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HUMANITARIAN AID IN IRAQI KURDISTAN

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Since the 1991 Gulf War, Iraq and in particular Iraqi Kurdistan have experienced an unprecendented measure of military, political, and humanitarian intervention from abroad. This massive intervention was legitimated with an appeal to Security Council Resolution 688, which at the time was perceived as undermining hitherto sacrosanct state sovereignty in humanitarian matters, and as creating a precedent for similar action elsewhere. The american president Bush proudly proclaimed the action against Iraq as a test case for a "New World Order", in which human rights and humanitarian considerations were to take precedence over state sovereignty. By 1995 at the latest, however, it had become clear that Iraqi Kurdistan, where a humanitarian 'Safe Haven' had been established, hardly qualified as a triumph for this kind of humanitarian interventionism. The region faced under a worsening social and economic crisis, and was dogged by political instability and by destructive foreign military incursions and Kurdish infighting.

Humanitarian aid has been an important economic and political factor in Iraqi Kurdistan, but it has had unforeseeable, and at times even paradoxical, effects; to some extent, it has exacerbated existing negative trends and tendencies. This paper tries to trace some of its main features and implications[1]. After some background, the main stages of this humanitarian involvement will be outlined: from initial relief effort and the establishment of a 'Safe Haven', aid shifted to a focus on long-term development; such efforts were increasingly hampered by the progressive social and political disintegration of the region, until a measure of stability was regained with the end of the Kurdish infighting and the implementation of the famous 'food-for-oil' resolution no. 986 of the UN.

Background

[1] For analyses of political, social and economical developments, see Leezenberg (1997) and (to appear) for a detailed account of humanitarian and other intervention in Iraq as a whole, see Graham-Brown 1999

In the 1970s, Iraq witnessed huge changes, mostly induced by the Baath party's radical and violent policies and made possible by the booming oil revenues; the conjunction of these two factors had created a repressive welfare state by the end of the decade. Any form of political opposition, notably the armed Kurdish uprising of 1974-1975, was savagely suppressed; in the Kurdish North, thousands of villages were evacuated and destroyed. Agriculture had been in steady decline for several decades. The prospects for a self-supporting agricultural sector had dimmed with successive land reforms, which had led to a fruitless collectivization in the 1970s followed by privatization measures in the 1980s, and had been further reduced with the government's heavily subsidizing food imports in the 1970s and 1980s. There had been a massive urbanization, in part the result of economic factors, and in part of the government's violent counterinsurgency policies against the Kurdish nationalist movement. Many Kurdish villagers were deported to relocation camps or *mujamma'ât*, where they were not allowed to carry out agricultural activities, and became totally dependent on the state infrastructure for their most basic needs. Food was centrally distributed, often through tribal leaders collaborating with the state. Basic infrastructural facilities, such as education and health care, were often inadequate.

Already by the mid-1970s, a form of state capitalism had emerged, with the Iraqi state constituting the most important customer for private enterprise, notably in construction projects. Such projects were carried out by private, often party-linked entrepreneurs, who could make huge profits on them; the commissioning and execution of such projects often involved various forms of corruption. A new class of entrepreneurs emerged, loyal to the state, but with an increasing economic power of their own. Such new urban forms of patronage remained largely intact after the uprising. There was also an established practice of smuggling (especially of cigarettes and liquor) across the borders with Turkey and Iran already before the imposition of an embargo in 1990.

Finally, and perhaps most importantly, Iraq had in the late 1980s intensified a privatization drive started a few years earlier, mostly to meet the costs of the first Gulf War. Coinciding with the end of the war and with a massive demobilization, the government engaged in a reckless economic shock therapy that could have caused serious social disruption. According to some sources[2], this economic crisis was the primary cause of Iraq's invasion of Kuwait: on this view, the government's wish to avoid the risk of social unrest practically forced it to invade Kuwait as a means of diverting attention from domestic problems and of easily acquiring new funds. The

[2] E.g., Chaudhry 1991

invasion certainly had the effect of masking domestic socio-economic developments. At the outbreak of the Gulf crisis in August 1990, the UN imposed an economic embargo on Iraq. In response, the Iraqi government installed a food rationing system that provided the entire population with part of its nutritional needs.

In short, at the time of the 1991 uprising, most of Iraqi Kurdistan had gone through drastic social transformations: the area had become predominantly urban; the overwhelming majority of the population was directly or indirectly dependent on the state; new patterns of patronage had been established in the cities; and the countryside held a potential for serious land conflicts[3].

