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THE KURDS AND THE MIDDLE EAST POLITICS: A HISTORICAL EVOLUTION

Abstract

The Gulf War was a 'critical event' for the Kurds in the Middle East politics. With the end of the Gulf War, the Kurdish issue received more attention in the West and people in many parts of the world became familiar with it. In other words, the Gulf War has not changed the existing problem itself rather it has changed the perception of the problem in other countries. The main objective of this paper is to present a brief historical evolution of the Kurdish problem in the Middle East and analyze effects of the current events, especially in the post-1991 era, on the Kurds. Special attention will be given to the effects of the war in 2003 on the Kurdish political power, especially within Iraq.

Introduction

Many changes have taken place in the Middle East politics since the end of the Gulf War of 1991. The evolution of events in northern Iraq since 1990 has been especially important for possessing the potential of causing a large destabilization in the Middle East. In the

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era following the end of the 1991 Gulf War, the Kurds, living in northern Iraq, have established an autonomous political entity in the area by taking advantage of the no-fly zone that was enforced by the US-led coalition against the Iraqi aircrafts. As a consequence of the political changes that took place in northern Iraq in the post-1991 Gulf War, the Kurds have received big media coverage in the Western world. In these new circumstances, the Kurds gained the opportunity to make their cause to be heard in various countries and many people all around the world became aware of not only the current conditions but also previous atrocities committed against the Kurds and historical evolution of the Kurdish problem.¹ In the post-September 11 era, the George W. Bush Administration launched a military campaign against Saddam Hussein in March 2003. As a result of the military campaign, Saddam Hussein's regime came to an end and Iraq went through various political changes. One of the most important changes has been the increasing power of the Kurds within Iraqi politics. Especially, when increasing power of the Kurds is taken into account, there is a need to take into consideration the events of the last two decades. By presenting a brief historical evolution of the Kurdish political power in this paper, it is argued that the 1991 Gulf War has constituted a "critical event"² for the Kurds.

The main objective of this paper is to present a brief historical evolution of the Kurdish problem in the Middle East and to analyze effects of the current events, especially in the post-1991 era, on the Kurds. The Kurdish population in the Middle East is mainly divided among four countries, Turkey, Iran, Iraq, and Syria. This paper will focus on the Kurds living in Turkey, the largest ethnic group, and the

¹ Apart from the media coverage, since 1991 even within international political institutions, the Kurdish issue received much more attention than previous decades. For example, recently the European Parliament has accepted a report about the Kurdish problem.

²Richard Pride, "How Activists and Media Frame Social Problems: Critical Events Versus Performance Trends for Schools," *Political Communication*, Vol. 12, No. 3, 1995, pp. 5-26. According to Pride, "Critical events are contextually dramatic happenings [...] Critical events are eruptions; unlike routine performance indicators, they are radical discontinuities in the real world that attract attention."

Kurds living in Iraq, the group that has received the biggest attention since the end of the 1991 Gulf War.

While analyzing the Kurdish issue in the Middle East, one of the central questions that needs to be addressed is that how did the Gulf War affect the Kurds? This question has several components. First of all, the political changes have to be analyzed. There is also a need to examine the changing perception of the Kurdish problem in Western countries. As a part of this question, there is also a need to examine whether this change in perception was explicitly toward the Kurds living in northern Iraq or was it a change for all the Kurds living in other countries in the Middle East? It is also important to examine the contemporary Kurdish problem. What kind of opportunities has become available for the Kurds in the current era? How does the current situation affect future of politics in the Middle East? While examining these questions, there is a need to present historical evolution of the Kurdish issue in the Middle East.

After presenting a brief historical background about the Kurdish problem in the first part of this paper, the 1991 Gulf War's effects on the Kurds will be examined in the second part. Since this war has had the greatest influence on the Kurds living in northern Iraq, special attention will be given to them in this part. In the last part of the paper, effects of the war in 2003 on the Kurdish political power, especially within Iraq, will be analyzed.

