

ABSTRACT

Iraqi Kurds: Road to Genocide

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The Kurds of northern Iraq have long been an important and troublesome issue for Iraq's government. For much of the 20th century the Kurds rebelled against Iraq in efforts to gain autonomy. These rebellions were almost always met with harsh oppression by Iraq's army. Throughout the 1960s and 1970s the Kurdish rebellions were met with particular brutality. The Iran-Iraq War, which lasted from 1980-1988, served to bring the Kurdish issue to the forefront for Iraq and Saddam Hussein, as Iraq's Kurdish groups worked together and alongside Iranian troops in rebellion against Saddam. Iraq responded to this rebellion with a brutal counter-insurgency campaign, which continued Iraq's precedent for oppression. However, the magnitude and violence of this campaign were drastically increased, surpassing any previous oppression and leading to genocide. This genocide 1987-1988 left 200,000 Kurds dead, destroyed 4,000 villages, and displaced 2,000,000 Kurds from their homes.

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IRAQI KURDS: ROAD TO GENOCIDE

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CHAPTER ONE

Introduction

The genocide of Iraqi Kurds in 1987-1988 was ostensibly initiated as a campaign against rebellious Kurdish militias of northern Iraq, as punishment for cooperation with Iran during the Iran-Iraq war. Though this response had as its immediate trigger the Iraqi Kurdistan Front, which was a coalition of Iraqi Kurdish factions for the purpose of fighting the regime in Baghdad, this was a pretext for the government of Iraq to initiate a solution to the political and military problems the Kurds had caused them for decades. What unfolded during the Anfal campaign only loosely resembles a counter-insurgency campaign. Utilizing a term in the eighth chapter of the Koran referring to legal spoils of war, Saddam Hussein demonstrated that his intent was never to combat a rebellion but to destroy and to plunder. This was the officially sanctioned mass murder in 1987-1988 of roughly 200,000 civilian Kurds largely by chemical means, with as many as 2,000,000 more displaced in forced exportation. The purpose was to crush the Kurdish insurrection once and for all by destroying the Kurdish guerilla units and the villages and people who supported them.

Examining the evolution of events contributing to and leading toward this genocide, especially in light of what unfolded during the genocide itself, it becomes clear that the oppression and brutality inflicted on the Kurds in 1987-1988 was primarily a continuation and fulfillment of precedent for Iraq's treatment of the Kurds. Though it was of far greater magnitude than Iraq's previous offensives against the Kurds, this

genocide was a continuation of the tradition and trend of Iraq's response to Kurdish nationalism, especially under the Ba'ath regime and Saddam Hussein's influence from 1968-1988.

CHAPTER TWO

Organization and Oppression of Kurdish Nationalism

Introduction

Before examining the history of the Kurds in Iraq during the Iran-Iraq War and the Anfal Campaign, it is important to understand the background of the Kurds as a people and a basic history of the Kurds in Iraq during the 20th century. The aim of this chapter is to provide background information on the Kurds and to arrive at a firm understanding of their status in Iraq by 1979, having highlighted some of the important facets of the Kurdish nationalist movement in Iraq, particularly concerning leadership and organization. Because they had been oppressed historically and recently, Iraq's Kurds developed over the course of the 20th century a series of successful leaders, structured opposition groups, well-organized peshmerga militia, and strong efforts at negotiation with the government of Iraq. Despite the limited aims of their cause, the increased organization of their movement ultimately led to marginalization, oppression, and disappointment.

The Kurds

Population, Geography, Terrain, and Resources

Based on best estimations the Kurds today number between 24-27 million in the Middle East, with roughly half that number living in Turkey, where they constitute around 20 percent of the population. In Iraq there are 4.2 million Kurds, or 23 percent of

the population. Kurds in Iran constitute about 10 percent of the population, roughly 6 million people. Roughly one million Kurds live in Syria, while there are also several hundred thousand living in former Soviet republics and in central Europe.¹ Determining the Kurdish population in a region that stretches across Turkey, Iran, Iraq, Syria, and Armenia is difficult; each of those nations favors a low estimation of the Kurdish population in order to minimize the political power they are granted. Pro-Kurd estimators do exactly the opposite.

Geographically, the Kurds live in a region known as Kurdistan, though the exact borders of Kurdistan are unofficial. Determined by areas in which Kurds predominate, this mountainous terrain spreads from Eastern and Southeastern Turkey, through the northeastern tip of Syria, across the plains and low mountains of Northern Iraq, and to a long strip of Western Iran. The majority of this region is covered in rocky, mountainous, and oftentimes barren terrain, though parts of Turkish and especially Iraqi Kurdistan are fertile plains.² To be sure, Kurdish people live all across the Middle East, especially in the large cities of Turkey, Iraq, and Iran, but the land Kurds claim as their own is distinctly difficult and remote. With mountain peaks reaching as high as 15,000 feet and vast plateaus stretching across much of Eastern Turkey, Kurdistan has for centuries acted as both a natural barrier to invading forces and as a refuge for Kurdish militias and bandits. This difficult terrain has worked to isolate the Kurds through the centuries and

¹ David McDowall, *A Modern History of the Kurds* (London: I.B. Tauris, 1996), 3-4.

² Gerard Chaliand, ed., *A People Without a Country: the Kurds and Kurdistan* (New York: Olive Branch Press, 1993), 4.

help them maintain a distinct identity. Much of the region was once heavily forested, but Kurdistan was stripped of her resources over the course of the past several centuries as various ruling countries harvested timber to support their armies.



Map of Kurdistan

Despite its treacherous terrain, Kurdistan is well equipped to operate as an independent economy. The plains regions offer rich agricultural ground for producing wheat, barley, lentils, cotton, tobacco, and livestock; the headwaters of the Tigris and Euphrates rivers are in Kurdistan.³ Furthermore, Kurdistan is well-positioned as the

³ Ibid, 52.

primary land connection between Europe and the Middle East, with road and rail links across the region. Slightly more mountainous regions have reserves of chrome, copper, iron, and coal, not to mention the massive oil reserves in Turkey and Northern Iraq. The importance of Kurdistan's oil reserves cannot be overstated; it is estimated that the oil fields around the Iraqi city of Kirkuk are rich enough to support Kurdistan on their own.⁴

Much of this region is not inhabited solely by Kurds, however. The boundaries of Kurdistan have shifted considerably throughout the centuries, based on the power of Kurdish tribes and the might of various ruling nations. Especially in the lowland regions, Kurds live among Arabs and Turks, while Iraqi Kurds live alongside Turkoman and other minority ethnic populations. The important Iraqi Kurdish cities of Kirkuk and Arbil were not always predominantly Kurdish; they were both traditionally Kurdish minority cities taken in as Iraqi Kurds migrated to cities in the 20th century.⁵

Origins and History

The origin of the Kurds is unclear. Among the Kurdish people, myths abound about “a lost tribe being driven into the mountains, either fleeing a child-eating giant or from King Solomon's harem after being sired there by djinns.”⁶ Most scholars trace the Kurds back to Indo-European tribes who moved across Iran into the mountains perhaps 4,000 years ago. This Indo-European group likely intermixed with the local tribes over

⁴ McDowall, *A Modern History of the Kurds*, 6.

⁵ Bulloch and Morris, *No Friends but the Mountains: the Tragic History of the Kurds*, 54.

⁶ Quil Lawrence, *Invisible Nation: How the Kurds' Quest for Statehood is Shaping Iraq and the Middle East* (New York: Walker and Company, 2008), 11.

the centuries to develop a unique Kurdish people. For years the official Turkish government name was to call them “mountain Turks,” a label the Kurds understandably detested. That their origins are unclear and mysterious seems appropriate for the Kurds. A popular descriptor attached to the Kurds is “no friends but the mountains,” which fits perfectly with their origination legends.

Regardless of the unknowns surrounding their origin, the Kurds are clearly an ancient people with an established homeland. Kurdistan was often at the center of regional military conflicts between the various dynasties that surrounded them, whether Roman, Greek, or Persian. The Kurdish tribes were well-known for abilities in war, as they were harnessed for service in the Roman, Byzantine, Sassanid, and Arab Islamic armies throughout the centuries.⁷ The 10th century marked the advent of autonomous and independent Kurdish states for the first time in their history, as the decline of the Arab dynasties allowed Kurdish leaders to fill the void. Kurdistan was often the battlefield in wars between Byzantine and Seljuk forces during the 11th century, which soon gave way to the Crusades of the 11th through 13th centuries.⁸ Though the Kurds were never the dominant force as empires from across Europe and the Middle East clashed, Kurdish leaders and armies often played crucial roles in holding cities and waging war against invaders. Most notable among Kurdish warriors was the famous general Saladin, one of the most successful and influential military leaders in the history of the Middle East. Saladin has received such high acclaim that Arab histories have welcomed him, a Kurd,

⁷ Bulloch and Morris, *No Friends but the Mountains: the Tragic History of the Kurds*, 60.

⁸ Ibid, 64.

as one of their own, either ignoring or forgetting his identity.⁹ By the 16th century Kurdistan had been largely incorporated into the Ottoman Empire, which utilized Kurdish leaders as vassals to control mountainous regions. Again, Kurdistan served as a battleground between competing empires, this time Ottoman and Safavid.¹⁰ The majority of Kurdistan would remain under Ottoman rule through the 20th century.

Culture: Language, Religion, and Societal Organization

One aspect of the Kurds that emphasizes their distinct identity from their neighbors is the Kurdish language, which is similar to Persian and loosely related to Sanskrit.¹¹ There are, however, two separate dialects that separate the Kurds. Kurmanji, which is spoken by most of the northern Kurds, is nearly incomprehensible to southern Kurds, who speak Surani. These two dialects are nearly separate languages entirely, with major differences grammatically despite vocabulary similarities. Various tribal regions within Kurdistan speak distinct variations of these dialects.¹²

Sunni Islam is the predominant religion of the Kurds, at over 75 percent of the population.¹³ The only other large religious group among the Kurds is a Shi'ite group in Iranian Kurdistan. Various northern groups practice Alevi beliefs, which are akin to Shi'i

⁹ Ibid, 65.

¹⁰ McDowall, *A Modern History of the Kurds*, 30.

¹¹ Bulloch and Morris, *No Friends but the Mountains: the Tragic History of the Kurds*, 54.

¹² McDowall, *A Modern History of the Kurds*, 10.

¹³ Bulloch and Morris, *No Friends but the Mountains: the Tragic History of the Kurds*, 54.

Islam. Likewise certain southern Kurdish groups practice Ahl-i Haqq, based on ancient Zoroastrian beliefs. The Yazidis are a Kurmanji-speaking religious group of northern Iraq with beliefs stemming from an amalgam of Jewish, Christian, Muslim, and Manichaean beliefs. For all of these religious sects, tribal affiliation and organization is a determining factor. There are also among the Kurds and in Kurdish majority areas certain groups of Sufis, Christian Assyrians and Christian Armenians.¹⁴

One dominant facet of Kurdish society is tribalism, a loose term that refers to various groups within Kurdistan that vary in terms of structure, organization, size, language, religion, and economy. These tribes are bound together by ideas of shared ancestry as well as a territorial identity from occupying the same villages and pasturages for generations. In Iraq, tribes of distinct valley regions often speak slightly different dialects of Surani Kurdish, which reinforces their tribal differences; by and large, however, Iraq's Kurds speak a common Surani dialect of Kurdish.¹⁵ Within this context there are also families and confederations of tribes that tie various tribal groups and regions together. Tribal chieftains and sheikhs at various levels of authority are necessary in this culture to arbitrate and mediate between groups. There has always been conflict between Kurdish tribalism, tied to ideas of kinship and territorialism, and the idea of an individual or organization attempting to monopolize power over the tribes and people.

¹⁴ McDowall, *A Modern History of the Kurds*, 10-12.

¹⁵ Ibid, 10.

This has played out through the years as the Kurds have resisted both oppression by the state and by potentially unifying Kurdish leadership.¹⁶

One issue resulting from tribal tensions is pro-government Kurds. For most Kurdish tribesmen, traditional nationalism holds little influence. As such, various tribal groups of Kurds will fight in the government army against other Kurds. By and large, this is not seen as a betrayal; rather the government is a legitimate ally against opposing tribes.¹⁷

Kurdish History in Iraq

British Rule of Iraq

Since the 16th century, the majority of Kurdistan had been under the control of the Ottoman Empire, but the turn of the 20th century saw the collapse of Ottoman power. The fall of the once-great Ottoman Empire was all but cemented by their defeat in World War One. Though the Republic of Turkey emerged after the war, a large share of the former empire fell to the victorious Allied forces of the British and French. A large share of Kurdistan was included in that territory, primarily under British control.

World War One devastated the Kurdish male population, as hundreds of thousands of Kurdish troops fought alongside Turkish troops, with as many as 800,000 Kurds killed

¹⁶ Edgar O'Ballance, *The Kurdish Struggle: 1920-94* (New York: St. Martin's Press, Inc., 1996), 3-4.

¹⁷ McDowall, *A Modern History of the Kurds*, 10.

in the war and reports of mass deportations of dissidents.¹⁸ With their ranks so depleted, Kurdish leaders were left divided on whether to side with the British, Turkish nationalists under Ataturk, or the Persians.

