

IRAQ'S RESILIENT MINORITY

Shaped by persecution, tribal strife and an unforgiving landscape, Iraq's Kurds have put their dream of independence on hold for now **BY ANDREW COCKBURN**

IN THE SAVAGE HEAT of summer on the Mesopotamian plain, where the temperature regularly tops 110 degrees, Baghdadis crave the cool mountains and valleys of Kurdish Iraq, where the wild landscape climbs up to the rugged borders of Iran and Turkey. Even amid this dramatic scenery, the rocky gorge of Gali Ali Beg stands out as a spectacular natural wonder, and it was there one day last August that I encountered Hamid, an engineer from Baghdad, happily snapping photographs of his family against the backdrop of a thundering waterfall.

Hamid had just arrived with his wife, sister, brother-in-law and four children. By his account, the dangerous nine-hour drive from Baghdad—much of the ongoing Iraq War is fought on the highways—had been well worth it. Excitedly, he reeled off a long list of Kurdish beauty spots he planned to visit before heading home.

Given that Kurds have vivid memories of genocidal onslaughts by Saddam Hussein and his Baath Party henchmen, and are currently wary of attacks by Arab Sunni insurgents, I was surprised to see Hamid here. Was he nervous? Were the Kurdish people friendly? The 30-year-old Hamid, who earns a prosperous wage working for a major American corporation in Baghdad, looked puzzled. “Why not?” he replied, “it’s all the same country. It’s all Iraq.”

“They still don’t get it,” hissed a Kurdish friend as we walked past a line of cars with Baghdad plates in a parking

lot. “They still think they own us.”

Kurds like to tell people that they are the largest nation in the world without a state of their own. There are roughly 25 million of them, predominantly non-Arab Muslims practicing a traditionally tolerant variant of Islam. Most live in the region where Iraq, Turkey and Iran meet. They claim to be an ancient people, resident in the area for thousands of years, an assertion not necessarily accepted by all scholars. Until the 20th century, they were largely left to themselves by their Persian and Ottoman rulers.

As nationalism spread across the Middle East, however, Kurds, too, began to proclaim a common bond as a nation, even though they remained riven by tribal feuds and divisions. The British, after defeating the Ottomans in World War I, briefly considered the creation of an independent Kurdish state. Instead, in 1921, Great Britain opted to lump what was called southern Kurdistan into the newly minted Iraqi state, ruled by Arabs in Baghdad. Successive Iraqi governments broke agreements to respect the Kurds’ separate identity, discouraging, for example, the teaching of Kurdish in schools. The Kurds protested and periodically rebelled, but always went down to defeat. In the 1980s, Saddam Hussein sought to solve the Kurdish problem by eliminating them in vast numbers; as many as 200,000 died on his orders, often in chemical weapons attacks. Thousands of villages were destroyed. Survivors who had lived by farming were herded into cities where they subsisted on government handouts.

Today, however, Iraqi Kurdistan appears in shining contrast to the lethal anarchy of occupied Iraq. Kurds provide their own security and, with some bloody exceptions, have deflected the strife raging around them. The economy is

comparatively prosperous. Exiles who escaped to the West are returning to invest and make a living, as are Christian Iraqis now fleeing the embattled cities to the south. The electricity works most of the time (still a distant dream in Baghdad). Iraqi Kurds can now celebrate the outward symbols of independent statehood, from flags to national anthems. The agreement they have negotiated with the groups that dominate the rest of the country allows them to run their own affairs in return for remaining part of a federated Iraq. As the slogan of Kurdistan Airlines proclaims: "Finally a dream comes true." Yet despite these hopeful signs, Kurds are still at the mercy of unfriendly neighbors who will not even let the tiny Kurdish airline service land in their countries. And the past rivalries that so plagued Kurdistan have not gone away. Despite outward appearances, the Kurds remain very much divided.