Evolution of the Kurdish Problem

The Kurds live mainly in the area called Mesopotamia, the region between the Euphrates and Tigris Rivers and they have very long historical background in the area. The Kurdish problem too has a long historical background and with a total population of approximately 30 million people, the Kurds are the fourth largest ethnic group in the Middle East after the Arabs, the Persians, and the Turks.³ Despite this large population size and several attempts that have been made during the twentieth century, the Kurds have not succeeded in establishing their own independent state. The Kurdish population and the problem associated with that is so significant that some authors refer to the

³ Henry J. Barkey and Graham E. Fuller, *Turkey's Kurdish Question*, Lanham: Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, Inc., 1998, p. 5.

Kurds as “the world’s largest nation without a country.”⁴ As the country where half of the total Kurdish population lives, Turkey has the largest Kurdish population in the area, a total between 12 and 18 million. Iran has approximately 6 million, Iraq 4 million, and Syria 1 million Kurds living within their territories.⁵ Apart from the Kurds living in Middle Eastern countries in the current situation, there are about 850,000 Kurds living in various European countries as a result of the migration that mainly took place during the 1990s and 500,000 to 600,000 of them are living in Germany.⁶ The presence of this large Kurdish population in Europe is another reason that made the countries outside the Middle East, especially the European Union, to be more sensitive to the Kurdish issue.

⁴ William Safire, “The Kurdish Ghost,” *The New York Times*, March 3, 2003, p. A23.

⁵ The numbers about the total Kurdish population and distribution of this population among countries vary and we are using the numbers that seem to reflect the average among various sources. All these numbers seemed to be calculated based on ethnicity but ethnicity and personal feeling about nationality may vary greatly. Some people who have Kurdish origin may not call themselves as Kurdish as they integrate within dominant culture of the country where they live. About the numbers of the Kurdish population see Erik Cornell, *Turkey in the 21st Century: Opportunities, Challenges, Threats*, Richmond: Curzon Press, 2001, p.120; Stephen Kinzer, *Crescent and Star: Turkey Between Two Worlds*, New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2001, p. 120; Michael Gunter, “The Kurdish Question and International Law,” in Ferhad Ibrahim and Gulistan Gurbey, (eds.), *The Kurdish Conflict in Turkey: Obstacles and Chances for Peace and Democracy*, New York: St. Martin’s Press, 2000, p. 31; Robert Olson, *The Kurdish Question and Turkish-Iranian Relations: From World War I to 1998*, Costa Mesa, California: Mazda Publishers, 1998, p.3; Miron Rezun, *Saddam Hussein’s Gulf Wars: Ambivalent Stakes in the Middle East*, Westport: Praeger, 1992, pp.110-111; Human Rights Watch/Middle East, *Iraq’s Crime of Genocide: The Anfal Campaign Against the Kurds*, New Haven: Yale University Press, 1995, p.18; For more conservative estimates about total Kurdish population see Paul J. White, *Primitive Rebels of Revolutionary Modernizers? The Kurdish National Movement in Turkey*, London: Zed Books, 2000, pp. 16-17.

⁶ Martin van Bruinessen, *Transnational Aspects of the Kurdish Question*, European University Institute, Working Paper RSC No. 2000/22, San Domenico, Italy: 2000, p. 24.

The Kurds have lived in the territories controlled by the Ottoman Empire for several hundred years. During this time, the Kurds revolted many times against the Ottoman central government and they became famous for their non-cooperation with the central authority.⁷ At the end of the World War I, the Ottoman Empire came to an end and the territory where the Kurds lived was divided among four major countries: Turkey, Iran, Iraq, and Syria.⁸

During the Turkish Independence War that took place after the First World War in Anatolia most of the Kurds supported Mustafa Kemal, leader of the Turkish forces that fought against foreign invaders and who later became president of the Republic of Turkey. But even during this war against foreign invaders a section of the Kurds revolted against Mustafa Kemal.⁹ The new Turkish state that was founded in 1923 put great emphasis on Turkish nationalism and most of the Kurds were not satisfied with the arrangements carried out by the state. The Kurds mostly felt offended by new policies, like prohibiting non-Turkish names¹⁰ and non-recognition of the Kurds as minority. Therefore, the Kurds revolted more than a dozen times during the 1920s and 1930s against the government in Ankara.¹¹

⁷ About Kurdish uprisings during the Ottoman era see Kendal, "The Kurds under the Ottoman Empire," in Gerard Chaliand, (ed.), *A People Without a Country: The Kurds and Kurdistan* (Translated from French by Michael Pallis), New York: Olive Branch Press, 1993, pp. 11-37.