1. The 1991 refugee crisis and the Safe Haven

For the purposes of analysis, humanitarian involvement in Iraqi Kurdistan can be conveniently subdivided into several phases. The first phase lasted roughly till the end of 1991, and can be characterized as an effort to cope with the acute refugee crisis that arose in April. As such, it largely focused on short-term relief aid, but it also explicitly aimed at containing the crisis by encouraging the refugees to return home.

In the aftermath of the second Gulf War, a largely spontaneous rebellion broke out against Saddam Hussain's regime, but this poorly organized revolt was quickly crushed by government troops, which resorted to retaliation measures of a brutality that was unprecedented even by Iraqi standards. In panic, an estimated 1.8 million people from Iraqi Kurdistan fled towards the Turkish and Iranian borders, but neither of these countries was at all prepared for such an enormous influx of refugees. Turkey was unwilling to open its borders primarily for fear that this influx might trigger fresh problems with its own restive Kurdish population.

On April 5, the Security Council adopted resolution 688, which called for the Iraqi government to end the repression of its civilian population, notably the Kurds, and to allow international humanitarian agencies immediate access to the country. This resolution was subsequently used as a legitimation for allied interventions that did not themselves have a UN mandate. Among these were the unilateral American imposition of an air exclusion zone in Northern Iraq and the creation of a 'Safe Haven' in the North, both in April 1991. The Safe Haven was proposed as a means of easing the refugee crisis by the British Prime Minister John Major, taking up a suggestion made by Turkey's president Turgut Özal. The rationale for a Safe Haven inside Iraq was that it would allow for refugees to remain inside

[3] See Leezenberg 1997 and (to appear) for more detailed analyses of these trends

the country. Significantly, however, it was Turkey rather than the US or the UK that was a main driving force behind both resolution 688 and the Safe Haven plan; Iraq's direct neighbours obviously had a greater interest than the more distant Gulf War allies in containing the crisis and in promoting humanitarian aid inside Iraq itself. The American government, in subsequent years a prime foreign protagonist in Northern Iraq, was thus drawn into the humanitarian operation much against its wishes; it was particularly reluctant to engage ground troops in the region.

The Safe Haven not only entired Kurdish and other refugees back into the country where they had been persecuted – in clear violation of the ban on refoulement proclaimed in the 1951 UN convention on refugees –, it also was an instrument of enforcing humanitarian aid that overruled state sovereignty. The entity thus created was, at that time, without precedent in international law; in fact, it aimed at protecting Turkey from a mass influx of Kurdish refugees at least as much as at protecting Iraqi civilians from persecution by government troops. No such entities were created along the borders with Iran and Saudi Arabia, where comparable numbers of refugees had arrived. Those refugees who had arrived in Turkey were strongly discouraged from staying or moving on to a third country, and were thus practically forced back into Iraq. Likewise, food aid was often distributed on the Iraqi side of the border, in the hope of enticing refugees back into the region they had just escaped from.

This allied humanitarian operation, in other words, had a military character and clearly political aims. It did not have an explicit UN mandate, however, and in fact overlapped with simultaneous humanitarian initiatives by the UN. On April 18, 1991, the UN signed a Memorandum of Understanding (MOU) with the Iraqi government, which enabled it to carry out its humanitarian programs for all of Iraq, including the regions that were not under government control. In return, the Iraqi government retained a degree of control over the flow of humanitarian aid; all UN operations required the Iraqi government's consent, and the MOU explicitly acknowledged that Iraq did not accept resolution 688[4].

American and British troops arrived in the region on April 20. The allied forces, notably the Americans, were anxious to impose strict time limits on this operation, which was costly and potentially dangerous for its personnel. By mid-July, they pulled out in the expectation that the small contingent of UN guards, provided for by the MOU, would take over their monitoring role. The Iraqi government was likewise – though obviously for rather different reasons – anxious for foreign troops to leave, and this may explain

[4] Cf. Graham-Brown 1999: 34-6

its initially speedy acceptance of the MOU, including the location of UN guards with a very limited mandate.

The massive humanitarian effort, in combination wih the allied operation and the Safe Haven, fulfilled its declared aim: by late 1991, practically all refugees had returned home. The underlying political problems and the long-term humanitarian questions, by contrast, had remained entirely unresolved. The Kurdish parties and the Baghdad government were nowhere near a negotiated peace deal; and the ambiguous legal and political status of the area in Northern Iraq, under different kinds of international protection, prevented an adequate political settlement that provided durable international guarantees for the population's safety. The problems of the region were treated almost exclusively in humanitarian terms, at the expense of a lasting political solution. The population was kept in limbo, and the continuing uncertainty had serious consequences for the region's economic and social rehabilitation.