But at least Saddam has gone. "My age is 65 years, and in my life I have witnessed this village destroyed and burned four times," a Kurdish farmer named Haji Wagid announced to me outside his very modest stone house, in the village of Halawa, tucked away in a mountain valley at the southern end of the Zagros range. "The first time was in 1963, the last time was in 1986." As his wife sorted sunflower seeds in the shade of a mulberry tree, he explained how after the last onslaught, the whole area had been declared a closed military zone. "Four people were taken away, and to this day we do not know what happened to them," said a neighbor who had sauntered over from his house to invite me for tea and watermelon, "and they killed so many livestock." The villagers were herded off to the city of Irbil, a few hours away on the dusty plain, where it would be easier for authorities to keep an eye on them.

Most of the outside world learned of the Kurdish predicament only in March 1991. Following Saddam's defeat in the Gulf War, the Kurds launched a revolt throughout Kurdistan, briefly securing most of the territory, only to flee in terror when the Iraqi army counterattacked. Suddenly, more than a million men, women and children poured across the Turkish and Iranian frontiers and onto the world's TV screens. The United States, backed by the United Nations and pressured by public opinion, forced Saddam to withdraw from much of Kurdistan. Refugees returned to live more or less independently under the protection of allied fighter jets, which patrolled a newly established "no-fly" zone over Kurdistan. When U.S. ground forces invaded Iraq in 2003, the Kurds were eager to assist in the destruction of their nemesis, contributing troops and providing territory as a staging ground for the assault. The United States has hardly been consistent in its dealings with Kurds, however. Having cheered resistance to Saddam, the United States now discourages all manifestations of Kurdish independence—to preserve Iraqi unity and to avoid offending America's allies in Turkey. Kurds complain that the United States takes them for granted.

I visited Kurdistan for the first time shortly after the Iraqi

withdrawal of 1991, driving across the bridge over the Habur River that marks the major crossing at the Turkish border. The former Iraqi immigration and customs post was deserted, and the ubiquitous official portraits of Saddam had in every case been destroyed or defaced. Blackened swaths marked where entire villages had been wiped off the face of the earth. There was no electricity, hardly any traffic and precious little food, but the atmosphere was one of amazed and euphoric relief. Everywhere there were cheerful *peshmerga*, Kurdish fighters with AK-47 rifles and their distinctive baggy pants and turbans. Sometimes whole groups burst into song as they marched through the devastated countryside.

Fourteen years later, the Kurdish end of the Habur Bridge has sprouted a crowded passport control office, complete with flag, a "Welcome to Kurdistan" sign and a bureaucracy demanding proof of Iraqi accident insurance coverage. The guards have abandoned their dashing traditional garb in favor of drab camouflage fatigues. Almost everyone carries a cellphone, and the smooth highway, framed by rich wheat fields on either side, runs thick with traffic.

Approaching Hawler, to use the Kurdish name for Irbil, capital of the Kurdish region, the traffic grew heavier, and eventually halted in an impenetrable jam. In the gathering dusk, firelight flickered all along the mountainside, for it was Friday night and the city folk had streamed out of town for family barbecues.

At the time, Kurdish politicians in Baghdad were negotiating the new Iraqi constitution, one that they hope will guarantee them control of Kurdish affairs. Most important, the Kurdish leaders want most of the revenues from any new oil fields struck in their territory, calculating that if they have an independent income, they will truly be free. Until then, they must rely on money from Baghdad to run the Kurdish Regional Government, which is supposed to get about \$4 billion a year, 17 percent of Iraq's national revenues. But Kurdish officials grumble that Baghdad always shortchanges them, passing along a fraction of the amount due. "It's not a favor they're doing us by sending money," a minister complained to me. "We have the right. They should be grateful that we are staying in Iraq."

Meanwhile, because most of Iraqi Kurdistan has been effectively autonomous since 1991, young people cannot remember ever living under anything but Kurdish authority. To them, the horrors of the past are the stuff of legend.

"What happened to your families when the Baathists were here?" I asked a classroom of teenagers in Sulaimaniyah, Kurdistan's second-largest city. A few hands rose. "My father was a nationalist, and he was put in prison," said a boy named Darya. Two students had visited Kirkuk while it was still controlled by the Baathists and had been harassed and kicked by police. Silwan, sitting at the next desk, has a friend whose family was showered with chemical weapons by the Iraqi air force. "His brothers and sisters died." Berava, three rows back, had had a brother imprisoned.