⁸ Not all of these four countries became independent immediately after the World War I; Iraq and Syria remained under the British and French protectorate for a long time.

⁹ The most significant Kurdish revolt during this period was the one that was called as Kocgiri revolt which took place in 1920. For this issue, see White, *op. cit.*, pp. 70-73; Barkey and Fuller, *op. cit.*, p. 9.

¹⁰ A number of other policies were implemented by Mustafa Kemal to form a unified 'Turkish nation' and to westernize the Turkish society. To get an idea about the Kurdish uneasiness to these policies, see Cornell, *op. cit.*, p.123.

¹¹ For well documented history of Sheik Said rebellion, the largest Kurdish uprising, that took place in 1925, see Robert Olson, *The Emergence of Kurdish Nationalism and the Sheikh Said Rebellion, 1880-1925*, Austin, Texas: University of Texas Press, 1989.

Although there were no significant Kurdish uprisings between 1940 and 1980, uneasiness continued to exist among the Kurds in Turkey. Apart from the lack of cultural rights for the Kurds, the areas where they live remained underdeveloped and an economically inferior position to other regions in Turkey. During the 1960s, as a response to this backwardness the Kurdish students created leftist groups like many groups that were created by the Turkish students during that era. Despite these student activities during the 1960s, no powerful Kurdish group emerged until the early 1970s.¹²

The Partia Karkaren Kurdistan – Kurdistan Workers' Party (PKK) was founded in 1978 by Abdullah Ocalan as a Marxist-Leninist organization fighting for independence of the Kurds living in Turkey.¹³ Although the PKK was recruiting most of its members from Turkey, after the military coup that took place in Turkey in 1980, Ocalan and some of his close associates fled to Syria. They lived in Syria under the protection of the Syrian government until late 1998.¹⁴ For Syrian President Hafiz Assad, the PKK was a good tool to be used against Turkey.

Between 1978 and 1984, the PKK grew very fast and carried out its first terrorist act against Turkey on August 15, 1984, by killing more than a dozen people.¹⁵ According to many analysts, the PKK reached its most powerful position in the years following the Gulf War.¹⁶ The PKK continued its operations against Turkey until February 1999, when Ocalan was captured in Nairobi, Kenya, and handed over to the Turkish authorities.¹⁷ Upon capture of its leader, the PKK

¹² See White, *op. cit.*, pp. 130-134. Also see Dogu Ergil, "Aspects of the Kurdish Problem in Turkey," in Debbie Lovatt, (ed.), *Turkey Since 1970: Politics, Economics and Society*, New York: Palgrave, 2001, p.168.

¹³ In early 1970s, Ocalan was a student of Political Science at Ankara University and he was from rural southeastern part of Turkey where the Kurds are the dominant ethnic group.

¹⁴ Ergil, *op. cit.*, p. 169.

¹⁵ Kinzer, *op. cit.*, p. 112; Ergil, *ibid.*,

¹⁶ Barkey and Fuller, *op. cit.*, p. 22; Michael Radu, "Who is Abdullah Ocalan?" *Republic of Turkey, Ministry of Foreign Affairs*, available at <http://www.mfa.gov.tr/grupa/ac/acf/Radu.htm>, accessed on January 05, 2003.

¹⁷ Syria had to expel Ocalan in late 1998 upon Turkey's increasing pressure. After traveling between Russia, Italy, and Greece he was captured in Kenya

declared ceasefire and later changed its name to the Kurdistan Freedom and Democracy Congress (KADEK) in 2002. Although Ocalan received death penalty in a Turkish court, the verdict was not carried out and later on Turkey abolished the death penalty from its law mainly as a response to the European Union's demands.¹⁸ Currently, Ocalan is still in prison in Turkey and the KADEK is trying to develop political strategies rather than military ones in order to adapt itself to the new situation.