2.October 1991-May 1994: attempts at economic and civil rehabilitation

A second phase in the international humanitarian involvement roughly coincides with attempts by the Kurdish parties to set up an effective civil administration. In this phase, aid shifted towards efforts at securing more durable economic recovery, though short-term relief aid (notably a succession of UN "winterization plans") remained a large, and probably the major, part of the activities. The effectiveness of these efforts was seriously restricted by essentially political factors, notably the UN embargo against Iraq and the international unwillingness to promote or encourage in any way a viable and self-supporting Kurdish entity in the North.

In April 1991, the Kurdish parties had entered into negotiations with Baghdad, but these talks collapsed in August. Following the withdrawal of the last allied ground troops in October, renewed fighting between the Iraqi army and Kurdish guerrillas broke out in and around the major Kurdish cities. The government then pulled out its civilian and military personnel from most of the Northern area, and at the same time imposed an economic blockade on it. This withdrawal left the North in an administrative vacuum. At first, local administration was taken care of by local committees that had been established by the Iraqi Kurdistan Front (an umbrella organization of the major Kurdish parties that had been established in 1987), but gradually the need for a more effective form of local government became clearer. On May 19, 1992, the Kurds held elections for the regional parliament. The international community expressed its approval of the elections, but did not accord them any political recognition. This lack of recognition seriously undermined the development of lasting stability and security in the region,

and was one major cause of the collapse of the civilian structures and the outbreak of internecine fights between the two main Kurdish parties in 1994[5].

From the start, the functioning of the regional parliament and government was hampered by the rivalry between the two victorious parties, the KDP and the PUK. This rivalry was extended to society at large: thus, the 'fifty-fifty' division agreed upon for cabinet seats was also applied to all other posts paid by the government. Moreover, even foreign aid agencies would regularly be asked by party officials to aim at a 'more equitable distribution' of their activities over the entire region, in other words, to apply a 'fifty-fifty' distribution of aid activities as well. The cabinet's lack of economic and executive power and political leverage enabled the respective party leaderships to ignore, or actually even dictate, parliament decisions.

Reconstruction projects suffered from a lack of coordination, both between the regional government and the NGOs and between the different government ministries involved in reconstruction[6]. Thus, the areas that were relatively easy to reach from the Turkish border, notably the Badinan, appear to have received a relatively greater share of aid. Other, more remote areas like the Germian, which lies below the 36th parallel, received far less aid. Efforts to set up a more effective central development board were unsuccessful, and failed to attract the cooperation of foreign NGOs.

Alongside the valiant but only partly successful efforts at reconstruction, relief aid, for which the United Nations remained a prime agent, continued. The basic framework for UN humanitarian assistance was the Memorandum of Understanding (MOU) between Iraq and the UN mentioned above. It allowed for relief supplies of food, medical supplies, and other basic humanitarian goods, which were to be distributed for as far as possible in cooperation with the Iraqi government. The government to some extent profited from the MOU, as locally acquired aid supplies were paid for in hard currency; nevertheless, UN activities tended to undermine Iraqi goverment control over its population, in particular by further institutionalizing the *de facto* separation of the three Northern governorates. In March 1993, Baghdad refused to renew the MOU, which until then had been periodically extended, and declared that any NGO that continued working in Northern Iraq would be there illegally. Following this announcement, numerous assassination attempts were carried out against foreign aid workers, but also against UN guards. These assaults came to a halt, however, after the PUK-KDP infighting broke out in May 1994, creating new problems for the continuation of foreign NGO work.

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[5] Cf. Leezenberg 1997.

[6] Numerous contributions to Hussein a.o. (eds.) 1993 and De Boer & Leezenberg (eds.) 1993 testify to these difficulties, which arose already at an early stage.

Under the terms of the MOU, such UN organizations as UNICEF, UNESCO, FAO, WHO, and WFP (World Food Programme) carried out various relief aid projects, but also some projects oriented towards economic reconstruction and development, like repair of schools, supply of insecticides for agriculture, and improving water and sanitation supplies. The UN also sponsored NGO activities, particularly in Iraqi Kurdistan. Most of these projects have been funded on the basis of the so-called 'Escrow Account'. Security Council resolution no. 778 provided for the establishment of this account, which involved the release of frozen Iraqi assets as 'matching funds' for voluntary contributions to humanitarian assistance by external donors. Thus, funding of humanitarian aid projects for the North was effectively doubled, though simultaneously, Iraqi sovereignty was further undermined.