"How many of you think Kurdistan should be an inde-

pendent country?" I asked.

All of the 13 young people raised their hands.

Only three of them know any Arabic, once a required subject in school. Since 1991 a generation of students has graduated speaking only Kurdish. "That is why," one Kurd remarked to me, "there is no going back."

Each member of the class had paid \$52 for an introductory course in English, as offered in the brightly painted premises of the Power Institute for English Language. The school itself, founded in July 2005 by Raggaz, a young Kurd who had grown up in the London suburb of Ealing, is something of an advertisement for the new Kurdistan. Following the 2003 war, Raggaz returned to Sulaimaniyah, the hometown he barely remembered, and saw that Kurdish youths were eager to learn English. He borrowed \$12,500 from an uncle, set up the new school and was turning a profit after just three months.

Despite the billions pledged for the reconstruction of Baghdad, all of the cranes visible on that city's skyline are rusting memorials of Saddam's time. The major cities of Kurdistan, by contrast, feature forests of cranes towering over construction sites. Part of this prosperity can be accounted for by money from Baghdad—even the central government's parsimonious contribution helps some. In addition, Kurdistan's comparative peace has attracted investors from abroad and from Arab Iraq. Driving out of Sulaimaniyah early one morning, I passed a long line of laborers toiling at road repairs in 100-degree heat. "Arabs, bused in from Mosul," explained a businessman. "There's 100 percent employment in Sulaimaniyah. You have to wait ages for a Kurdish worker, and Arabs are 40 percent cheaper anyway."

But they're not welcome everywhere. "We don't employ any Arabs, as a security measure," said another returned exile, named Hunar. A year after arriving home from Sweden, he is security director for 77G, the most successful manufacturer in Kurdistan. Tucked away on the outskirts of Irbil, the company claims to make every one of the huge free-standing concrete slabs designed to deflect the blast from the heaviest suicide car bomb or rocket. The company's structures, rising up to 12 feet, have become the symbol of the new Iraq, where any building of consequence is encircled by 77G's long gray walls—including the American Embassy in Baghdad, according to the company. The bunker monopoly is very profitable. Desperate customers have paid as much as \$700 per 12-foot-long section—producing roughly 30 percent profit for an enterprise operated by Kurds.

"When Arabs apply to work here, we can't do a detailed background check, so we don't employ them," Hunar explained offhandedly. "It's not discrimination; it's just that we don't trust them. Why? We have to fight our way through to make deliveries in Baghdad—we are always under attack. Arabs have killed six of our guys—but we killed *more!*"

Recounting a typically Kurdish life story of upheaval, per-

secution and exile, Hunar insisted that the Kurds have no future as part of the Iraqi nation. Semi-seriously, he posited the notion of fencing all of Kurdistan with 77G products: "We could do it. We could seal off all our borders."

Such overconfidence may be dangerous, says David McDowall, a scholar of Kurdish history. "The Kurds should remember that Washington may come and go, but Baghdad is there forever. One day Baghdad will be strong again, and that could lead to a day of reckoning."

Pending that, the Kurds face persistent problems on their borders. "It's hard for our people to understand the difficulties we face," says Falah Mustafa Bakir, minister of state in the Kurdish Regional Government. "None of our neighbors are happy with a strong Kurdistan. When the foreign ministers of Turkey, Iran and Syria, who in reality hate each other, get together, at least they can agree about the 'problem' of Kurdistan. For the Turks, the Kurdistan at the other end of the Habur Bridge does not exist, even though they are looking at it. That's why it's impossible for Kurdistan Airways to get permission to fly to Istanbul."

Turkish attitudes toward Kurdistan are molded by perennial distrust of its own 14 million Kurds, who constitute 20 percent of the population. Irked by discrimination, the Turkish Kurds fought a brutal guerrilla war against Turkey in the 1980s and '90s. Fighting flared up again this year.