In December of 1918 the British appointed Kurdish tribal chieftain Shaykh Mahmud Barzinji as the leader of the Mosul vinyalet (Iraqi Kurdistan) in the newly-created British Mandate of Iraq. Over the next two years relations between Shaykh Mahmud and British leadership deteriorated while Shaykh Mahmud's tribal ambitions grew, culminating in a failed rebellion in 1919 and another in 1923.¹⁹ Though Shaykh Mahmud's insurgencies were for the Kurdish nationalist cause, as he fought to unite disparate Kurdish groups against their British rulers, this was a chance at Kurdish autonomy in Iraq muddled and ultimately lost because of conflict between tribalism and unifying nationalism.²⁰

In 1920 Ottoman leadership agreed to a treaty with the Allies, and one of the stipulations of this treaty, the Treaty of Sevres, was to allow for the creation of an independent state from eastern Anatolian Kurdistan, with options for the potential incorporation of British-held Kurdistan as well.²¹ In the sort of disappointment typical to Kurdish history, the Treaty of Sevres was never ratified as the Ottoman Empire officially

¹⁸ Lawrence, *Invisible Nation: How the Kurds' Quest for Statehood is Shaping Iraq and the Middle East*, 12.

¹⁹ Wadie Jwaideh, *Kurdish National Movement: Its Origins and Development* (Syracuse, New York: Syracuse University Press, 2006), 181.

²⁰ Bulloch and Morris, *No Friends but the Mountains: the Tragic History of the Kurds*, 96.

²¹ Jwaideh, *Kurdish National Movement: Its Origins and Development*, 131.

collapsed and was replaced by Turkish nationalists headed by Mustafa Kemal Ataturk, who refused to recognize any of the agreements of the former Ottoman Empire.²² The Treaty of Lausanne, which emerged in the place of the Treaty of Sevres, completely abandoned the idea of creating an independent Kurdish state. Instead, Kurdistan was to be incorporated into the new states of Turkey and Iraq.²³

As such, the state of Iraq was created 1921, with the Kurdish Mosul region a vital component of the new state, which thrust together Arab Shiites, Arab Sunnis, and Kurds.²⁴ The British imposed King Faisal I as the new ruler of Iraq, creating an official leadership structure by which they could control Iraq without having to directly administer the state.²⁵

Monarchy

The Kurds, who were once hopeful of an independent Kurdish state under the Treaty of Sevres, were now subjected under an Arab-dominated state.²⁶ Though Iraq was now Faisal's kingdom, British influence was still the leading power in the state. Iraq was

²² Bulloch and Morris, *No Friends but the Mountains: the Tragic History of the Kurds*, 91.

²³ Jwaideh, *Kurdish National Movement: Its Origins and Development*, 195.

²⁴ Lawrence, *Invisible Nation: How the Kurds' Quest for Statehood is Shaping Iraq and the Middle East*, 13.

²⁵ Ibid, 15.

²⁶ Ibid, 14.

essentially an imperial colony.²⁷ The 1920s saw various groups competing for power in the new Iraq. Through the policy of the British administration, and to a lesser extent that of King Faisal, Kurdish traditional tribal landlords were empowered over poorer villagers and given privileged use of funding as a means of maintaining stability in Kurdistan and retaining British influence.²⁸

Iraq officially gained independence in 1932, as British forces pulled out, but King Faisal I died in 1933 and the following twenty-five years of Iraq were plagued by rebellions, coups, and invasions. In a telling statistic, Iraq had 58 different governments from 1921 to 1958.²⁹

Though British influence led to improved infrastructure and education in some areas, the majority of the Iraqi population, including Kurds, remained in desperate poverty; Iraq was 90% illiterate and life expectancy was 26 years. Famine and starvation plagued Iraqi Kurdistan, which led to Kurdish rebellions in 1931 and 1943 under the leadership of tribal chieftain Mullah Mustafa Barzani. These rebellions were waged by Kurdish peshmerga militia, groups of warriors largely organized by tribe and numbering as great as 2,000-3,000 per unit. Each wave of rebellion and insurrection was extinguished by the British-backed Iraqi army, which prevented Kurdish forces from successfully holding any territory beyond their mountain strongholds. Kurdish nationalists, including Barzani, were forced to flee to the Soviet Union and Iran in

²⁷ Natali, *The Kurds and the State: Evolving National Identity in Iraq, Turkey, and Iran*, 27.

²⁸ Ibid, 47.

²⁹ Hannibal Travis. *Genocide in the Middle East: the Ottoman Empire, Iraq, and Sudan* (Durham, North Carolina: Carolina Academic Press, 2010), 389.

1945.³⁰ These rebellions, aimed at improving life among the Kurds, ultimately led to a British crackdown and the exile of most of the Kurdish leadership.

The Iraqi Kurdistan Democratic Party (KDP) was formed in 1946 under the leadership of Barzani on the same grounds as the Iranian KDP. Its purpose was to struggle for the right of self-determination for the scattered Kurdish people; its immediate goal was democratization and representation in the governance of Iraqi Kurdistan. Barzani's KDP officially espoused Marxist-Leninist ideology to gain support of the Soviet Union and other communist groups in Iraq, though the Iraqi Communist Party reproached them for their nationalism.³¹ This organization, the first Iraqi Kurdish nationalist group, developed out of necessity in opposition to their oppressors, marking an important step in the development of Kurdish nationalism in Iraq, as the Kurds had moved from tribal associations and ambitions of Shaykh Mahmud to an organized opposition party under Barzani.

1958-1968

When General Abd al Karim Qasim overthrew the monarchy in July of 1958, he ushered in the promise of democratic rule and pledged respect, opportunity, and limited autonomy for the other groups opposing the monarchy, including Mustafa Barzani's Kurdish Democratic Party (KDP). Qasim specifically promised the Kurds a stake in the sovereignty of Iraq. The KDP immediately pledged full support for Qasim and his

³⁰ Ibid, 390.

³¹ McDowall, *A Modern History of the Kurds*, 304.

regime. In a show of good faith Qasim pardoned Barzani, who was allowed to return from exile and welcomed to Baghdad. Qasim allowed certain privileges to Barzani and the Kurds, who now led the KDP from Baghdad, enjoyed a stipend from the government, and received government security; they were hopeful that long-standing tensions would ease and problems could be solved.³² However, without a party of his own, and factions within and without the government, Qasim's actual power was limited and he hoped to play the various groups against each other. Qasim's paranoia soon clashed with Barzani's domination of the Kurdish leadership. Beyond even this clash "lay more complex problems, a conflict between rival nationalisms, between the civilian and military elements in Baghdad, and between tribalism and ideology in Kurdistan," in the words of noted historian David McDowall.³³ An attempt on his life in 1959 pushed Qasim further into paranoia and insecurity; now concerned he had been too soft on the opposition parties, he withdrew all support and privileges for the Kurds, who had an organized structure and leadership for opposing his regime. Qasim soon attempted to play various rival tribes against each other, particularly against Barzani's tribe. Furthermore, the government heavily employed Kurds (known as jash) in its army; in 1962 pro-government Kurdish forces number upwards of 10,000.³⁴ As Barzani and the KDP

³² Bulloch and Morris, *No Friends but the Mountains: the Tragic History of the Kurds*, 120.

³³ McDowall, *A Modern History of the Kurds*, 302.

³⁴ Ibid, 312.

recognized this, full-scale Kurdish uprising against Baghdad began in 1961 and continued off-and-on for the next fourteen years.³⁵

The Kurds were not the only ones displeased with the government, however. Standing against Qasim's regime were the Iraqi Communist Party and the Baath Party, which drew support from Arab-nationalist segments of the army. In a manner that would come to typify their rule in the coming decades, the Baath took power in 1963 through a ruthless and bloody coup. After executing Qasim, the Baath National Guard systematically hunted down Qasim's Free Officer supporters, as well as the communists. The Baath recognized that a war against the Kurds waged among their mountain strongholds would be unsuccessful. Likewise, Kurdish leaders knew that open warfare in Iraq's cities and open plains would be disastrous. Seeing this standstill, both sides walked into negotiations, hoping to gain time rather than reach a peace settlement. Ceasefire was declared in February of 1964.³⁶

Barzani led the Kurds and the KDP into renewed attempts at autonomy, establishing a Senate, consultative assembly, and Revolutionary Council for the Kurds. He renewed his demands on the government in Baghdad, now headed by Abdel Salam Aref: "autonomy, the inclusion of Kirkuk and Khaniqin oilfields within that autonomy, the use of Kurdish as an official language in Kurdistan and a fair share of national oil revenue." ³⁷ When no progress was made on any of these fronts, fighting broke out again

³⁵ Ibid, 308.

³⁶ Bulloch and Morris, *No Friends but the Mountains: the Tragic History of the Kurds*, 127.

³⁷ McDowall, *A Modern History of the Kurds*, 327.

in April of 1965. After Aref was killed in a helicopter crash, Prime Minister Abd al Rahman Bazzaz, who clearly favored a less militaristic approach, began renewed negotiations with Barzani. Bazzaz made a remarkable offer to the Kurds: freely elected political representation, autonomy, recognition of Kurdish language and culture, and official recognition and legitimation of the KDP. Barzani could hardly refuse this offer and signed the agreement.³⁸ However, Bazzaz was soon forced out of office and Abd al Rahman Aref soon took power. Though the fighting had again come to a standstill in 1967, Baghdad had made no effort to institute the stipulations of Bazzaz's agreements. Despite their disappointment at the failure of the Bazzaz agreement, the Kurds' position was stable as they had gained support and resupply from the Shah of Iran and as the government's army was in shock after their disastrous involvement in the Six Day War.

Kurds under Saddam: 1968-1979

In July of 1968 the Baath staged an internal military putsch, dismissing Aref and placing General Ahmed Hassan al-Bakr in his place with Saddam Hussein as the new Vice-President. Though al-Bakr was the official head of state, Saddam was the real strongman, exerting his influence early and often.³⁹ He was particularly active in negotiations with the Kurds, reaching an agreement with Barzani's KDP that allowed for Kurdish autonomy and which was met with tremendous enthusiasm both among the Kurds and throughout Iraq. The Kurds were granted limited measures of autonomy in the

³⁸ Ibid, 320.

³⁹ Bulloch and Morris, *No Friends but the Mountains: the Tragic History of the Kurds*, 129.

administration of Kurdistan, as well as ministerial positions in Baghdad. A central component of the Kurdish demands in the agreement involved a census to be taken in the Kurdish region, specifically important cities like Kirkuk and Mosul, to determine political representation and oil revenues to be shared. If the Kurds could claim majority rule in Kirkuk, they would gain significant funding and wield tremendously increased political power.⁴⁰

Over the next two years, leaders from both sides publicly supported the agreement and stated their hopes that the agreement would lead to lasting peace. Tension developed, however, over the census and the process by which the Kurds would select their representative for the Vice-Presidency.⁴¹ Saddam delayed both the census and the transfer of autonomy over the next several years. In a process of “Arabizing” Kurdish regions, Baghdad began diluting the Kurdish population of Kirkuk by forcibly moving Arabs to live there and deporting Kurds to the South. Again, a subtle irony of the Kurdish cause becomes clear here, as Kurdish efforts to gain representation and fair share of the revenue for their presence in Kirkuk ultimately led to increased oppression and dispersal of the Kurds. It became clear that “the Baath wanted Kurdish cooperation but were unwilling to share control.”⁴² As happened before, this landmark agreement was never actualized. In delaying the census and enabling “Arabization of Kurdish cities,

⁴⁰ Ibid, 133.

⁴¹ Edmund Ghareeb, *The Kurdish Question in Iraq* (Syracuse, New York: Syracuse University Press, 1981), 110.

⁴² McDowall, *A Modern History of the Kurds*, 332.

Saddam demonstrated his primary strategic goal in relations with the Kurds; both of these measures were aimed limiting Kurdish political weight in Iraq.

With assassination attempts on the lives of Barzani and his son Idriss, Kurdish leadership began to suspect duplicity on the part of Saddam and the Baath. Minor skirmishes again broke out in 1972. The KDP renewed communication with and support from Iran, and, through Iran, the U.S. began pouring in support for the Kurdish rebels out of solidarity with the Shah of Iran and opposition to Iraq. American policy and interests in the Middle East in the 1970s were primarily tied to Iran, which was the main benefactor of American support and the primary conduit of American policy. In this case, the Shah supported Iraqi Kurds as an indirect way of asserting influence in Iraq; American policy-makers supported Iranian efforts in opposition to Iraq. Throughout 1974 and early 1975 both Kurdish and government forces alike prepared for war, with the Kurds counting on continued support from Iran and the U.S.⁴³

Saddam and al-Bakr, embroiled for several years with Iran over border disputes concerning Iraq's access to the Gulf, struck a deal with the Shah in 1975 by which Iraq ceded a large swath along the Shatt al-Arab river to Iran in return for the discontinuation of Iran's military support and resources for the Iraqi Kurds. As Iran withdrew its support for Barzani's Kurds, so did the U.S. The Kurds were shattered by this sudden betrayal, as they saw it. The Kurds felt secure in their mountain strongholds to the far north, but their recent attempts at autonomy throughout the Kurdish north had included the open plains and closing in on major cities such as Kirkuk. Without the support of Iran and the U.S.,

⁴³ Ibid, 338.

the Kurds stood no chance against Iraq's army. After a brief and failed defense, Barzani and his peshmerga militia fled to neighboring Iran, while hundreds of thousands of Kurdish civilians escaped the oncoming advance by fleeing to the mountains of Turkey and Iran, where they were met with starvation, poor shelter, and suffering. Saddam now initiated open oppression of and violence against the Kurds. The Iraqi army established a security belt along the border regions to prevent Kurds from either entering or leaving Iraq; anyone found within this zone would be killed on sight. Renewed attempts at "Arabization" were initiated with at least 1,400 Kurdish villages razed and nearly 600,000 civilians forcibly deported to resettlement camps, little more than refugee camps heavily patrolled by Iraqi guards.⁴⁴ Baghdad's campaign against Kurdish autonomy continued with

"financial rewards to Arabs who took Kurdish wives, a deliberate encouragement of ethnic assimilation, the transfer of Kurdish civil servants, soldiers, and police out of Kurdistan, the removal of Kurdish faculty from the new university in Sulaymaniya, and the Arabizing of some place names...Baghdad also resorted to arrests, torture, and executions to ensure its writ went unchallenged."⁴⁵

For the Kurds, all of this was devastating. Their national cause in Iraq had reached its highest point: significant international support from the United States and Iran, strong organization and peshmerga, visible position nationally, and negotiations with the state. Their national cause at its peak ultimately caused the greatest oppression and violence inflicted upon them in the 20th century, up to that point.