UN operations were notoriously slow, costly, and inefficient, largely due to the extensive bureaucracy involved. Also, all contracts had to be approved by the sanctions committee, which turned down numerous applications. Consequently, the implementation of UN aid programs tended to proceed slowly. Slowly, the activities of both the UN and the foreign NGOs shifted away from the emphasis on food relief aid and repatriation of (kurdish) refugees. There were early criticisms that after the return of the refugees, food aid was actually superfluous, as the Iraqi government's distribution system had largely remained in place; the prolonged supply of relief aid carried the risk of further extending or institutionalizing the population's dependence on handouts. The necessity of using local middlemen for the distribution of the vast amounts of aid, for which local party officials and formerly government-linked tribal leaders were the most obvious candidates, also carried the risk of reproducing old and creating new patterns of patronage. And indeed, subsequent years witnessed ever-increasing efforts at clientelization and the political instrumentalization of aid distribution by various local agents.

Roughly two-thirds of the UN budget for humanitarian operations in Iraq as a whole went to the three Northern governorates, although in some respects (notably health and sanitation, inflation, and social anarchy), the situation in Central and Southern Iraq was considerably worse[7]. This imbalance resulted in particular from the Iraqi government blockade against Kurdish-controlled territory. After the spring 1991 uprising, the region continued to depend on basic foodstuffs and petrol products supplies by Baghdad; these supplies were progressively cut off from October 1991 onwards, until in June 1992 they had come to a complete standstill. Consequently, in September 1992, the UN launched a 'winterization plan',

[7] UN 1995a, b

which involved food and kerosene distribution in the North. These goods were mostly distributed through UNICEF, the World Food Program, and CARE International. With the winterization plan, more than half of the UN food supplies in Iraq was targeted for the North: in 1993 and 1994, 750,000 out of a total 1,3 million beneficiaries of relief supplies were living in Iraqi Kurdistan. Thus, foreign relief aid replaced the government rationing system; likewise, the American government-related OFDA soon developed into a kind of central bank for foreign NGOs[8]. In other words, foreign organisations took over various functions from the withdrawn Iraqi state agencies, thus in a sense furthering the privatization drive.

Perhaps this was the most paradoxical development: the UN replaced the rudiments of the former Iraqi welfare state, thus taking over the state's responsibility for the well-being of its citizens in the North. With the subsequent implementation of UN resolution 986, this shift of responsibility became clearly visible in Iraq as a whole.

3.Foreign NGOs and their constraints

Another feature of the second phase was the increasing economic (hence political) influence of foreign and local NGOs, especially after the expiration of the MOU between the UN and Baghdad in March 1993. In the highly polarized circumstances, it was difficult if not impossible for foreign humanitarian organizations to remain politically neutral. The UN had a particularly ambivalent, even paradoxical, role, as both the institution that had imposed sanctions and as the leader of the large-scale relief effort; moreover, its humanitarian program was inextricably linked with the political agenda of some of its member states, notably the U.S. Likewise, the UNHCR's aim of resettling refugees ran counter to the Iraqi government's long-standing policies of village evacuation and expelling non-Arab inhabitants from the Kirkuk area; as of mid-1995, some 140,000 internally displaced persons from Kirkuk remained in the three Kurdish-held northern governorates[9]. Finally, the very presence of foreign NGOs in Northern Iraq after the expiring of the MOU in March 1993 amounted to taking a political stance against the Iraqi regime.

While foreign NGOs' humanitarian activities were inevitably politicized, their actions faced both economical and political constraints. Foreign NGOs concentrated their reconstruction efforts on agricultural rehabilitation; their main aim was to encourage deported villagers to leave the *mujamma'ât*, and to return to their former dwellings and re-establish a productive and self-

[8] Bozarslan 1996: 120n.
[9] UN 1995a.

supporting life. Quite apart from the problems caused by the lack of coordination, however, agricultural rehabilitation and village reconstruction faced several structural constraints based on the more durable characteristics of the domestic and international economy. First, they were often based on the mistaken assumption that the causes of urbanization in the region had been predominantly, if not exclusively, political, and that *mujamma'a* dwellers would automatically return to their villages when enabled to do so. Second, the succession of land reforms confronted the regional authorities with competing claims to the same lands after the Iraqi government withdrawal, claims which they were in no position to resolve. This kind of land conflict could easily articulate itself in the distinct but overlapping terms of landlord-peasant confrontation, inter-party rivalry, or even ethnic conflict[10]. Finally, aid efforts underestimated the disruptive effects of the international agricultural market, where relatively cheap agribusiness products, especially from Turkey, were readily available. The cultivation and marketing of local produce was severely hampered by the lack of pesticides and petrol products caused by the double embargo. Nevertheless, large numbers of villages were successfully rebuilt, and many villagers returned, if at times on a temporary or on-off basis only. Subsequent economic and political developments made clear, however, just how vulnerable this newly rehabilitated subsistence agriculture was.