A proudly independent Kurdistan just across their border is anathema to the Turks, an attitude most bluntly expressed in the line of fuel tankers stretching back as far as 20 miles into Turkey from the Habur River crossing. They are carrying the gasoline much needed in Kurdistan, which is rich in oil but short on refining capacity. But the Turks feel little inclination to speed the flow. Kurds must wait for their fuel while hapless drivers sleep in their trucks for days or even weeks. "Every now and then the price of gas soars here, because the Turks feel like tightening the screws a little bit by slowing border traffic further," one businessman told me. "Then you see people lining up for 24 hours to get gas, sleeping in their cars."

There is little prospect that Kurdish identity will be subsumed by allegiance to any other nation. "There is more of Kurdistan in Iran," asserted Moussa, whom I encountered in Tawela, a remote mountain village near the Iranian border. About the same number of Kurds—five million—live in Iraq and Iran each. Moussa's sentiment was firmly endorsed by the crowd gathered in the cobbled street.

"Should all Kurds be together as one country?" I asked.

"Yes," came the thunderous reply from the group gathered around me. "It *bas* to be."

Meantime, the villagers get by as they always have, farming, smuggling and taking jobs with the police.

Kurds, scattered across international borders, have traditionally been well positioned for smuggling. In northeastern Iraq, where the landscape is dominated by soaring mountainsides dotted with the black tents of nomadic shepherds, I encountered an unattended horse trotting along with a

bulging pack strapped to its back. This was one of the *aeistri zirag*, or “clever horses,” trained to travel alone across the frontier with loads of contraband, such as alcohol, into Iran.

From 1991 to 2003, when Iraqi Kurdistan offered a way around the U.N. trade embargo, a good smuggler-horse was worth as much as a car. At that time, the roads leading to Habur were slick with oil leaking from the tanks on thousands of trucks smuggling crude to Turkey. Kurds at the Habur River checkpoint levied millions of dollars in fees each month. Happy to see the Kurds support themselves, Western powers winked at this flagrant sanction-busting.

In addition, anyone with good connections to powerful Kurds and the ruling elite in Baghdad made huge amounts of money smuggling such basic commodities as cigarettes from Turkey shipped across Kurdish territory to Baghdad. These fortunes may account for much of the frenetic construction activity around Kurdish cities.

Tribal alliances still bring money and power to their adherents. The Barzani clan, headed by Massoud Barzani, dominates the Kurdistan Democratic Party, or KDP. The Patriotic Union of Kurdistan, or PUK, is led by an energetic intellectual named Jalal Talabani. The two groups fought side by side in the 1991 uprising that followed Saddam’s defeat in the Gulf War. Then both Kurdish factions came home to rule under the shelter of American air power in the respective areas they controlled, Barzani in the northwestern corner of Iraqi Kurdistan, Talabani to the east.

Rivalry turned to civil war in 1994, over land disputes and, some say, spoils from oil smuggling. The fighting raged on and off through the summer of 1996, when Talabani enlisted military support from Iran and soon had Barzani on the ropes. Desperate, Barzani made a deal with the devil himself—Saddam Hussein—who sent Talabani’s forces reeling.

In 1998, the U.S. government persuaded the two parties to sign a peace agreement. They cooperated—with each other and with the United States—through the 2003 war and the negotiations on the Iraqi constitution. Barzani agreed that Talabani could become president of Iraq. Meanwhile, Barzani was given authority as president of the Kurdish Regional Government.

The two sides no longer shoot it out, though there have been scattered and unpublicized armed clashes as recently as this past February. But divisions remain deep and persistent. The city of Irbil is festooned exclusively with portraits of the Barzani family, while portraits of Talabani watch over the streets of Sulaimaniyah, the PUK capital. Barzani’s Irbil is somewhat dour, with the few women visible on the streets almost invariably clad in enveloping black *abayas*. Talabani’s Sulaimaniyah appears more vibrant, with a lively literary and musical scene and some of its women in Western fashions.

“Sulaimaniyah is the cultural heart of Kurdistan,” said Asos Hardi, the crusading editor of *Hawlati*, a weekly newspaper based in the city. “It’s relatively new, founded only 200 years ago. Irbil is 9,000 years old, and very traditional. No one has ever seen Barzani’s wife. Talabani’s wife is very active and visible, the daughter of a famous poet.”