⁴⁴ Ibid, 339.

⁴⁵ Ibid, 340.

In light of this devastation, the Patriotic Union of Kurdistan (PUK) was formed by Jalal Talabani in June of 1975 in an attempt to modernize the Kurdish movement with socialist revolutionary undercurrents, more skillful negotiations, and an emphasis on concerted diplomatic (rather than military) efforts. Talabani had for years pushed for this modernization from within the KDP, but he and Barzani proved irreconcilably different. Talabani came from a different background than the tribal leader Barzani. Though he joined the Kurdish resistance movement at a young age and idolized General Barzani as did most other young revolutionaries, he was much more highly educated and well-read.⁴⁶ He closely followed the teachings of high-ranking KDP official Ibrahim Ahmad; together they represented the Kurdish intelligentsia. With a background in law and an extensive formal education, Talabani was a skilled politician. Though there were tribal tensions between the two groups, with slight dialect differences a component of the tribal differences, the primary conflict between the two groups was around the personalities and politics of the leadership group.⁴⁷ Barzani considered Talabani and his politicians as “slick, vain city dwellers who let men like [Barzani] do the real fighting.” Over time, this bickering and fighting undermined their progress.

There were primarily two functioning groups under the umbrella of the PUK, Komala and the Socialist Movement of Kurdistan (KSM). Komala was a clandestine revolutionary group with strong Marxist-Leninist leanings, while the KSM called on all progressive and leftist forces to join the revolution. While the KDP had espoused some

⁴⁶ Lawrence, *Invisible Nation: How the Kurds' Quest for Statehood is Shaping Iraq and the Middle East*, 30-31.

⁴⁷ McDowall, *A Modern History of the Kurds*, 343.

of these Marxist and socialist values as well, Barzani and the KDP's leadership group only did so to gain the support of other revolutionary groups, such as the Iraqi Communist Party.⁴⁸

With Barzani in exile and the Kurds fractured, internal divisions festered and grew through the late 1970s. Not only could the fractured Kurdish leadership not agree on how to deal with Baghdad, but internal bickering devolved into skirmishes between rival Kurdish groups.⁴⁹ Initial hatred between the two rival leaders, Barzani and Talabani, over time expanded and grew. In the disarray following Saddam's attacks and oppression, conflict between Barzani's KDP and Talabani's PUK played itself out with miscommunications and skirmishes, executions and retributions.

Conclusion

An important factor to note throughout Iraqi Kurdish history in the 20th century is the development and growth of nationalism. The Kurds as a unified nationalistic people with a distinct identity had never been a factor. At various times, especially in the early 20th century of late Ottoman and early British rule, influential tribal chieftains had risen to power and declared themselves leaders of a united Kurdish people. This kind of nationalism is more akin to tribalism than unifying nationalism. Mustafa Barzani's struggles throughout the 20th century brought a slightly different tone, however. Tribal elements were still clearly seen in Barzani's loyalties, patronage, power base, and

⁴⁸ Ghareeb, *The Kurdish Question in Iraq*, 128.

⁴⁹ Lawrence, *Invisible Nation: How the Kurds' Quest for Statehood is Shaping Iraq and the Middle East*, 30-31.

peshmergas, but he was more than a tribal chieftain. He became a hero for Kurdish rebels across Iraq, a symbol of unity and rebellion against the various oppressive regimes in Baghdad. Though he was defeated and exiled numerous times, the fact that Barzani continued to return to Iraq and continue the struggle belied a kind of ideology and unifying leadership that trumped traditional tribalism. His efforts to establish Kurdish representation in government and develop the Kurdistan Democratic Party further demonstrated this nationalism. Jalal Talabani pushed the Kurds further toward nationalism as well, espousing a socialist and modern nationalism with clear goals and policies. Talabani's power base was not primarily tribal or regional, but ideological. In tune with the goals he fought for, Talabani struck a measured and reasonable tone.

Whether through the Kurdistan Democratic Party or Patriotic Union of Kurdistan, Mustafa Barzani and his sons or Jalal Talabani, Iraq's Kurds fought for one primary goal: autonomy. From the very beginnings of the state of Iraq, the Kurds strove for autonomy, the freedom to run their own affairs. In various agreements the Kurds struck with Baghdad throughout the decades there were several specific demands: elected representation and decision-making influence in Baghdad, official recognition of the Kurds as a separate and distinct nation, establishment of Kurdish as the official language of Kurdistan for administration and education, political control of cities and areas where they were majority, legitimization of the KDP, and--crucially--a proper share of national revenue from Kurdistan's plentiful oil (among other resources). Through the KDP and the PUK the Kurds for years had the organizational, administrative, and leadership structure to administer their areas of influence. If given the resources they felt they

deserve, the Kurds maintained an organizational structure equipped to meet their own needs.

Ultimately, all of the Kurds' efforts at autonomy and self-governance sprung out of a desire to rectify and recover from their oppression and misuse by the various powers that ruled them, whether Ottoman, British, or Iraqi. Led primarily by Mulla Mustafa Barzani, Iraq's Kurds began unifying and organizing against their oppressors. Considering the tumult in the region, their aims were rather limited. The KDP did not seek to conquer Iraq or even necessarily to break into an independent Kurdistan. Their aims of autonomy and elected governance were limited in scope and were aimed at bringing peace and stability to a region that had historically been abused and oppressed at the crossroads of empires. For the Kurds, their leadership, organization, and rebellion developed as a response to their oppression, both historically and recently; but in these efforts, limited in their scope, they caused the Ba'ath to respond with increased brutality and oppression. By the late 1970s the Kurdish opposition movement was left devastated by Saddam's attacks and fractured between the KDP and PUK. From 1975-1979 the Barzani and Talabani bickered and skirmished so much that they ceased to be a threat to Baghdad. By 1979 the Kurdish people of Iraq were severely oppressed and the Kurdish national movement was in disarray.

CHAPTER THREE

Threat Escalation

Introduction

With a solid understanding of general Kurdish culture, history, and development, as well as a brief history of Iraqi Kurds, this study now turns to examine the Iraqi Kurds during the Iran-Iraq War, specifically the years 1980-1987. Over the course of the war Iran, at various points threatening to completely overrun Iraq's coastal territory on the Gulf, receded as a threat to Iraq because of waning internal support for the war and Iraq's proficient use of deadly chemical weapons. Meanwhile Iraq's Kurds, revitalized by support from Iran, united together against Saddam. By spring 1987 the disparate Kurdish forces of the KDP and PUK had united together against Baghdad, and, as Iran's final offensives failed, the Kurds had emerged as the greatest threat to Iraqi sovereign territory.

Revolution and Buildup, 1979-September 1980

The Iran-Iraq War was one of the costliest, longest-lasting, and most devastating wars of the 20th century, lasting from September 1980 to August 1988. To understand the Iran-Iraq War, the Iranian Revolution is critical. This transformation, in which the shah of Iran was deposed and an Islamic government established, headed by Ayatollah Khomeini. The fundamental shift brought by this revolution can be seen in that Khomeini was not brought to power by a brief coup d'état, but was overthrown by a movement that began with demonstrations and civil resistance in October of 1977 and

was the culmination of a movement against the Western-imposed and decadent Pahlavi dynasty. The new government brought about by this revolution was fundamentally based on Islam and Islamic law, headed by the structure and organization of Shi'ite Islam. This government was more radically based on Islam than any other modern Islamic state; the fundamental shift brought by this revolutionary Islamic government brought tremendous changes. This regime was aggressive and expansionary, bringing instability and change to the region and pushing to spread Islamic rule into neighboring countries and across the Middle East.¹

Furthermore, Iraq's response to this revolution in Iran is tremendously important in leading to the coming war. Baghdad was happy to see the fall of the Pahlavi dynasty, which had been a bastion of Western power in the region and a contentious rival with Iraq for control of the Gulf. The revolution brought instability to Iran, which was to Iraq's favor, but leadership in Baghdad was left between two points. Iraqi leadership favored instability in Iran, which meant a weaker and less threatening Iran, but also feared the complete collapse of the revolution, which could precipitate the formation of an independent Kurdish state in Iran, a state which would no doubt work to break Iraqi Kurds from Baghdad and incorporate them into the independent state. By 1979 Iranian Kurds were in full-scale war with the new Islamic regime of Iran. Long-standing policy for Iraq had been to oppose the formation of an independent Kurdistan anywhere that might be.²

¹ Lawrence, *Invisible Nation: How the Kurds' Quest for Statehood is Shaping Iraq and the Middle East*, 12.

² Travis, *Genocide in the Middle East*, 400.

By this point, Baghdad began to face increased pressure from the Kurds, who began military action against the regime. The KDP had regrouped from the devastation of the failed 1975 rebellion and began to see the instability in the region as an opportunity to work towards forcing Saddam out of power, which was one of their primary goals in seeking autonomy within Iraq. These offensives brought limited results for the Kurds and did little to hinder or harm Saddam's regime. Despite the ineffectiveness of these offensives, they served to illustrate that Iraqi Kurds had regrouped from the devastation of the previous years and were prepared to agitate against Saddam militarily.³ Despite regrouping and minor agitation against Saddam, the KDP threat to Iraq was minimal. Far from initiating rebelling militarily against Iraq, Talabani was crafting the PUK as a modern opposition political party in Iraq, rather than simply a rebel militia organization. As such the PUK's efforts were aimed at politics and diplomacy rather than direct military threat to Saddam.

Within this context of instability in Iran, full-scale rebellion by Iranian Kurds, and limited offensives from Iraqi Kurds, tensions between Saddam's regime and the new Islamic leadership in Tehran were high. Late 1979 through summer of 1980 was filled with brief skirmishes and standoffs between the two countries, largely over the same border areas near the Shatt al-Arab river that been so contentious throughout the 1970s. In October of 1979 Khomeini appointed a new ambassador to Iraq; he was expelled by March of 1980 for agitation and meddling in Iraq's internal affairs.⁴ Much of this tension

³ Lawrence, *Invisible Nation*, 56.

⁴ Stephen Pelletiere, *The Iran-Iraq War: Chaos in a Vacuum* (New York: Praeger Publishers, 1992), 31.

had ethnic undertones as Saddam at times championed the cause of the largely Arab populations of the Iranian border province of Khuzestan while standing firmly against Iranian expatriates living in southeastern Iraq.⁵ An assassination attempt on Iraqi Deputy Prime Minister Tariq Aziz, allegedly at the behest of Khomeini, led to executions of several high-ranking Iraqi Shias and the expulsion of several thousand expatriate Iranians. In response to this, Khomeini publicly called Iraq's Shia dissidents to rebel and overthrow the Baathist regime.⁶ Saddam, in turn, issued statements of his own with promises to "cut off the hand" of anyone agitating against Baghdad and a refusal to be intimidated, even if that meant "dancing on the wings of death."⁷ By summer of 1980, in light of these assassination attempts and large deportations of domestic opponents and dissidents (Shi'ite and Kurd alike) from Iraq, the tension between the two countries, which had been palpable for most of the past decade, was at its highest point.⁸

Invasion, September 1980 - April 1982

This tension came to full fruition in September of 1980. In early September 1980 the Iraqi government sent an ultimatum to Iran which demanded the concession of two portions of the disputed border area along the Shatt al-Arab, which Baghdad claimed sovereignty over. When the government of Iran failed to hand the territory over, Iraqi

⁵ Shahram Chubin and Charles Tripp, *Iran and Iraq at War* (Boulder: Westview Press, 1988), 28.

⁶ Pelletiere, *The Iran-Iraq War*, 31.

⁷ Chubin and Tripp, *Iran and Iraq at War*, 28.

⁸ Travis, *Genocide in the Middle East: the Ottoman Empire, Iraq, and Sudan*, 390.

forces moved in to occupy this disputed territory along the Shatt al-Arab, roughly 150 square kilometers.⁹ With Iran's new government in a state of apparent weakness and instability, this was a calculated move on the part of Saddam as a show of force, a demonstration of Iraqi power.