Direct military interference by the neighbouring countries increasingly jeopardized the achievements of foreign-sponsored reconstruction projects. The March 1995 cross-border operation by the Turkish army, officially intended to wipe out PKK guerrilla bases, caused considerable hardship for Iraqi civilians near the border. Different sources speak of between 30 and 60 Kurdish villages near the Turkish border as having been destroyed in this invasion alone; an estimated 24,000 villagers were forced to flee[11]. Many of these villages had just been reconstructed and repopulated, in most cases with the aid of European NGOs. From March 1993 onward, Iran likewise carried out regular artillery shellings and cross-border operations against suspected guerrilla bases.

Another worsening constraint on foreign NGO activities was the increasingly restrictive border policy by the Turkish government. In September 1994, Turkey considerably tightened the regulations for foreigners who wanted to visit the region: it required all foreign aid workers and journalists to get permission for crossing the border in Ankara. Protests from foreign NGOs and their governments had little effect.

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[10] Cf. Leezenberg 1997.
[11] UN 1995b.

The emphasis on agricultural rehabilitation had left the cities, where the bulk of the population was living, relatively neglected. According to the regional Ministry of Reconstruction, some 2,800 villages had been rebuilt by 1995[12]; no such triumphs could be claimed for the cities. A 1994 USAid/OFDA survey established that the cities had seen a steady deterioration of the social and economic situation, especially a sharp increase in the number of urban destitute. The soaring unemployment and the increasing number of urban destitute families received far less been attention from the reconstruction programs of foreign NGOs than rural rehabilitation. City dwellers remained largely dependent on UN-distributed rations, aid supplied by foreign NGOs, and remittances sent by relatives abroad. This situation provided plenty of room for increasing party patronage. The collapse of civil government in 1994 further drove the cities into a state of social anarchy, and led to a rising crime rate. The continuing crisis also led to a massive exodus of the educated urban middle class,- that is, of precisely the groups that in less instable circumstances might have spearheaded a more independent civil society and demands for change. The parties did little to stop this brain drain; in fact, it was increasingly turned into a source of private profit, as will become clear below.

4.*Local NGOs and their opportunities*

The bulk of the rehabilitatition, as opposed to relief, activities in the region was in the hands of foreign and local NGOs and the regional government that had been established in 1992. The interaction between foreign NGOs, local organizations and the regional government merits further discussion. The foreign NGOs tended to ignore the regional government, and generally preferred to coordinate their activities with local NGOs like KRO and KRA, most of which were linked to the main political parties. Often, foreign NGOs had larger budgets at their disposal than the government itself. In this way, a parallel government was created, and the already eroding effectiveness and credibility of the elected structures were further reduced.

The parties as such did not engage in aid or reconstruction work, apart from giving support to their members, (former) fighters and their relatives. Rather, they set up, or gained control over, numerous local NGOs, which were quickly perceived as lucrative sources of income, and as powerful instruments of clientelization. Soon, complaints started to be heard of party members and their relatives being given preferential treatment by local NGO officials. As the parties' behavior had long been marked by mutual distrust

[12] UN 1995a: 56.

and envy, their respective NGOs had little incentive to develop a common plan and coordinate their activities. Between the two, there were regular mutual accusations of corruption and the embezzlement of reconstruction funds and materials.

The KDP-linked NGOs were mostly active in the Badinan area, where the traditional KDP following was concentrated; the PUK attempted to attract funding to areas it considered its territory, such as the Qaradagh region. In areas where both parties had a substantial following, the competition for political and economical prevalence could easily acquire a class character or a tribal dimension; or, to put it differently, KDP-PUK rivalry tended to reinforce, if not actively exploit, the existing fault lines of local society. Thus, the first round of major fights between KDP and PUK was triggered off by a land conflict in Qala Diza[13]. In the cities, the parties made ever more visible efforts to monopolize the local humanitarian organizations, just as they tried to monopolize political life. For example, an organization would be offered financial support on condition that it kept the colors and flags of the sponsoring party on prominent display.

In short, the allocation of foreign humanitarian aid was quickly turned into both an arena and an instrument of competition between the local political parties, which largely acted through their local NGO representatives. Although the main actors were the two governing Kurdish parties, the KDP and the PUK, clientelization also included attempts at exploiting ethnic or religious factors. Thus, Turcoman and Islamic NGOs would make their supplies of food and financial support conditional upon the recipient's signing a declaration of being Turcoman, or following Islamic codes of dress and behavior, respectively.