Like many Kurds, Hardi, known to his youthful staff as “the old man,” despite being only 42, shares the common distrust of the Arab Iraqis who ruled here for so long. “If we can live in this country with proper rights, why not?” he said. “But who can guarantee our future?”

Founded in 2000, Hardi’s muckraking journal, whose name means citizen, enjoys the largest circulation of any Kurdish paper. It is clearly doing its job; each of Kurdistan’s major political parties has, from time to time, boycotted the paper, each party charging that it is financed by the other’s secret police. Hardi conceded that there have never been any physical threats against him or his staff. Nevertheless, he is critical of Kurdistan’s current rulers.


“Since 2003 they’ve been forced to show unity vis-à-vis Baghdad,” he remarked, “but there’s no real practicable agreement. Although they all talk about democracy, no party accepts being number two for a while.”

To maintain an uneasy peace, the two parties have carved up their territory. So Kurdistan has two prime ministers, two ministers of finance, interior, justice, agriculture and so on down the line. They have two chiefs of peshmerga, two secret police forces—even two cellphone companies. Travelers passing from the land of the KDP to the land of the PUK mark their passage by tugging out their cellphones and changing the memory cards, an irritating but revealing fact of life in the new Kurdistan. Asia Cell, which covers PUK territory, was licensed in 2003 by authorities in Baghdad to serve northern Iraq. This arrangement cut little ice in Irbil, where local officials refused to switch from Korek Telecom, a monopoly that existed before the fall of Saddam.

The dominant Barzani family has blessed other entrepreneurs in its part of Iraq, such as the fast-expanding Ster Group. Motorists entering Iraq at the Habur River crossing are required to buy an accident policy from Ster’s insurance subsidiary—the fee ranges from \$5 to \$80, depending on who is collecting the money or talking about the practice. Most travelers who make it to Irbil stay in a shiny high-rise hotel owned principally by the Ster Group. Salah Awla, Ster’s fast-talking general manager, gave me a summary of the group’s impressive penetration of local business, starting with the new hotel where we were chatting. “We own 60 percent,” he said, going on to describe his company’s interest in oil wells, shopping centers, gas stations, bottling plants and tourist sites. There seemed no part of the economy immune from Ster’s influence—including the lucrative realm of government contracts. “We lend more than \$10 million to each ministry,” Awla explained cheerfully, “for ‘goodwill.’ In this way the minister has to give us projects.” But he left little doubt about a bright economic future for Kurdistan, especially for those with the right contacts.

Meanwhile, in a fold in the mountains, the village of Halawa, destroyed four times since 1963, has been once more rebuilt. It probably does not look that different now, apart from the smart little mosque financed by a Saudi charity and a school built by UNICEF. The Kurdish administration, said

locals, had not offered any help, but even so, one villager mused: “It would be better if Kurdistan were independent. Then everything will be under our control.”

On the long drive back to Turkey, I had to make wide detours to avoid cities like Mosul where the Iraq War laps at Kurdish borders. And at the Turkish border, the line of immobile trucks and tankers was as long as ever. 

Briefing

We live in a tough neighborhood, says a war-weary official in the Kurdish Regional Government of Iraq. Scattered across the Middle East, some 25 million Kurds live as minorities in Turkey, Iraq, Iran, Syria and neighboring countries (shaded pink). Most are non-Arab Muslims who speak a distinctive Indo-European language with Persian roots. Although separated by national boundaries and internal bickering, few Kurds can forget the cycles of rebellion and defeat that have defined their long history. Arabs first conquered Kurdish lands in the seventh century. Since then the Kurdish story has been written in blood and disappointment, with control of their homelands changing hands no less than seven times. Thousands of Kurds died when they rebelled at Turkish and Iranian rule in the 1920s and 30s. As many as 200,000 Iraqi Kurds died in the late 1980s when Saddam Hussein cracked down on them. They achieved a respite in the early 1990s, when a U.S.-backed no-fly zone kept Saddam from renewing his assaults. Kurds were happy to help topple their old nemesis and his Baathist regime as the United States and allies invaded Iraq in 2003.