When Khomeini failed to check Iraq's minor incursion, Saddam invaded. This was an aggressive lightning campaign intended to deal a hard blow to the Iranian military and take hold of Khuzestan Province. Though the campaign was limited in terms of territorial goals, it was aggressive and quick-striking. The offensive began with surprise aerial strikes on 10 of Iran's airfields, with the objective of destroying the Iranian Air Force before the ground war even began. Iraqi bombardments succeeded in destroying a portion of Iran's airbase infrastructure, but the Air Force itself was left largely intact. On the next day Saddam proceeded with the ground invasion of roughly 70,000 men and 2,000 tanks, invading Iran at four different points.¹⁰ Four of Iraq's six divisions involved in the invasion were allocated to Khuzestan Province, with the aim of seizing and securing the entire territory, while the remaining two divisions were positioned along the Iran-Iraq border north of Khuzestan to prevent a flanking Iranian counterattack.¹¹

Saddam's Objectives and Motivation

Saddam's aim with this offensive was squarely on gaining strategically and politically important territory, though this goal in itself has several underlying motivators.

⁹ Chubin and Tripp, *Iran and Iraq at War*, 28.

¹⁰ Pelletiere, *The Iran-Iraq War*, 36.

¹¹ Chubin and Tripp, *Iran and Iraq at War*, 30.

First, Saddam needed to establish himself and gain credibility. Iraqi internal politics was in a state of turmoil during 1979 and early 1980 as Saddam forcibly assumed the presidency ahead of the established Ba'ath Party schedule to preempt powerful opponents within the Baath Party. In seeking this power, Saddam was positioning himself as a bastion of power and stability for the neighboring Arab nations of the Gulf, especially in light of the aggressive and radical regime established in Iran with the revolution. Facing pressure internally from Iraqi Shias and externally from Iran's aggressive and radical regime, Saddam could not afford to take a weak or passive stance against Iran.¹² The second factor for Saddam was to regain strategically and economically important territory.¹³ This was Saddam's effort to rectify the 1975 Algiers Agreement with Iran, which had allowed Saddam to suppress Iraqi Kurdish insurrection, but had weakened Iraq's territorial position.¹⁴ The disputed territory along the Shatt al-Arab was important in 1980 for the same reasons it was in 1975: oil and access to the Gulf. One of Iran's primary strengths was massive oil reserves, and for Iraq to capture a piece of those reserves would strengthen Iraq's standing while simultaneously limiting the strength of Iran's position. Ultimately Saddam's aim with this offensive had several different motivators, not least of which was a desire to regain some of the prestige and power in the Gulf Iraq had lost to Iran in the 1970s.¹⁵

¹² Pelletiere, *The Iran-Iraq War*, 33.

¹³ Ibid, 28.

¹⁴ Ofra Bengio, *The Kurds of Iraq: Building a State within a State* (Boulder: Lynne Rienner Publishers, 2012), 170.

¹⁵ Joost R. Hiltermann, *A Poisonous Affair: America, Iraq, and the Gassing of Halabja* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2007), 99.

The timing of this invasion by Iraq was brought about by what Saddam saw as an opportunity; Iran's military had been well-trained and well-equipped by American support, but the revolution brought turmoil to the military as the traditional army was purged of dissidents and the Islamic Revolutionary Guard established to carry the changes of Islamic revolution into the military.¹⁶ The Revolutionary Guard was established during the revolution and was comprised of the militias and bands of warriors that sprang up across the country, largely at the urging and under the authority of local clerical leaders. At the start of the war Iran's regular military forces were down to roughly half their former size, with 150,000 men.¹⁷ Material support from the United States had dropped off, as had Iranian discipline for training and maintenance, which meant that much of the advanced equipment purchased from the U.S. was rendered barely operable and ineffective.¹⁸ To Iraq, Iran was a weak target. Conversely, Iraq was positioned well in terms of international support: Saddam's forces had been equipped and trained by the Soviets in the 1970s and Iraq now had the support of Saudi Arabia, Kuwait, and Jordan (all of whom acted as conduits of support for Iraq from the United States), who supported Iraq in fear and opposition to Iran's aggression and expansionism.¹⁹ Ultimately, this was a "war for political gain through territorial concession, initiated at a moment of apparent political and military opportunity."²⁰

¹⁶ Hiltermann, *A Poisonous Affair*, 99.

¹⁷ Pelletiere, *The Iran-Iraq War*, 35.

¹⁸ Ibid, 35.

¹⁹ Hiltermann, *A Poisonous Affair*, 25.

²⁰ Chubin and Tripp, *Iran and Iraq at War*, 28.

Iran's Defensive Strategy

Iran's defensive strategy had three primary tenets. Khomeini's regime instituted an international diplomatic policy primarily aimed at highlighting Iraq as the aggressor in the war. The purpose of this was to gain international support and sympathy while draining Iraq of international support and favor. This effort gained little traction internationally, as fears of aggressive Iranian expansionism prevailed.²¹

A second important tenet of Iran's defensive strategy was to heavily involve and support Iraqi Kurdish rebellion in northern Iraq. Through the beginning of the war, Iraq appointed only a limited internal security force to keep the peace in the vast region of Iraqi Kurdistan, most of which had been thoroughly swept clean in the "cordon sanitaire" during the crushed rebellion of 1975. There had been a slight uptick in action by the KDP in 1979, but nothing significant enough to merit serious allocation of Iraqi troops to the region. Beginning in spring of 1981, though, Iran's strategy was to encourage and materially support Kurdish offensives against Saddam's regime in the north, specifically moving attacks more into cities than the rural mountainous regions the Kurds had always controlled. KDP leadership knew that this increased agitation against Saddam would not immediately produce their goal of autonomy, but they also knew that working alongside Iran was the best way to destabilize and hopefully topple Saddam's regime. The importance of this Kurdish action was to divert more of Iraq's energy, resources, and manpower to Kurdistan so that Iraq's forces in Iran would be thinner, allowing Iran to

²¹ Hiltermann, *A Poisonous Affair: America, Iraq, and the Gassing of Halabja*, 23.

regroup.²² For the Kurds, Iranian support and initiative served as an instigator to further KDP action against Saddam. Kurdish leadership, still recovering and returning from exile after Saddam's campaign against them in the 1970s, was energized to continue agitation against the regime.

This leads directly into the third facet of Iran's defense. Iran's material resources and military supplies had dwindled as former international supporters withdrew their support. With a decreased capacity for artillery bombardment and realizing they were at a disadvantage fighting with conventional methods against Iraq, Iran turned to its most abundant resource: volunteers.²³ The Iranian Revolution was ushered in with a wave of popular support, which manifested itself with large-scale volunteerism for the Revolutionary Guard, especially with the redefined and reorganized military and in light of Iraq's aggressive invasion. Though initially outnumbered by Iraqi troops five-to-one, popular volunteerism allowed Iran to cut the deficit to two-to-one by 1982.²⁴ A majority of this uptick in volunteers was in the form of the basij, or "mobilization of the oppressed," which was comprised of twenty-two-man teams called up from mosques across the country. Utilizing these swelling numbers, Iranian forces employed a "human wave" tactic to overwhelm Iraqi positions, predicated on the battlefield surges by these basij teams, who moved as a unit toward their objectives. Under the authority of the clerically-influenced Revolutionary Guard, these basij units were poorly trained and poorly equipped, but fueled by indoctrination and ideological fervor, which allowed

²² Bulloch, *No Friends but the Mountains*, 89.

²³ Pelletiere, *The Iran-Iraq War*, 40.

²⁴ Ibid.

Khomeini to effectively utilize Iran's massive advantage in overall population, even if Iraq had a larger conventional army.²⁵

Progress of the War Through 1982

From the beginning, Iraq's offensives did not produce the desired results, primarily the intent to keep the war limited in scale and short in duration. Following Iraq's failed attempts to eliminate the threat of the Iranian Air Force, Iranian bombers responded on September 25 and 26 by attacking Iraqi infrastructure, energy facilities, and even Baghdad itself. Iran's navy, which far outclassed Iraq's negligible naval capacity, turned its focus on Iraq's oil refineries near the Gulf, significantly damaging Iraq's oil-exporting capabilities.²⁶ The advances of Saddam's infantry and armor were slow, and after the original invasion timeframe of two weeks, none of the four targeted cities in Khuzestan had been taken hold of. The city of Khoramshahr fell to Iraqi forces one week later, but at the cost of 1,500 dead -- far greater losses than had been anticipated.²⁷ After just three weeks, Iraq's invasion and hopes for a limited war were already failing as advances were slow, losses were high, and Iranian aerial and naval counterattacks unanticipated. Saddam still targeted the cities of Dezful and Ahvaz, but as winter

²⁵ Hiltermann, *A Poisonous Affair: America, Iraq, and the Gassing of Halabja*, 25.

²⁶ Ibid, 27.

²⁷ Pelletiere, *The Iran-Iraq War*, 37.

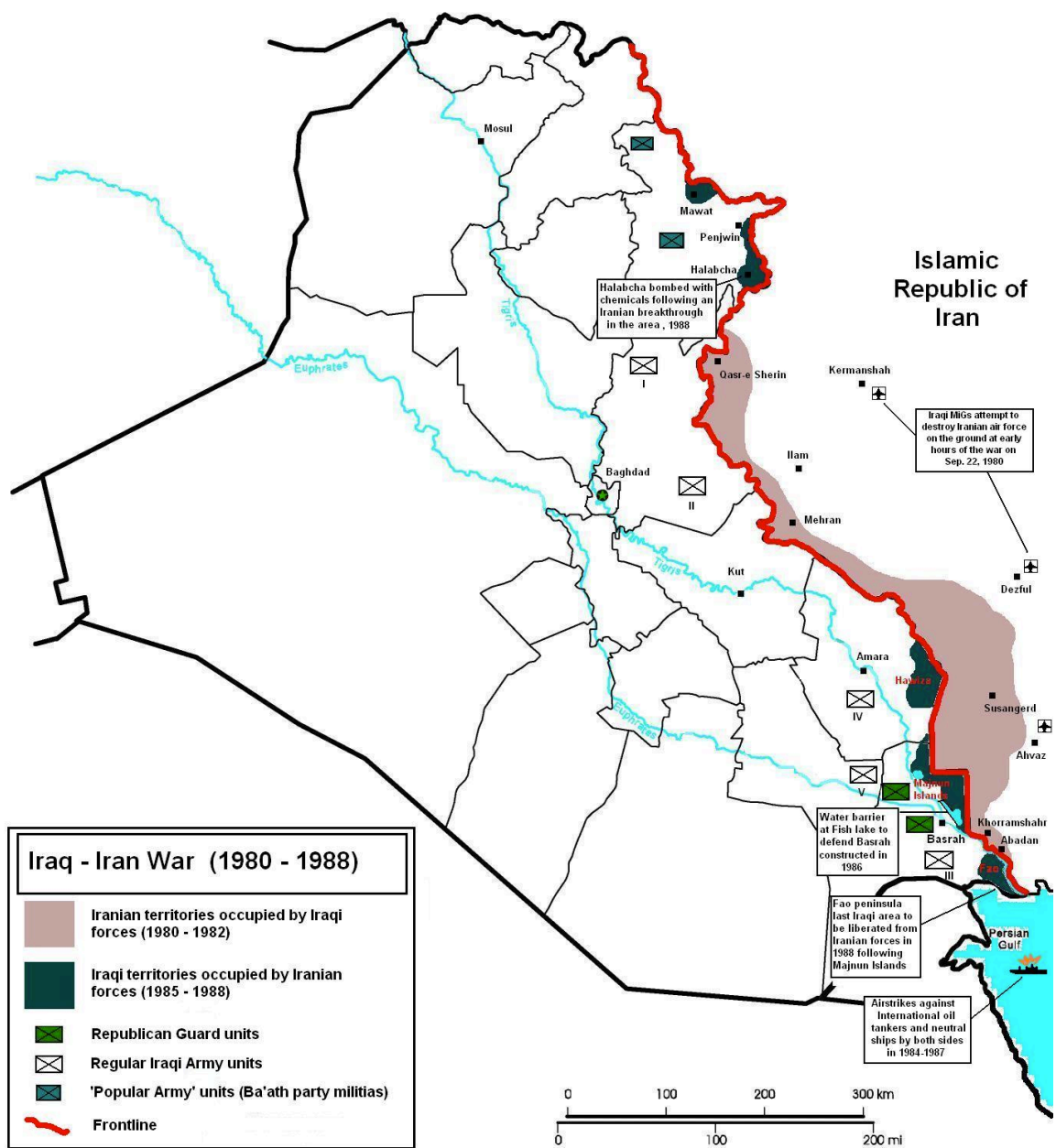
approached, Iraqi forces dug in and “thus the dynamic phase of Iraq’s initial thrust effectively ended.”²⁸

With the coming of spring in 1981, Iranian leaders initiated a massive and heavily armored offensive against Iraq’s stagnated forces. After promising initial results, the Iranian offensive collapsed with the loss of over 200 tanks, while Iraq lost not even one third of that amount. Iranian forces quickly retreated.²⁹ This was the turning point for Iran, when leadership transferred from a focus on conventional armored offensives to irregular units led by the Revolutionary Guard and basij, and utilizing the human wave tactic. Spearheaded by these irregular units and irregular tactics, Iran enjoyed minor successes in spring of 1981 around the city of Susangard, which stalled Iraqi focus on capturing Iranian cities. In September, Iraq suffered its first major defeat to Iran near the town of Abadan, as Iranian forces attacked en masse from four different directions. Iraqi leadership misread these attacks, their position was quickly overrun, and they fell into a retreat. Though they suffered heavy losses at nearly 5,000 men, this was a significant moment in the war for Iran, the first major defeat for Iraq.³⁰ Both sides dug in for the winter, but fighting resumed in the spring. A series of battles in late March and early April brought casualties in the tens of thousands for both sides, but Iran retook the city of

²⁸ Ibid.