The local NGOs thus became forceful instruments of clientelization, and helped in manipulating the humanitarian effort for party-political purposes. Humanitarian aid did not in and of itself create these problems, which in part resulted from the contradictory effects of both thirty years of Baathist rule and the rapid socio-economic transformations. It did, however, exacerbate such trends by making the stakes much higher with the influx of millions of dollars worth of hard currency, and with the task of allocating aid items and reconstruction contracts. Foreign aid workers were well aware of these problems, but were at a loss how to deal with them effectively. The local party-linked NGOs actively resisted efforts by foreign NGOs at setting up a more effective coordination and monitoring system. Notably, the foreign proposal of establishing a permanent secretariat of European NGOs to act as a prime agent for liaison and coordination was fiercely opposed[14].

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[13] Cf. Leezenberg 1997: 66.

[14] Cf. De Boer & Leezenberg (eds.) 1993: 82-83.

Because of the financial advantages involved in participating in local reconstruction projects, the local power of the parties as opposed to the government was thus reinforced, no doubt unintentionally on the side of the foreign NGOs. Moreover, local NGOs quickly became an important factor in the changing economy: they typically worked for private profit, and became a kind of local contractors sponsored by foreign capital, further hollowing out the formal government structures. In a sense, they were the heirs of the earlier private contractors paid by the Iraqi government, now receiving funds from the international community.

5.From clientelization to predation: the years of anarchy

A third phase of humanitarian involvement witnessed the steady deterioration of social and political security, the gradual withdrawal of foreign NGOs, and increasing shortage of funding for UN projects. It also saw an escalating abuse and instrumentalization of aid by the political parties and their respective militias. In May 1994, large-scale fights between KDP and PUK broke out. International efforts to mediate and to strengthen the regional government failed, in part because Turkey did all it could to thwart the emergence of a Kurdish quasi-state. In December, new fights erupted, with the PUK subsequently ousting KDP forces from Arbil after heavy fighting. Political interference from abroad increased: in March 1995, the Turkish army carried out a massive invasion. Iran likewise interfered, and also carried out several cross-border operation. Between August and December 1995, KDP troops were engaged in serious fights with PKK guerrillas. The most dramatic event was the KDP's takeover of Arbil on August 31, 1996, with the aid of the Iraqi army. Briefly, it looked as if the PUK would collapse entirely, but in the following month, it regained part of the lost territory. In early 1997, two separate administrations for the areas under KDP and PUK control were set up, both of them little more than front organisations for their respective politbureaus; obviously neither recognized the legitimacy of the other.

The outbreak of open fighting between KDP and PUK in May 1994 seriously hampered foreign aid activities in the region. Safe and adequate operation and movement of aid workers were seriously restricted by the lack of security, against which even UN guards could do little. Some foreign NGOs decided to cease their activities as a consequence of the infighting. An open letter protesting against Iranian involvement in these fights by a number of foreign NGOs active in Sulaymaniya elicited a sharp response from the KDP, which condemned the action as a politicization of humanitarian aid and an interference in internal affairs. Several NGOs

subsequently had to tone down or discontinue their activities, or to find alternative routes of transport and supply.

The KDP takeover of Sulaymaniya in September 1997 led to a new, if relatively brief, refugee crisis; until the subsequent PUK recapture of the city, over 50,000 people sought refuge in camps on the Iran-Iraq border. The takeover also caused more foreign NGOs to leave: notably, all American-backed NGOs pulled out, thus cutting an estimated annual $25-30 million in salaries away from the regional economy. The Americans also evacuated 2,500 Iraqi Kurds who had been working for the allied military forces or for American NGOs. The remaining European NGOs, however, largely continued with their work. Obviously, the KDP was anxious for NGOs to stay, and did not present any obstacles to them after their conquest of the PUK strongholds.

The party infighting caused serious collateral damage to the urban infrastructure. Most notably, the main hospital of Arbil, located near a checkpoint that became the site of fierce battles for control, was badly damaged by stray bullets and artillery shelling, and reportedly also suffered pillaging by militiamen. There were also outright attempts at instrumentalizing the population's plight for political or military purposes. Thus, in September 1996, the PUK cut off electricity supplies to Arbil, causing water and sanitation to stop functioning and thus exposing the population to new health hazards. More widespread was the setting up of check points, with the concomitant raising of levies on the transit of individuals and aid supplies, and on occasion even confiscating supplies or forcing the convoys to return.

