization. Although this normalization process did not lead to the rehabilitation of the erstwhile regional parliament and government (in fact, both parties set up their own 'regional governments' in their respective spheres of influence), it did lead to a protracted period of relative calm and stability. Eventually, the parties managed to establish a more effective, and less contested, form of one-party rule. The most significant factor disrupting this new constellation has been the emergence of new islamist groups, like the Islamic League, and the Islamic Union Party. These distinguished themselves from the Islamic Movement by their rejection of armed tactics, and focused their attention on morals, welfare work and education. Apart from such moral concerns, however, they hardly appear to have had any substantial social or economic programs.

Overall, the gradual implementation of the UN Oil-for-food program that got underway in the spring of 1997 has greatly reduced the hardship of the population; structurally, it marked no significant change in the existing distribution of economic power. These UN operations have often been criticized as highly cost-inefficient and corruption-prone; but they are probably no more so than the Iraqi form of state capitalism of the 1970s, of which they may be said to form a continuation or rehabilitation. The main risk associated with the UN program has been the further erosion of local agriculture, and the continuation of dependence on external welfare.[30] Although party-related personnel appears to have profited most from the program, some of the tribal chieftains could equally take advantage of the new opportunities by reverting to their prime economic activity of the 1980s, the contracting business. Likewise, former local (and party-

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[30] For an analysis of the development, constraints and consequences of humanitarian aid in the region from the first relief efforts in 1991 to the implementation of the Food-for-oil program, see Leezenberg (2000).

affiliated) NGOs transformed themselves into private contracting firms without difficulty, which suggests an underlying continuity. The contractors served as local middlemen in a more restricted economic sense, working for the Iraqi state at first, and subsequently for the international humanitarian circuit. Since the implementation of the Oil for Food program, new sources of local income were generated by the UN operations and their spinoff. Although undoubtedly a large proportion of the revenues was transferred to bank accounts abroad, the enormous profits increasingly had a local effect. The second half of the 1990s witnessed a new construction boom, and a steady rise in the import of luxury goods, especially in cities close to the border, like Zakho and Duhok.

A word remains to be said about the underlying causes of the KDP-PUK conflict.[31] This conflict has been called 'suicidal', but as disastrous as its consequences may have been for the population at large, the infighting has to some extent actually served the interests of the two parties. It should not be seen in overly personal terms; obviously, personal rivalries between Barzani and Talabani have played a role, but in themselves, these can hardly explain the tenacity and vicious character of the fights. There were simply too many people who had an active interest in maintaining a war economy, and keeping the population weak and dependent, in order to maximize their profits. Some analysts have even suggested that the outbreak of internecine fights may actually have helped the parties to avert the outbreak of major social conflicts (Ofteringer & Maro 1995: 107).

The division of border-trade profits was a main bone of contention between the Kurdish parties. At first, customs revenues were divided evenly among the IKF parties; after the elections, the KDP, PUK, and the government each received a percentage of these revenues, and the other parties were excluded from this source of income. Starting with the May 1994 fights, the KDP kept all the funds collected at the Habur border checkpoint to itself. The PUK found itself severely short of funds, which was one of the reasons that it was initially more eager to push for peace than the KDP: it had the majority of the population, and in particular the urban areas with their large numbers of civil servants, under its control. As soon as it had found a new source of funding in Iran, however, it could take up a less compromising attitude towards the KDP. The KDP, in its turn, found that it had more to gain by maintaining good relations with Baghdad, especially because of the lucrative oil revenues from the Ibrahim Khalil border crossing, which it could thus keep to itself, rather than having to share them with the PUK, let alone the government.

*7. Conclusion*

The notion of patronage may open up fresh perspectives on the political economy of Iraqi Kurdistan; it allows for more analytical flexibility than relatively static macro-

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[31]For a more detailed analysis of this conflict and its main causes, cf. Leezenberg (1997b).

categories like ethnicity, or a rigid dichotomy between 'traditional' and 'modern'. If the present analysis can claim any degree of correctness, it suggests a qualitative change in the nature of both tribes and political parties, even though existing patterns of loyalty have largely remained intact. Or, to put it more bluntly: the power elites of Iraqi Kurdistan have made extensive use of 'traditional' social structures and relations for wholly 'modern' purposes of capital accumulation. Perhaps the term 'patronage' sounds too neutral as a catch phrase to characterize the kind of sociopolitical relations that have been developing in the region: it may imply a suggestion of mutual benefit that has been largely absent in practice. But keeping in mind Gilsenan's (1977) critique of patron-client relations, patronage may also be seen as involving the "active creation and maintenance of dependence by those who have an interest in maintaining the existing division of power and resources".[32]

Tribalism in Iraqi Kurdistan is not simply a survival from the past; neither are (quasi-) tribal relations opposed or complementary to the strength of the state. In the 1980s, relations of patronage (re-) emerged, not in order to fill any social gaps left open by a weak state, but as the direct result of the state's active intervention. Likewise, the patterns of patronage formed after 1991 can hardly be described as forms of mediation between the individual and the state, as the old state institutions had collapsed and a new bureaucracy could not develop. With the KDP-PUK competition, party patronage practically became institutionalized as the most profitable, or even the only viable, option for many urban individuals. As patronage is usually defined as an informal relation, the expression 'institutions of patronage' may seem a contradiction in terms; but it should be kept in mind that patronage relations, no matter how openly they are formed, are never perceived as wholly legitimate; further, they are instable, as clients may switch sides when they perceive or expect greater profits with another patron; finally, in the absence of an effective formal government bureaucracy, they are the most readily available, and most advantageous, means of creating support from the population.

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[32] Of necessity, these patron-client relations have mostly been described from the patrons' side, as information about the city's poorer strata is sorely lacking.

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