²⁹ Ibid, 39.

³⁰ Ibid, 37.



Map of Iran-Iraq War

Khoramshahr and Iraqi forces were pushed almost completely out of Khuzestan province. By spring of 1982 Iraq's offensive had failed.

Stalemate and Devastation, April 1982-1987

The years following the collapse of Saddam's invasion in 1982 were filled with little progress made, characterized by massive casualties and devastation inflicted and sustained by both sides. For Iran, the remaining six years of the war were characterized by large annual offensives, heightened aggression against Iraq, increased involvement with Iraqi Kurds, and ultimately little progress made. For Iraq, the focus for the remainder of the war was to push Iranian forces back while adapting to deal with Iranian "human wave" tactics, turning to widespread use of deadly chemical weapons.³¹

Strategic Changes for Iran

With the invasion effectively pushed out of Iran, Khomeini and his leadership team adapted their strategy in primarily two ways. The first change for Iran was an increasingly aggressive tone to the offensives, as they set out to push Saddam's regime out of power and punish him as the aggressor and initiator of the war. Khomeini and the ayatollahs called for the complete destruction of the ruling regime in Iraq, aiming their war efforts squarely against the Baathist rule rather than seeking territorial conciliation or political acquiescence.³² These efforts were, ultimately, a conduit for carrying on the

³¹ Cordesman, *Iraq: Sanctions and Beyond*, 37.

³² Pelletiere, *The Iran-Iraq War*, 60.

fervor of the revolution. For the clergy who now ruled the country, turning the aggression and passion of the revolution away from internal issues and onto Iraq lessened the turmoil on the home-front and strengthened the war cause.³³ A clear demonstration of Iran's belligerent and punitive tone can be seen in their rejection of an offer of withdrawal and ceasefire from a group of Iraq's upper leadership. Had Khomeini accepted, Saddam would likely have been forced out of power.³⁴ Instead, Iran wanted to continue punishing Iraq and topple Saddam's regime. Strategically, their aggressive offensives were now aimed at capturing Basra, Iraq's second largest city, and the region around it, a move which would cut off Iraq's access to the Gulf and hopefully cripple Iraq economically.³⁵

The second significant change Iran instituted as they pushed the war into Iraqi territory was to spread the offensive out across a wide front, intentionally pushing the front into parts of Iraqi Kurdistan. Iran had subsidized KDP action against Saddam from the beginning of the war, but this new phase brought an increased level of cooperation and coordination with the Kurds. This change in strategy meant Iranian forces would invade Iraq via Kurdistan, oftentimes fighting alongside Barzani's Kurds.³⁶ Ultimately, the aim of this change was to "thin out the Iraqi frontline; it would create logistical problems for the Iraqi army by moving the front into mountainous terrain; it would reduce Iranian casualties; and above all, it would take the war to a zone where a popular

³³ Ibid, 59.

³⁴ Hiltermann, *A Poisonous Affair: America, Iraq, and the Gassing of Halabja*, 25.

³⁵ Cordesman, *Iraq: Sanctions and Beyond*, 37.

³⁶ Pelletiere, *The Iran-Iraq War*, 75.

rebellion against Baghdad already existed. The Iraqis would be fighting on hostile territory.”³⁷ Before invading Iraqi Kurdistan, Khomeini’s regime needed to solve the problem of revolting Iranian Kurds. Primarily through the Revolutionary Guard, with some help from Barzani’s KDP, the Iranian Kurdish rebellion was all but eliminated by spring of 1983. By this point KDP peshmerga controlled at least 10,000 square kilometers of border territory in Iraq. Kurdish civilians were encouraged to move back into the previously depopulated “cordon sanitaire” created in the 1970s by Saddam.³⁸

The first major battle in Iran’s offensive into Iraqi Kurdistan, called the Val-Fajr II offensive, took place in the mountain peaks around the Iraqi border town of Haj Umran, with the intention of pushing through the mountainous border and into the foothills. Haj Umran was a strategically important town for Iraq, with a nearby lake and dam that helped provide both water and electricity throughout the region. Consequently, Haj Umran was heavily defended by Iraqi forces. Depending on Barzani’s peshmerga as scouts and guides, Iranian forces flooded across the border in July of 1983.³⁹ From late July through early August brutal fighting ensued as the two sides pushed back and forth in the peaks above and around Haj Umran, with the joint Iranian-KDP forces ultimately securing Haj Umran.⁴⁰ Iran soon initiated attacks on nearby Iraqi border towns of Mehran and Penjwin, which was firmly in the territory of Talabani’s PUK. Talabani, who

³⁷ Bulloch, *No Friends but the Mountains*, 55.

³⁸ Ibid, 56.

³⁹ Hiltermann, *A Poisonous Affair: America, Iraq, and the Gassing of Halabja*, 29.

⁴⁰ Pelletiere, *The Iran-Iraq War*, 76.

had chosen to stay out of the conflict, could not stand by while Iranian and KDP forces moved in on territory he considered his own. With promises from Saddam for autonomy negotiations, Talabani joined forces with the Baathists, helping to push the Iranian forces out of Iraqi Kurdistan and back across the border.⁴¹ This was a significant development to see the Iraqi Kurdish nationalist movement so divisively split with Talabani entering into friendly relations with Iraq, not only independent of the KDP, but at the expense of the KDP peshmerga.

Important Developments in Iraq

There are two important developments from July and August that will advance and play out through the rest of the war and even into early postwar years. The first of these is Saddam's decision to punish the KDP for their cooperation with Iran against Baghdad, particularly targeting male members of the Barzani clan. On July 30th Iraqi forces rounded up between 5,000 and 8,000 Barzani men and took them away. These men were never to be seen again.⁴² This punitive action marks the first major instance of Saddam's intentional policy to target civilian populations rather than KDP peshmerga or leadership. The policy, tactics, and outcome demonstrated here in the summer of 1983 are a prelude to the brutality to come in the Anfal campaign. Though this was a tragic loss for the Kurds and a brutal expression of Saddam's retribution, this episode ultimately provides a symbol pointing towards the increased threat to Saddam's regime posed by the

⁴¹ Hiltermann, *A Poisonous Affair: America, Iraq, and the Gassing of Halabja*, 31.

⁴² Ibid, 30.

KDP. It is significant to note that even with Iranian forces in the south pushing the war back across the border and into sovereign Iraqi territory, Saddam initiated retributive action against the Kurds in the north.

A second important development is Iraq's use of chemical weapons on the battlefield, which is strictly prohibited by international law. In the fight for Haj Umran Iraq employed chemical weapons for the first time, particularly against Barzani's Kurdish forces working with Iran in the mountains. Iraq's use of chemical weapons was not widespread in this battle, but the evidence points to Iraqi use of sulphur mustard gas, the same deadly gas infamously used in World War One.⁴³ Casualties for the KDP were minor because they were positioned high in the mountain peaks, which meant that much of the gas drifted down the mountainside and away from Kurdish forces, but because this event was not well-reported Iraq experienced no international backlash. Because they had used deadly mustard gas with impunity, Iraqi leadership was encouraged to continue use of and experimentation with deadly chemical weapons, eventually utilizing devastating nerve gas.

Strategic Changes for Iraq

The implementation of Iran's new strategic invasion of Iraqi Kurdistan marks an important point as Iran's aggressive push from the defensive to the offensive left Iraqi forces reeling. Fighting against a coordinated front of Iranians and Kurds left Iraqi forces spread out over a wide range of territory. Spread out across the east, Iraqi forces were

⁴³ Ibid.

vulnerable to Iranian “human wave” assaults, which had become the normal mode of attack for Iran. Against these waves of Iranians, Iraqi forces were spending “astonishing” amounts of ammunition, and even with these massive bombardments they could not stop the assaults. In light of these struggles, Saddam instituted primarily two significant changes to prevent Iran from pushing into the Iraqi heartland.

The first of those changes was an attempt to sap Iranian civilian support for the war. The beginning of the war had seen strong support within Iran, as Iraq’s invasion served as a rallying cry for the leaders of the revolution. The war had brought Iranian people together against a common foe and solidified the Islamic government in place. Iran’s success in repelling Iraq’s invasion and pushing Saddam’s forces back into Iraq had been greeted as a great victory in Iran, a euphoric success; but with that success came tremendous loss and massive casualties. As revolutionary fervor waned and realistic expectations came for the Iranian people, Saddam aimed to key in on potential unrest in Iran. In an effort to destroy Iran’s will to fight, Iraq began attacking civilian population centers.⁴⁴ Aerial bombardments in March 1985 targeting economic centers and infrastructure in Tehran were poorly executed and materially ineffective but induced psychological pain on the Iranian people. In Tehran, support for this costly war waned.⁴⁵

Secondly, Iraq needed a way to deal with Iran’s devastating “human wave” assaults. Saddam needed a weapon to deal extensive casualties against the Iranian forces and to strike a psychological blow to Iran’s unyielding aggression. As they had initiated

⁴⁴ Hiltermann, *A Poisonous Affair: America, Iraq, and the Gassing of Halabja*, 25.

⁴⁵ Pelletiere, *The Iran-Iraq War*, 85.

with the attacks around Haj Umran, Iraqi forces began the use of devastating and deadly chemical weapons against Iranian forces. Over the next several years, Iraqi forces learned to utilize these chemical weapons with increasing effectiveness and efficiency, stemming the tide and preventing Iranian forces from driving through the Basra region and cutting off Iraqi access to the Gulf. Iraq's use of chemical weapons for the remaining duration of the war is a dominant theme of the war and a portend of Iraq's later brutality against the Kurds.

Iraq had been working toward developing chemical weapons capabilities for years under Saddam's regime, but had not needed to use them until Iran's offensives began pushing deeper into Iraq. Iraq's initial use of these chemical weapons, both at Haj Omran and in the following instances, was ineffective, however. Iranian forces were equipped to deal with such chemical weapons and carried the appropriate masks and equipment.⁴⁶ As such, the chemical weapons were not as devastating as Iraq had hoped. The weapons did provide some value, though, as Iranian troops were forced to carry the proper equipment and protection to deal with chemical attacks; when Iraq employed chemicals, Iranian forces were at the very least slowed down significantly. Over time, however, Saddam's forces learned how to utilize these weapons to their greatest effect, integrating traditional and chemical ordinances into artillery barrages; in learning to utilize these deadly chemical weapons, Iraq developed an efficient and effective weapon against the "human

⁴⁶ Cordesman, *Iraq: Sanctions and Beyond*, 37.

wave” attacks. Using the two in conjunction tremendously increased the effectiveness of both the chemical and traditional weaponry.⁴⁷

In spring of 1984 Iran resumed offensives aimed at Basra, and the two sides pushed back and forth in the territory surrounding Basra, with little material progress made for either side. Through late 1983 and early 1984 Talabani’s PUK was engaged in negotiations with Saddam’s regime about developing an autonomous Kurdish sector of Iraq. Both sides appeared pleased with the progress of the negotiations, but as Iraq began to have more success in rebuffing Iranian advances through the use of chemical weapons, negotiations deteriorated throughout 1984. From the perspective of PUK leadership, success using chemical weapons against Iran granted Saddam a certain measure of freedom whereby he no longer needed the cooperation Talabani to ensure Iraqi security in Kurdistan.⁴⁸ In January 1985 Iraq initiated a campaign against the PUK-held region around the major Kurdish city of Suleimaniyeh, which pushed Talabani, unable to maintain the fight against both Iraq and Iran, to begin friendly relations with Tehran.

By late 1985, Iran and Iraq were at an effective stalemate.⁴⁹ In February of 1986 Iran initiated a massive offensive to capture the cities of Al Faw and Umm Qasr, Iraq’s primary coastal cities. If successful, this move would put Iranian forces on the doorstep of Basra and cut off completely Iraq’s access to the Gulf, crippling the country economically and hopefully bringing about the end of the war. Both sides sustained

⁴⁷ Hiltermann, *A Poisonous Affair: America, Iraq, and the Gassing of Halabja*, 25.

⁴⁸ Ibid, 89.

⁴⁹ Ibid, 87.

heavy losses and Iran succeeded in capturing Al Faw, which was a tremendous embarrassment and hindrance for Saddam, though the Iranian victory was incomplete because they failed to capture Umm Qasr.⁵⁰ Seeking to gain an easy moral victory, Saddam initiated a campaign to retake the city of Mehran, which had been held by Iran since 1983. The campaign was inadequately planned and poorly executed, with disastrous result.

After initiating relations with Iran in spring of 1985, the PUK was working side-by-side with Iranian forces in Iraq. PUK peshmerga carried the primary role of reconnoitering and raiding Iraqi posts, working alongside Iranian Pasdaran fighters. In a brilliantly executed joint mission on October 2, peshmerga and Pasdaran forces drove into the heart of Iraqi oil fields around Kirkuk and attacked various oil installations while also raiding Iraqi supply stations.⁵¹ The attack sent a clear signal to Baghdad that Iraqi Kurds and Iran were in full cooperation against Iraq's regime. Iran's coalition with Talabani provided a stimulus for the PUK to organize and initiate offensives against Saddam. Working alongside Iranian Pasdaran, PUK peshmerga and leadership grew in confidence and boldness against Iraq's forces. By the end of 1986 Saddam's reputation had taken a major hit from the failed Mehran campaign, the loss of Al Faw, and the joint PUK-Pasdaran raids, while Iran was positioned well with two significant victories in Iraqi territory and building an army to bring about a massive invasion in early 1987 to finally bring the war to an end.