Although the infighting was primarily motivated by territorial ambitions and by the wish to control the lucrative petrol trade across the border with Turkey, the parties also tried to increase their control over, and profits from, the humanitarian aid flows at large. In a sense, they had an active interest in maintaining the crisis situation, in which they could use their military power for increasing their hold on markets and supply lines and keeping the population weak and dependent. Thus, the domestic anarchy, in combination with the opportunities provided by the international humanitarian interference, encouraged a 'politics of predation', which consists of illegitimate forms of private profit gained through the sale of public goods, and through the extracting of taxes and levies from the (urban) civilian population[15]. Predation in part affected humanitarian supplies: in various places, party militias set up check points and raised levies on goods destined for rival teritorry. But it was not only the parties that profited from the anarchy. Urban warlords, either protected by one of the rival parties or ably

[15] Bozarslan (1996: 113).

exploiting the antagonism between them, could with impunity set up their own roadblocks, confiscate cars and other luxury goods, or demand protection money from local civilians.

The presence of both UN organizations and foreign NGOs provided the local parties with an unprecedented opportunity to pursue their own political gain and economic profit, ignoring or even actively exploiting the fate of the population they claimed to represent. In comparison with the increasing profits to be made from smuggling, the dwindling aid supplies became ever less of a concern to the parties. Nevertheless, they could ill afford to wholly ignore, let alone antagonize, either the local population or the humanitarian organizations. The local parties' actions and attitudes were thus to some extent constrained by the desire to maintain a grip on whatever was left of the aid flow. After noting that neither party could decisively defeat the other, a truce of sorts was reached, and a relatively demarcation line was established in the course of 1997; by this, the conditions for the remaining foreign aid organizations were somewhat improved.

The Iraqi Kurdish parties thus increasingly turned the resources provided by both humanitarian aid and smuggling activities to their own advantage, at the cost of the local population. Over the years, however, few actors have been as cynical in exploiting the population's misery as the Iraqi government. In government-held territory, the rationing system had remained in place until lack of funds forced serious cuts in 1994, but the government shifted the burden of the sanctions to the population through its monetary policies, which caused a hyperinflation and dramatic fall in the exchange rate[16]. Most foodstuffs, and even medicine, were readily available on the local markets, but few people could afford them. By such and other means, the Iraqi government could capitalize on the suffering of the population, whilst largely being freed of responsibility for its fate. The imposition of an internal embargo against the Northern governorates likewise relieved the government from responsibility for the continuation of food rationing for some 20% of its population. It was foreign humanitarian organizations, rather than the local political parties, that took over these responsibilities.

The internal blockade and the subsequent UN purchase of Iraqi petrol for the North encouraged various forms of 'private enterprise': the private companies dominating trade and smuggling, on both sides of the demarcation line, were in fact little more than lucrative front organizations for the personal enrichment of close relatives and good friends of those in power in both the North and in government-held territory. Individual agents with access to party power and military force could openly exploit the crisis

[16] Cf. Graham-Brown 1999: 166.

for the creation and continuation of which they themselves were in part responsible. The international aid effort in the North encouraged such forms of profiteering by its massive injection of hard currency into the regional economy, and at the same time mitigated its worst effects on the civilian population. Indeed, the very presence of foreign aid organizations provided a potential source of considerable private profit; over the years, several billions of dollars must have come to the region in aid. It seems, however, that these aid flows have not so much initiated new socio-economic tendencies as facilitated existing trends, notably privatization, clientelization, and predation. Much of the responsibilty for the welfare system, or what was left of it, thus shifted away from the national and regional authorities to foreign organizations allied with private (though often party-linked) local contractors, who thus reaped considerable profits from the existing humanitarian needs.

6.UNSC Resolution 986: Providing Relief or Reproducing Dependence?

The situation improved somewhat in 1997, largely due to UNSC resolution no. 986, which provided for the sale of limited amounts of crude oil by the Iraqi government. The revenues were to remain under strict UN control and to be used for humanitarian aid to the Iraqi population, but also for damage payments and for the UN arms inspection program. Moreover, out of each billion worth of dollars of revenues, US$ 150 million were to be earmarked for aid to the population of the three governorates under Kurdish control. This mixture of humanitarian and political aspects made the resolution more difficult for the Iraqi government to stomach. For a long time, it refused to accept these conditions on the grounds that they infringed on its national sovereignty. Towards the end of 1995, however, it changed its mind, and an agreement was reached in May 1996. Being in ever more serious financial difficulties, the government had little choice but to accept, if it wished to avoid serious social unrest.