⁵⁰ Ibid, 102.

⁵¹ Hiltermann, *A Poisonous Affair: America, Iraq, and the Gassing of Halabja*, 91.

At this point, in late summer 1986, Iran was at its peak power as a threat to Iraq. The February and March offensives aimed at cutting off Iraq's Gulf access, while not complete successes, demonstrated Iran's ability to drive into Iraqi territory and capture a strategically important city like Al Faw. After Saddam's disastrous counterattack at Mehran, Iran was seated on the doorstep of Basra with a weak and poorly-organized Iraqi defensive force. Meanwhile, Iran's joint offensives with the KDP and PUK proved successful in distracting and disrupting Iraqi operations.

At the behest of their benefactors in Tehran, the PUK initiated friendly relations with the KDP in early 1986. Despite differences in leadership and a troubled history between the two, in November 1986 Barzani's KDP and Talabani's PUK officially allied themselves together with the Iraqi Communist Party, the Kurdistan Socialist Democratic Party, and the Kurdistan Socialist Party in the Kurdistan Front.⁵² The now jointly-working peshmergas coordinated their raids and attacks to great effect, trained militias, initiated urban attacks, staged protests, and generally undermined all efforts by Saddam's regime. Moving from the rural regions they had maintained throughout the war, the united Kurdish forces at times alongside Iranian pushed the boundaries of their effectively controlled territory further outward, even moving toward some of the larger towns. In early spring of 1987, Kurdish rebels were in their strongest position since the last days of Mustafa Barzani's leadership in 1974.

The Karbala campaign of January 1987 was Iran's final push to end the war, pushing forward into Iraqi forces all across the front, from southeastern Iraq all along the

⁵² Pelletiere, *The Iran-Iraq War*, 92.

border up to Iraqi Kurdistan, with the main thrust of the offensive focused on taking Basra. In short, the campaign was an utter failure. Iraq's Republican Guard, which heavily recruited college students, reinforced Saddam's regular army and stymied Iranian attacks; in large part, Iraq's success in fending off the Karbala campaign depended on the training, organization, and leadership of the Republican Guard. Iran failed to achieve their strategic objectives and took losses of at least 70,000 men to Iraq's 10,000. Such massive and disproportionate losses crippled Iran's army; Iranian leadership spent much of 1986 building up the strength of the army for this major push, and in light of the waning internal support for Iran's war efforts, the Iranian public proved unwilling to rebuild the army into a force capable of aggressively pursuing the war deep into Iraqi territory.⁵³ For all practical purposes, the war was unwinnable for Iran by February 2, 1987.⁵⁴ To be sure, the war was far from over; Iran, with international military resupply from the likes of Syria, Ethiopia, and North Korea, was certainly capable of continuing the war. Khomeini's forces had once stood on the doorstep of Basra and, as recently as January 1987 threatened to push the war deep into Iraqi territory, but though Iran still possessed the firepower to significantly disrupt Iraq's oil production in the Gulf, their prospects in the war now rested on pushing Iraq to the point of exhaustion.⁵⁵ After the failed Karbala campaign, their hopes were built on not collapsing before Iraq did.⁵⁶

⁵³ Chubin and Tripp, *Iran and Iraq at War*, 253.

⁵⁴ Pelletiere, *The Iran-Iraq War*, 120.

⁵⁵ Anthony H. Cordesman, *The Iran-Iraq War and Western Security 1984-87: Strategic Implications and Policy Options* (London: Royal United Services Institute, 1987), 145.

⁵⁶ Chubin and Tripp, *Iran and Iraq at War*, 252.

Conclusion

With all of the above as a background, there are two significant keys or themes from this period of war with Iran that will later be echoed in Saddam's violent campaign against the Kurds in 1988. The experimentation and learning curve with chemical weapons proved to be an advantage for Iraq that would evidence itself in the Anfal campaign. Kurdish accounts of chemical weapons attacks by Saddam during those years describe artillery barrages following that exact same pattern: traditional artillery bombardment followed by moments of quiet, with a silent barrage of chemical weapons directly after that. Of huge import was the lack of forceful international reaction to these uses of chemical weapons during the Iran-Iraq war. The United States certainly knew about this prohibited use of chemical weapons, and issued weakly-worded statements of disapproval, but took no actionable steps to stop them. The combination of Iraq's frequent use of, and battlefield-tested experience with, prohibited chemical weapons with the exceedingly weak international response ultimately proved to be a precursor to the devastation and brutality inflicted on the Kurds during the Anfal campaign.

A second important theme from this period of war with Iran is the brutality and ruthless effectiveness that Saddam employed against Iran. This war changed from an aggressive but territorially-limited campaign into one of the longest and most devastating wars of the 20th century. As the war developed, the aggression and ruthlessness of both sides commensurately increased. Eventually Saddam initiated attacks on civilian

population centers and tried to sap the will to fight from the population. Those harsh campaigns would soon be initiated against the Kurds.

Iran's failed Karbala campaign, considered in conjunction with these two facets of Iraq's war efforts, precipitated the collapse of Iran as a threat within Iraqi territory. Meanwhile, both the KDP and PUK had been mobilized and energized by cooperation with Iran to continue raids and offensives against Saddam. In light of this mobilization of Kurdish forces and the Kurdistan Front, by spring of 1987 the greatest threat to Iraqi sovereignty was the united Kurdish forces of the KDP and PUK operating in northern Iraq. To Saddam, these were traitors who needed to be punished for acting against the state while Iraq was embroiled in a bitter war with Iran. Beginning in spring of 1987 Saddam would turn these two vital developments of the Iran-Iraq War, deadly chemical weapons use and ruthless efficiency, directly onto the Kurds.

CHAPTER FOUR

Anfal: A Continuation of Violence

Introduction

Throughout the rule of the Baath Party in Iraq, and especially so under Saddam Hussein, the Kurds had been oppressed and their efforts at gaining autonomy crushed, but the brutal offensives carried out by the government of Iraq against the Kurds in 1987, followed by the official Anfal campaign in 1988, mark a clear increase in the magnitude of violence and oppression inflicted on the Kurds. Though the Kurds joined together in the Kurdistan Front as a unified threat and issue of rising prominence for Iraq, Saddam's genocidal response to this threat was disproportionate; he responded to a limited regional threat in northern Iraq with a campaign against the very people of Kurdistan. Despite the wartime setting and the military threat of the Kurdish peshmerga, Saddam's response transcended measured military response and was instead created out of his retributive desire to rid Iraq of the Kurdish nationalist problem entirely.

February 1987-February 1988

By spring of 1987 Iran's Karbala campaign, intended to finally bring the war to an end, had failed. Iraq had rallied its armies, relying heavily on the Republican Guards, and summarily defeated Iran's massive final push. By this point support within Iran for the war was waning; volunteerism had slowed to a crawl and the basij had dried up. Through the rest of 1987 Iran, aware of the deficiencies of its army, pursued the war

primarily through the air and in the Gulf, rather than on the ground. Iran attempted to utilize its naval dominance to hinder Iraq's oil production and trade capability by targeting oil tankers in the Gulf, while also periodically sending SCUD missiles into Iraqi cities such as Baghdad and Basra. These missile attacks, though occasionally successful in striking their targets, brought little actual effect. Meanwhile Iran's activity in the Gulf elicited increased Western presence in the Gulf, which, due to fear of an international incident or conflict with American or British vessels, put a halt to Iran's offensives on Iraqi oil facilities by September.¹ With a lull in Iran's ground offensives, and in light of their success in holding off Iran's Karbala campaign, Iraq's army, spearheaded by the Republican Guard, was growing in cohesion and in size.²

Despite failure in their major offensives in the south, Iran continued to work heavily with the KDP and PUK in spring of 1987, with large coordinated strikes throughout February, March, and April.³ Though these raids, targeting Suleimaniyeh and Arbil in over-night attacks, were successful on a small scale in terms of stealing and destroying Iraqi equipment, the joint Kurdish-Pasdarani forces operating on the fringe of Iraqi-held towns and cities in Kurdistan had little material effect on Iraq's security in the region. The Kurds were, however, a significant threat to various strategic points for Iraq. Specifically, Kurdish forces targeted the towns of Haj Omran and Halabja, both of which were highly contentious throughout the war because of dams on nearby lakes; these dams

¹ Pelletiere, *The Iran-Iraq War*, 130.

² Ibid, 145.

³ O'Ballance, *The Kurdish Struggle: 1920-94*, 144.

were a source of both water and electricity throughout the region.⁴ While working alongside Iran on raids against Iraqi positions, the KDP and PUK were also working to permeate the countryside surrounding Kirkuk and secure the support of local populations. Iranian leadership encouraged and supported Kirkuk in particular as a target because of the major refinery in support of Kirkuk's oil fields; this, in conjunction with their efforts in the Gulf, was aimed at limiting Iraq's oil-production and export capabilities, which would hopefully cripple Iraq economically.⁵

Jalal Talabani and Masoud Barzani knew that if they were to make significant headway in gaining territory in northern Iraq, they needed to rely on not just the strength of their mountain strongholds but also the support of the local populations, both materially and emotionally.⁶ As such, they were working to build relationships with the rural populations in the villages surrounding Kirkuk. By late spring 1987 KDP and PUK peshmerga held the strategically significant town of Haj Omran, threatened Halabja and the Kirkuk oil fields, and effectively controlled nearly all of the territory previously allocated to them in the now-defunct autonomy agreement of 1974, excluding cities, large towns, and major roads.⁷

Seeing the advance of the Kurdish war efforts, especially considering the unity of the KDP and PUK in the Kurdistan Front, the increasing reach of the peshmerga guerrilla

⁴ Hiltermann, *A Poisonous Affair: America, Iraq, and the Gassing of Halabja*, 29.

⁵ Cordesman, *The Iran-Iraq War and Western Security 1984-87: Strategic Implications and Policy Options*, 111.

⁶ Hiltermann, *A Poisonous Affair: America, Iraq, and the Gassing of Halabja*, 93.

⁷ Ibid.

raids, and the growing public support for the Kurdish cause, Saddam instituted a change in northern Iraq. On March 18, 1987 Saddam replaced the governor of the Northern Bureau in Kirkuk, who had weakly overseen security in northern Iraq, with his own cousin Ali Hassan al-Majid, the brutally effective and efficient head of Iraq's secret police.⁸ His objective was simple, to suppress the Kurdish rebellion and punish the Kurds for their betrayal of the state in time of war. For this objective he was given wide latitude. Specifically, his aims were to depopulate the Kurdish countryside, the base of Kurdish operations and influence, and to destroy Kurdish leadership. Kurdish leaders, secure in their mountain strongholds, proved a difficult target, which forced al-Majid to turn his focus almost entirely on destroying villages and devastating the civilian populations that supported the Kurdish cause, hoping to sap the strength of the Kurdish effort by cutting off their support and destroying their will to fight. To further these ends al-Majid's primary tool was eventually chemical weapons, which led to him being infamously known as "Chemical Ali."⁹

Illustrating his intentions in unquestionably clear language, al-Majid delivered a speech in spring of 1987 to a group of party members in which he stated,

I told [the village leaders]: 'I cannot let your village stay. I will attack it with chemical weapons. Then you and your family will die'...I will kill them all with chemical weapons! Who is going to say anything? The international community? F--- them!...This is my intention. As soon as we complete the deportations we will start attacking them everywhere according to a systematic military plan, even their strongholds...I will not attack them with chemicals just one day, but I will

⁸ Ibid.

⁹ Ibid.

continue to attack them with chemicals for fifteen days. Then you will see that all the vehicles of God himself will not suffice to carry them all.¹⁰

Beginning in spring of 1987 Iraq began an offensive aimed at destroying Kurdish villages and towns, primarily in the PUK-dominated Balisan region, through the use of bulldozers and dynamite after military forces had moved into town in force. The first chemical gassing of a village took place in April at Shaikh Wisan.¹¹ The use of chemical weapons on the defenseless rural population of Kurdistan was both the first use of chemical weapons by a state on its own civilian population (without a legitimate military target) and the first direct chemical gassing of a town or village.¹² Over the following months Chemical Ali's forces moved through rural Kurdistan in the Balisan region, destroying villages and gassing towns as they went.

In June of 1987, Chemical Ali issued two standing orders in response to villagers and army deserters fleeing to Kurdish strongholds. The first order designated the "prohibited zones," target areas for the coming massacres; the order reads, "Within their jurisdiction, the armed forces must kill any human being or animal present within these areas. They are totally prohibited."¹³ The second order instructed the commanders to "carry out special strikes by artillery, helicopters and aircraft at all times of the day or

¹⁰ Ibid, 95.

¹¹ David Romano, *The Kurdish Nationalist Movement: Opportunity, Mobilization, and Identity* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006), 199.

¹² Martin van Bruinessen, "Genocide of Kurds." *Genocide: A Critical Bibliographic Review* 3 (1992): 7.

¹³ Hiltermann, *A Poisonous Affair: America, Iraq, and the Gassing of Halabja*, 99.

night in order to kill the largest number of persons present in those prohibited zones.”¹⁴

Examining these two orders in conjunction with his aggressively-worded statements to party members, Chemical Ali’s intent to kill and destroy is plain to see. The brutality inflicted on the Kurds was government policy directly initiated, planned, and orchestrated by upper Iraqi government.

These orders were carried out efficiently and effectively throughout the summer as Iraq’s forces destroyed villages and bombarded civilians throughout rural Kurdistan, largely in PUK-dominated areas, but through the rest of 1987 and early 1988 Iraq focused its attention on dealing with the multi-national naval standoffs in the Gulf, preparations for a massive war-ending campaign, and efforts to bring about the ceasefire with Iran called for by United Nations Resolution 598 in July.¹⁵

Anfal Campaign

In the early months of 1988, with the war quiet in the south, Saddam continued to build and fortify his army, recruiting well-educated college students to lead and operate the Republican Guard, which had proved crucial in defeating Iran’s Karbala campaign. Saddam was building this army in preparation for a massive campaign planned for spring of 1988; the intent of this offensive would be to push Iranian forces entirely out of Iraqi territory in the south, which would bring Iraq one step closer to ending the war. While planning what would hopefully be a decisive campaign in the south, in February Saddam

¹⁴ Ibid.

¹⁵ Ibid.

re-initiated his campaign against the Kurds in the north, this time in the official Anfal campaign. Anfal was largely the approval and continuation of Chemical Ali's efforts and offensives of the previous year, this time enacted more systematically in eight phases between February and September 1988. Instead of the free-fire zones targeting limited areas, the Anfal campaign would feature a systematically-pursued offensive moving through the regions of Kurdistan with chemical bombardment and rounding up civilians, either for execution or deportation to the desert.¹⁶

The first phase of Anfal began on February 23 with a siege of the stronghold of the PUK, in the Jaffati Valley region.¹⁷ Until this time Kurdish peshmerga had held strong against government forces in the mountainous terrain, but this led Iraq to begin the indiscriminate use of chemical weapons on a series of small Kurdish villages.¹⁸ Until this point, Iraqi use of chemical weapons in Kurdistan had largely been defensive in nature as joint Kurdish-Iranian forces attacked border towns and Iraqi forces employed gas attacks defensively. Iraq had not shied away from inflicting civilian casualties through chemical weapons in pursuance of their counteroffensives, as they pushed Kurdish forces back.¹⁹ Iraq's use of chemical weapons during Anfal, however, now targeted civilians and villages systematically. This proactive, offensive use of deadly chemical weapons is

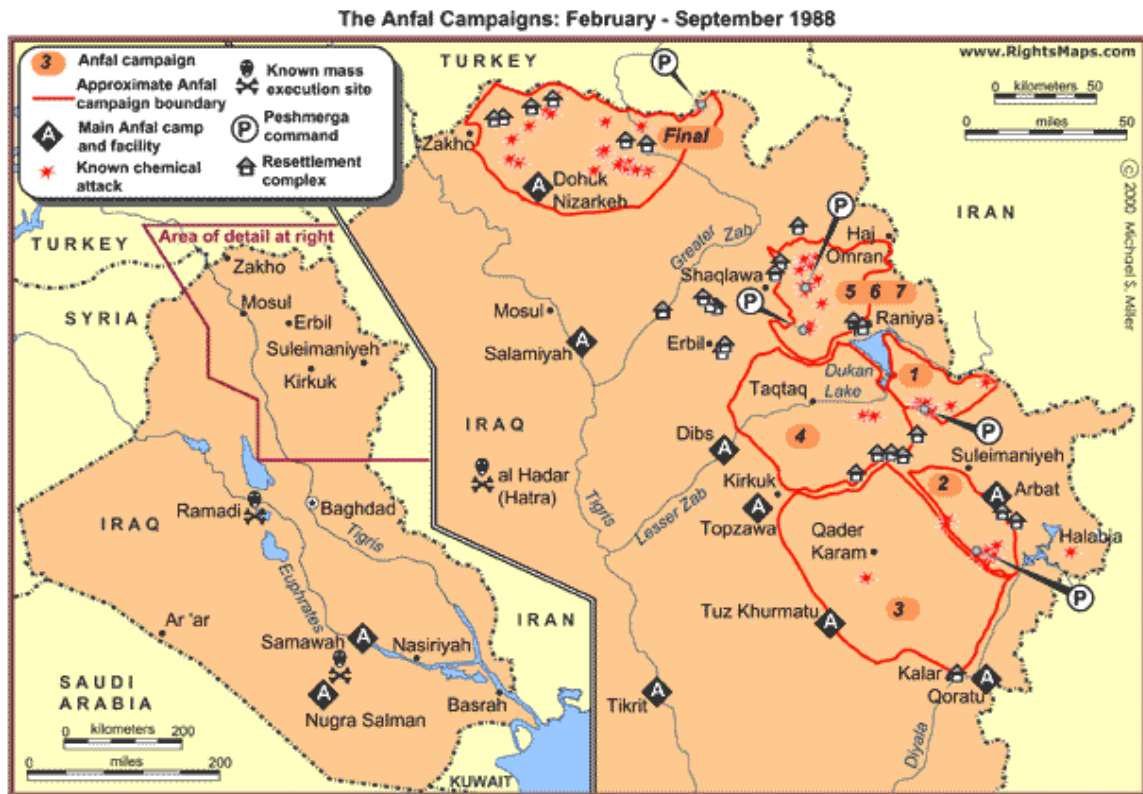
¹⁶ U.S. Congress. Senate. Committee on Committee on Foreign Relations. Kurdistan in the Time of Saddam Hussein. 102d Cong., 1st sess., 1991. S. Rep. 56.

¹⁷ Lemarchand, *Forgotten Genocides: Oblivion, Denial and Memory*, 114.

¹⁸ Ibid, 115.

¹⁹ Hiltermann, *A Poisonous Affair: America, Iraq, and the Gassing of Halabja*, 83.

another point at which it becomes clear that Iraq's ruthless offensive against the Kurdish people was explicitly planned and intentional.



Map of Anfal Campaign

PUK peshmerga responded by occupying the border town of Halabja, southeast of the targeted Jaffati Valley, in attempt to divert Iraqi attention away from the villages. Like Haj Umran, Halabja was a strategically important border town because of its proximity to a lake and dam. The Kurds' move on Halabja was costly, however, as Iraq bombarded the town of 80,000 with gas, killing as many as 5,000 civilians.²⁰ In late

²⁰ Travis, *Genocide in the Middle East: the Ottoman Empire, Iraq, and Sudan*, 400.

March the second phase of Anfal targeted the Qara Dagħ region, a heavily mountainous region slightly south of the Jaffati Valley. Again, the villages were flooded with poison gas. This time Iraq instituted a new use for chemical weapons, “Use gas to flush villagers from their homes, gather them up, take them to faraway sites, and dispose of them -- bury them under the desert sands and thereby end the Kurdish rebellion forever.”²¹ Those who escaped the chemical bombardment in the villages of Qara Dagħ were rounded up by Iraqi forces and arrested, separating men from women; many of these villagers were never seen again.²² In this way chemical weapons were used to a largely psychological effect, to terrorize Kurdish civilians and push them into the open where they could be killed.²³

The carnage intensified with the third phase of Anfal in April, which took place in a plains region west of Qara Dagħ where many of the peshmerga and civilians had fled. It was here, in these vast plains, that Iraq initiated its bloodiest offensives against women and children, though Iraq used chemical weapons sparingly here and instead attacked from several fronts with the army, pulverizing villages as they went.²⁴ In many cases Iraqi leaders offered amnesty to the fleeing villagers, only to revoke these offers of amnesty with arrests and executions. April 14, now honored by the Kurdistan Regional

²¹ Ibid, 94.

²² Lemarchand, *Forgotten Genocides: Oblivion, Denial and Memory*, 114.

²³ van Bruinessen, “Genocide of Kurds.” *Genocide: A Critical Bibliographic Review*, 7.

²⁴ Lemarchand, *Forgotten Genocides: Oblivion, Denial and Memory*, 116.

Government as Anfal Memorial Day, was a day of infamy for the Kurds because of the disappearance of thousands of women and children.²⁵

In mid-April 1988 Iraq initiated an offensive to push Iranian forces in the Al-Faw area out of Iraqi territory and bring the war to a close. The intent was to gather Iraq's forces for a large-scale push to force out the Iranians and hopefully reach an armistice; if Iran chose instead to continue the war then Iraqi leadership felt confident in the ability of their recently-rallied and better-trained army to hold firm against Iran's attacks.²⁶ This campaign, known as Tawakalna ala Allah (or "In God We Trust"), began on April 17 with an attack on Al-Faw, Iran's primary significant holding in Iraq. Iraqi forces, numbering roughly 200,000, smashed through Iran's small force of 15,000 -- significantly less than Iraqi leadership had anticipated -- and moved decisively through the Fish Lake area, the Majnoon Islands, Dehloran, and into Iran at the border town of Qasre Shirin. After penetrating into Iran forty miles, Iraqi forces held several small towns for three days, looted them of all valuable equipment, and then pulled back to the border.²⁷ With his success in driving Iranian forces out of Al Faw and the brutal efficiency and devastation of the Anfal campaign against the Kurds, Saddam had positioned himself on the precipice of bringing the war to a close on both fronts.

Saddam and Chemical Ali continued to press their advantage against the Kurds. The fourth phase of Anfal, in early May, targeted the Valley of the Lesser Zab and began with a chemical bombardment; people fled the villages and towns, forced in certain

²⁵ Ibid, 116.

²⁶ Pelletiere, *The Iran-Iraq War: Chaos in a Vacuum*, 145.

²⁷ Ibid, 142-45.

directions by the approaching Iraqi army, only to be captured and either deported or executed en masse.²⁸ It was here that Iraqi forces began instituting a policy whereby all men between the ages of 15 and 70 were executed after brief detention and interrogation, oftentimes with forced confessions; the women and children fared little better as they were deported to resettlement camps in the Arab south and left to fend for themselves.²⁹

This pattern of chemical bombardment, capture, and deportation or execution would be carried on in the fifth, sixth, and seventh phases of the Anfal campaign.³⁰ According to one estimate, “by July 45,000 out of 75,000 square kilometers of Kurdistan had been cleared of Kurds.”³¹

On July 18, 1988 Iran agreed to a ceasefire with UN Security Council Resolution 598.³² The announcement of Iran’s acquiescence by Khomeini was sudden and shocking, and it was greeted with caution by Saddam. Not trusting Khomeini’s acceptance of the ceasefire, Iraq continued to attack Iranian positions, even with chemical cyanide and mustard gas. The United Nations intervened on August 8th and declared the cease-fire would commence on August 20th, followed by negotiations in Geneva beginning on the

²⁸ Ibid, 116.

²⁹ Hiltermann, *A Poisonous Affair: America, Iraq, and the Gassing of Halabja*, 99.

³⁰ Lemarchand, *Forgotten Genocides: Oblivion, Denial and Memory*, 117.

³¹ McDowall, *A Modern History of the Kurds*, 360.

³² Romano, *The Kurdish Nationalist Movement: Opportunity, Mobilization, and Identity*, 199.

25th.³³ After eight years of fighting, the the Iran-Iraq War had finally come to a halt, but the fight continued for the Kurds.

Even after concluding the Iran-Iraq War, Saddam continued his genocide against the Kurds with the eighth and final Anfal phase, which targeted the heavily populated Badinan region of the KDP in late August and early September. This featured some of the fiercest chemical bombardments of the entire campaign; up to 80,000 civilians were forced to flee into neighboring Turkey, with tens of thousands more fleeing to Iran and more still blocked from fleeing by the Iraqi army.³⁴ A systematic pattern pervaded the campaign, “first the gas attacks to kill and terrorize the victims; then came conventional bombings, followed by ground assaults that were launched from several fronts so as to corral the survivors through a single exit,” at which point they were often interrogated and either executed or deported.³⁵ After eight months of the devastation and brutality from the Anfal campaign, not to mention Chemical Ali’s unofficial campaign of the previous spring and summer, the Kurdish genocide was over.

The total number of civilians killed or deported is difficult to ascertain with certainty because of the immense turmoil in the villages as thousands were forced to flee; in this turmoil and the execution of entire groups and families, finding the exact numbers of Kurds killed is nearly impossible. Thousands of Kurds perished immediately from Iraq’s chemical bombardment of villages; thousands more have died from cancer and

³³ O’Ballance, *The Kurdish Struggle: 1920-94*, 177.

³⁴ Lemarchand, *Forgotten Genocides: Oblivion, Denial and Memory*, 117.

³⁵ Ibid, 113.

other lingering effects of the gassing, complicating any estimate of casualties.³⁶ Equally difficult to estimate are those who perished from starvation, illness, lingering wounds, or the treacherous terrain of northern Iraq as they fled. All of this considered, an average estimate for the number of Kurds directly executed by Iraq is 70,000, according research by The Committee to Defend Anfal Victims' Rights, as well as Middle East Watch.³⁷ Considering all other factors and those not killed directly by government action, the total number of Kurds killed is estimated to be roughly 200,000.³⁸ An estimated 2,000,000 Kurds were displaced from their homes. Current estimates claim that upwards of 4,000 villages were completely destroyed in this campaign, another indicator of the incredible scale and efficiency of Anfal.³⁹

Conclusion

Saddam's Anfal campaign cannot be divorced from the immediately preceding years, the Iran-Iraq War. Baghdad dealt severely with the Kurds in the late 1970s, instituting a policy of deportation, exile, and destruction of villages, but the Kurdish problem for Iraq subsided, as it had repeatedly done throughout their history. The Iran-Iraq War, however, saw the Kurds rise back to the forefront of internal issues for Iraq, and this time the threat of the Kurds was greater than ever before. It was the development of

³⁶ Ibid, 114.