For obvious reasons of short-term gain, the Iraqi government and Kurdish administrators alike treated resolution 986 as little more than a shopping list for relief supplies, and largely neglected potential use for more durable development purposes. Typically, contracts were awarded to private companies, not NGOs; in a sense, the resolution thus furthered the 1980s privatization drive. The Baghdad government may have relinquished control over the economy to a considerable extent, but it aimed at maximizing political influence on the operation. Thus, it demanded that redistribution centers for the North be located in government-controlled territory, and that all citizens receive equal amounts of supplies, regardless of their actual needs. The results of this short-term relief emphasis and instrumentalization

for purposes of political control soon became apparent. When news of the May agreement reached the North, food prices and the foreign exchange rate fell sharply. The local markets were flooded by cheap foreign foodstuffs, which formed a serious threat to the livelihood of local agricultural producers. In other words, the agricultural sector that had only just been rehabilitated with such difficulty was among the first victims of the resolution's implementation. The hard-won successes of the strenuous effort at rural rehabilitation were thus once again put at risk.

By late 1998, the rulers in the North had acquired a new confidence, the new income and labour generated by the implementation of resolution 986 gave the Kurdish parties more leeway to engage in infrastructural projects in their respective territories. A relative political stability had been established by the 1997 truce and the September 1998 Washington agreement. Behind the benign appearance of a welfare state, however, looms a radically new constellation in which power and riches are equally asymmetrically divided.

Conclusions

The international humanitarian involvement in Iraqi Kurdistan has been of a contradictory nature, and has yielded paradoxical results. Despite its proclaimed humanitarian character, the initial phase had patently political motivations. The UN-led operation in Iraq as a whole was meant to counter the disastrous effects of the destruction of the infrastructure during the Gulf War, and to mitigate the effects of the sanctions that had been imposed by the UN itself in August 1990. In the North, the humanitarian effort also had to address the spring 1991 refugee crisis and after October 1991, the internal blockade imposed by Baghdad. Humanitarian intervention ignored the long-term social and economic trends and features of Iraqi Kurdish society, and discovered them only slowly and painfully. Many foreign NGOs became engaged in Iraqi Kurdistan out of a clear sympathy for the Kurdish plight and a genuine desire for stability and democratization in the region; ironically, their efforts unwittingly contributed to the undermining of the elected regional administration in various ways.

The combination of the UN-led relief operation and an allied creation of a safe haven not sanctioned by the UN turned the region into a political and juridical anomaly. Both operations presented themselves as exclusively humanitarian in character, and thus blocked a durable solution of the underlying political problems from the start. The international reluctance to encourage the Iraqi Kurds politically had the effect of blocking long-term economic reconstruction and rehabilitation as a way out of the impasse.

The regional parties were quick to turn this anomalous situation, and the population's distress, to their own advantage. The considerable financial

profits and the concomitant political leverage that could be gained from the aid effort proved too great a temptation for the local political leaders.

The Iraqi government was unhappy about the infringement on its sovereignty, but exploited the political and economic opportunities it provided. The international action of war and sanctions against Iraq has masked the radical economic transformation of the country and its concomitant social disruption. The subsequent humanitarian effort has mitigated its worst effects, and in fact encouraged its continuation, as it gave the Iraqi government the opportunity to blame any suffering on the population's part on the sanctions regime rather than on its own policies.

The international humanitarian effort has in effect taken much of the responsibility for the local population's well-being off the shoulders of both the Iraqi government and the Kurdish parties ruling in the North. The government, notably, was quite explicit in its conviction that the implementation of resolution 986 was to replace, rather than to supplement, the existing distribution system. It discontinued its own rationing system, and broadcast the message that henceforth, the UN would be responsible for supplying the population with foodstuffs and medicine. The Kurdish parties have not been quite as vocal, but their behavior has betrayed a similar attitude.

In other words, a form of privatization has been made possible and even encouraged by the humanitarian effort; this privatization might less euphemistically be characterized as predation. The Iraqi state elite soon gave up its traditional wish to maintain full control over the economy, and appears to have quite consciously delegated responsibility for the population's well-being to both private and transnational agencies; in part, this is a reflection of worldwide trends of economic privatization and an increasing role for NGOs, which reduces the state's grasp on economic developments. On both sides of the demarcation line, local agents backed by their own or their parties' coercive apparatus, have actually turned the plight of the population at large to their advantage. The resulting local economy might consequently be characterized as a kind of extremist neoliberalism: what remains of the state is largely subordinated to private and party-linked interests, and the responsibility for public health and welfare has been transferred from the state to the humanitarian protection belt of the transnational economy.

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