³⁷ Ibid, 120.

³⁸ Ibid, 121.

³⁹ Cordesman and Hashim, *Iraq: Sanctions and Beyond*, 75.

this threat that necessitated a strong response from Baghdad; the magnitude of this Kurdish threat is evident in three different facets.

The first of those issues was that Iraqi Kurds were working closely with Iranian forces, as well as receiving their material support. This had been the case before, especially in the early 1970s, but as the war developed Iraqi Kurdish and Iranian forces worked more closely than ever before, fighting side-by-side in joint offensives into Iraqi territory.

A second issue that increased the severity of the Kurdish threat to Iraq was the unity of the Kurdish parties in Iraq against Baghdad. With the advent of the Kurdistan Front in 1986 the Kurdish cause was united on a scale not seen since Mulla Mustafa Barzani's rebellions in the 1960s. In the years since then Saddam and the Baath had often utilized the internal bickering of the Kurdish groups to their advantage. But in a united Kurdish Front late in the Iran-Iraq War, Saddam faced a formidable threat.

Furthermore, with this united Kurdistan Front and close cooperation with Iran, the Kurds significantly threatened strategically important areas. Specifically, Kurdish forces threatened Iraqi control and effective utilization of Haj Umran, Halabja, and the Kirkuk oil fields. With the combination of Iranian cooperation and support, the union of Kurdish parties and forces, and Iraq's focus on the war in the south, Kurdish peshmerga expanded their territory throughout 1986 and early 1987. By spring of 1987 the Kurds controlled almost all of Kurdistan.

The structure of Kurdish forces and attacks, however, limited their ability to capture and control major cities; with their 2,000-3,000 man peshmerga units, the Kurds

were well-equipped for capturing villages or harassing Iraqi installations in night-time raids, but they did not have the large-scale organization or communication to mount the sophisticated attacks necessary to capture larger towns and cities, much less Chemical Ali's heavily-defended Kirkuk. Despite their cooperation with Iran and with each other, and despite rebelling against Saddam when Iraq was distracted by war with Iran, the Kurds never posed a significant threat to Saddam's regime or his control over major cities.

Ultimately, the military and strategic threat posed by the Kurds necessitated a response; Saddam's response was a campaign of genocide. This genocidal response was disproportionate and in more extreme measure than the threat that caused it. Saddam portrayed the Anfal campaign externally as counterinsurgency, as continuing the Iran-Iraq War against the Kurdish factions that were agitating against him, but this was not the case. Iraqi forces continued efforts to "Arabize" northern Iraq, they targeted civilians, they destroyed villages and infrastructure, they deported people, they forced confessions, they executed whole groups of people. To be sure, these measures may have served to sap the energy and will of the Kurdish peshmerga and leadership, but this was a disproportionate response to the Kurdish aims and efforts. The Kurds were surely a threat to Saddam's military control over northern Iraq and his political domination of government in Kurdistan, but they were in no way a threat to the existence of his regime, even during their peak cooperation with Iran in spring of 1987.

However, looking at the other factors that motivated Saddam's actions helps provide a clearer picture of what led to genocide. An analysis of the Kurdish threat in

conjunction with the combination of Saddam's "arabization" policies aimed at weakening Kurdish political weight, his desire for retribution for Kurdish treachery, and his opportunism (previously demonstrated in his treatment of the Kurds in 1975) provides an indicator of what stimulated these genocidal campaigns.

Viewing Iraq's actions against the Kurds in light of Saddam's long-standing goal of "arabizing" Kurdistan provides further perspective on his intent. With an appreciation for Iraq's previous attempts to dilute the Kurdish population, it becomes clear that the executions, deportations, and destroyed villages of the Anfal campaign were in the same vein as the prominent "arabization" attempts of the mid-1970s. The primary thing to see in Saddam's actions here is a reflection and signal of his broader aim to decrease the political weight and influence of the Kurds in Iraq. Diluting the Kurdish population of northern Iraq would serve to weaken their military capability, to be sure, but would also decrease the unity and strength of their political organization. With a diluted population, Kurdish political efforts carried less weight. Another important element of Saddam's "arabization" goal was to weaken the Kurdish claim on oil revenue from the Kirkuk oil fields, which were in contention throughout the 1960s, 1970s, and 1980s. Furthermore, in 1975 Saddam encouraged Arabs to move into Kurdistan, marry Kurds, and dilute Kurdish culture. Ultimately, all of these aspects "arabization" attempts point to Saddam's political aim to weaken the influence and weight of the Kurdish political cause in Iraq; this political goal was demonstrated in 1987-1988.

Another factor contributing to Saddam's desire to initiate a violent anti-Kurdish campaign was his desire to punish the Kurds, which was demonstrated as early as 1983

with the massacre of Barzani tribesmen as penalty for KDP rebellion. In the Iran-Iraq War Kurdish peshmerga were, for the first time, acting against the state of Iraq during full-scale war. From Saddam's perspective, the Kurds' treachery had never been worse than acting against Iraq when the very existence of state was on the line. Saddam's vindictive desire to punish the Kurds sprung from this treachery.

The final factor to examine when considering Saddam's motivation for initiating genocide against the Kurds is opportunity. Saddam's leadership of Iraq dating back even to his role as Vice-President under al-Bakr displays a certain opportunism that was demonstrated again with the Kurdish genocide. He took advantage of an opportunity to lead Iraq into a deal with the Shah of Iran in 1975 that allowed him to pursue a devastating campaign against rebellious Kurds, and he demonstrated that opportunism again in preemptively seizing the Presidency in 1979, initiating an aggressive invasion of an Iran not yet settled from revolution, and frequently using internationally-prohibited deadly chemical weapons during the Iran-Iraq War because international powers did little to stop him.

The genocide of the Kurds at the tail-end of the Iran-Iraq War again demonstrates Saddam taking advantage of an opportunity; he saw an opportunity to deal harshly with the Kurdish problem in 1975, and when, in 1987, he saw a greater opportunity to deal with the Kurdish problem, he took it. Saddam's treatment of the Kurds at two great points of opportunity demonstrates his intent; in 1975 he almost destroyed the Kurdish rebellion in Iraq, and in 1987-1988 he came even closer.

There is a sizable gap between the threat of the united Kurdistan Front and Saddam's genocidal response. Saddam's action was not one of in-kind, wartime response (or even one military action intended to strike a blow and decisively end the war). This was not a campaign of military necessity, territorial expansion, or power projection. The apparent disproportionate nature of this reaction encourages a broader examination of the range of factors motivating Saddam's actions; some of these motivating factors are independent of the magnitude of the Kurdish threat. In light of this range of factors it becomes clear that this was brutality attributable to Saddam as a unique factor, attributable only to his decision-making, as the political, military, cultural, and ethnic issues of the past twenty years were all tied up together here and brought to a head in one brutal campaign. Clearly, though, this was not a measured military response to a military threat; Anfal was a punitive campaign springing directly from the political, military, and personal goals of Saddam Hussein.

CHAPTER FIVE

Conclusion

From the very creation of the state of Iraq, the Kurds were an important factor and an often-troublesome issue. Beginning with Shaykh Mahmud and continuing with the organization of Barzani's Kurdistan Democratic Party, negotiations with various regimes in Baghdad, and the autonomy agreements of the 1970s, Iraq granted the Kurds varying degrees of freedom and limited autonomy in northern Iraq. For much of the 1960s and 1970s, however, the Kurds openly rebelled against Baghdad. Particularly under the Ba'ath Party these rebellions were met with brutality and oppression. Kurdish rebellions were harshly put down with executions, deportations, banishments, betrayals, and assassinations. When, in 1975, Iran halted all support for Iraqi Kurds, the Ba'ath initiated a devastating, brutal, and far-reaching campaign that nearly eliminated Kurdish nationalists and militias in Iraq entirely, but most of the Kurdish leadership escaped the onslaught and the Kurdish cause in Iraq continued. The Kurds persisted as a major issue for Baghdad.

That the Iran-Iraq War served to bring the Kurdish issue to the forefront in Iraq was hardly a surprise. Neither was the harsh and systematic campaign that Saddam initiated as a counter to the Kurdish threat. In this campaign Kurdish agitation was met with deportations, executions, massacres, torture, and destroyed villages, just as had been the case before, especially in the late 1970s. Iraq's Kurdish offensive was, largely, a continuation of precedent in terms of tactics and brutality.

In all of this, however, it is clear that some elements of the Anfal campaign were disruptions or changes that altered the trend of relations between the government of Iraq and the Kurds. One of those stark disruptions was the massively stepped-up scale of the campaign, in which entire valley and plains regions were marked for destruction and chemical attack. Led by Chemical Ali, huge portions of Kurdistan were marked as “prohibited zones,” where Iraqi forces had full authority to detain, torture, deport, and kill. Illustrating this increased scale, upwards of 4,000 Kurdish villages were destroyed and nearly 2,000,000 people (almost half of Iraq’s Kurdish population) were displaced from their homes.

Related to this scale increase in the way it represents a distinct change is the nature of the targets of Anfal. Civilians had been a part of Kurdish massacres before, as recently as the 1983 Barzani tribe massacre of 8,000 men, but never before had civilian centers been the primary target of a campaign. In conjunction with the dynamite and bulldozers used to flatten villages, Iraqi forces now began killing whole groups of people. Deportations to refugee camps and makeshift towns in Iraq’s southern deserts had long been a component of Iraqi tactics, but in the Anfal campaign many of the deported civilians simply disappeared, buried in the desert sand. This campaign to wipe rural Kurds off the map had the massacre of civilian populations as a primary goal; Iraqi leadership had learned that the most effective way to eliminate the Kurds as a threat was not to attack peshmerga strongholds but to target the people.

A second, and more obvious, point of discontinuity with the Anfal campaign is the fact that the means of pursuing these objectives largely revolved around the use of deadly

chemical weapons. As demonstrated so chillingly with the town of Halabja, chemical weapons were used to kill thousands of civilians quickly, quietly, and without even damaging buildings or infrastructure. Iraq developed the use of chemical weapons during the Iran-Iraq War out of necessity; it was strategically optimal for Iraq to utilize deadly chemical weapons against Iran's human-wave tactics because they could eliminate waves of Iranian troops quickly and efficiently. That efficiency led to the heavy utilization of chemical weapons against the Kurds in 1987-1988; Iraqi forces could efficiently and effectively kill thousands of Kurdish civilians, without damaging infrastructure or buildings in strategically important towns such as Halabja. Iraq's use of chemical weapons against the Kurds was clearly a stark continuity in the means utilized to pursue violent campaigns against the Kurds, and the fact that Iraq utilized deadly weaponized gas on large groups and populations further emphasizes the magnitude and scale of Iraq's targets in this sweeping campaign.

Realization of the escalation and radicalization of Iraq's treatment of the Kurds raises the question of why this was so. Looking at the various motivators previously outlined, it is clear what range of factors prompted Saddam to initiate a violent anti-Kurdish campaign, especially considering the precedent for brutality against the Kurds. Examining these factors of intent together also answers the question of why Saddam's response to the Kurdish threat appeared disproportionate. The campaigns of 1987-1988 were not simply a military response to a specific Kurdish military threat; Saddam's genocidal response was, instead, motivated by political and personal goals as well as the direct Kurdish threat. Many of these factors of intent were important for Saddam and the

Baath from 1963 onward, especially evident in Iraq's devastating anti-Kurdish campaigns in the late 1970s. It was these motivators that prompted Iraq's leadership to pursue violence against the Kurds throughout this period.

However, analyzing the issue of what caused this radical escalation in brutality in conjunction with an examination of these motivating factors in the decades leading up to Anfal, it becomes clear that the Iran-Iraq War served to bring together these various factors and amplify them with a wartime setting. The war did not create a new Kurdish problem for Iraq, but rather the development of the Kurdish opposition to Iraq during the Iran-Iraq War simply brought the issue of the Kurds to the forefront for Saddam. Longstanding factors in Iraq's brutality against the Kurds, such as Saddam's attempts at "arabization" and his opportunistic approach, became more evident in 1987-1988. These factors, tied together with a heightened desire for retribution by Saddam and the greatest threat the Kurds had ever posed to Iraq, served to provide the impetus for Saddam to initiate brutality and violence against the Kurds to an extent not previously known.

Examining the question of continuity or change for the Anfal campaign, the most appropriate answer is nuanced and complex. As with many complex questions, the most fitting answer is a combination of the two extremes. Iraq's actions during the Anfal campaign were both a continuity with what had been going on, looking at long term history and recent events, and a distinct change in some regards, as Saddam's regime pursued an offensive against the Kurdish people with previously unknown vigor. What was different with Anfal was an increase in scale, civilians as targets, and an escalation of the means utilized. In this escalation, this distinct change in the way Iraq pursued the

Anfal campaign a common theme and continuity remained: Iraqi tradition of violence, repression, deportation, and massacre of the Kurds persisted, particularly under the Ba'ath Party with Saddam Hussein as the crucial figure.

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