Revolts against the central authorities were not something seen solely among the Kurds living in Turkey. The Kurds in other countries too have had several conflicts with the authorities of states they are living in. From this perspective, the Kurds living in northern Iraq have been especially important. When the Iraqi and the Iranian Kurds joined their forces under the leadership of Mullah Mustafa Barzani they established the first quasi-independent state called the 'Mahabad Republic' in 1946. However, it lasted only a year before it was crushed and Barzani fled to the Soviet Union.¹⁹

As indicated earlier, there are about 4 million Kurds living in Northern Iraq.²⁰ When we look at the political structure of the Kurds in northern Iraq there are mainly two powerful Kurdish parties in that

and handed over to Turkey. For a rich analysis of the evolution of Turkey-Syria relations during 1990s and Ocalan's capture in February 1999, see, Robert Olson, *Turkey's Relations with Iran, Syria, Israel and Russia, 1991-2000: The Kurdish and Islamist Questions*, Costa Mesa, CA: Mazda Publishers, Inc., 2001, pp. 105-124. About the same issue also see, Gunter, *op. cit.*, p. 54; Ergil, *op. cit.*, pp.170-175; Kinzer, *op. cit.*, pp.119-123; Cornell, *op. cit.*, pp. 131-132.

¹⁸ Turkey is trying to get full membership of the EU and in order to consider Turkey's membership application, the EU has asked Turkey to carry out various reforms, including abolishment of the death penalty.

¹⁹ Human Rights Watch, *Genocide in Iraq: The Anfal Campaign against the Kurds*, A Middle East Watch Report, New York: Human Rights Watch, 1993. For details see, Chapter One: Ba'athis and Kurds available at www.hrw.org/reports/1993/iraqanfal/ANFAL1.htm, accessed on January 06, 2003.

²⁰ This number differs among the sources and the numbers we met. There is a range from 3.2 million to 5.6 million. Therefore, we use 4 million, which is a kind of mean for the numbers in this case, as the number of Kurds living in Northern Iraq.

area. First one is the Kurdistan Democratic Party (KDP) led by Massoud Barzani, son of the legendary Mullah Mustafa Barzani. The second big Kurdish party in northern Iraq is the Patriotic Union of Kurdistan (PUK) led by Jalal Talabani. The PUK was established in 1975 when Talabani left the KDP politburo and chose to follow a more secular leftist movement.²¹ The KDP has more feudal linkages, compared to the PUK, and it is more powerful in rural areas. On the other hand, the PUK has more influence in urban areas and less feudal structure. Apart from their struggle against Saddam Hussein, these two parties have also fought many times against each other to have greater areas of influence in northern Iraq.

In order to secure its power in Iraq at the beginning of the 1970s, the Ba'ath Party offered autonomy to the Kurds living in northern Iraq. While doing so, the regime excluded oil rich lands from the autonomous Kurdish region. The Kurds rejected this proposal but the Iraqi government unilaterally imposed this autonomy in 1974. At the same time, the government in Baghdad started its 'Arabization' policy in oil rich areas in northern Iraq. Upon this Iraqi policy the Kurds revolted against the Iraqi central government under the leadership of Mullah Mustafa Barzani and at the beginning of this revolt he was supported by Iran, Israel, and the US.²² Things changed when Iran signed a border agreement with Iraq in 1975 and withdrew its support from Barzani. With Iran's policy change toward Iraq, the US followed a similar policy and cut off aid to the KDP. When Barzani wrote to the US Secretary of State Henry Kissinger to ask for help against the Iraqi government, Kissinger did not deign to reply. Therefore, the KDP fled into Iran and Iraqi government forced tens of thousands of Kurds to leave their homes and they were relocated in south of Iraq.

In the mid and late 1970s, the Iraqi government removed more than a quarter million Kurds from Iraq's borders with Iran and Turkey. Most of those people were relocated in areas controlled by the Iraqi Army and they were forbidden to go back to their homes.²³ When Iran-Iraq war started, the KDP, this time led by Massoud Barzani, revived its alliance with Iran and in 1983 the KDP helped Iranian Army in

²¹ Human Rights Watch/A Middle East Report, *op. cit.*, p. 27.

²² *Ibid.*, p. 3.

²³ *Ibid.*, p. 3.

operations against Iraq. In addition to this KDP-Iran alliance, the KDP's major Kurdish rival, the PUK, could not reach an agreement with the Iraqi government and in 1986, Jalal Talabani also concluded a political and military agreement with Iran. As a result, rural areas in northern Iraq were liberated by the Kurdish forces and Iraqi government lost its control in these areas.

In order to deal with this Kurdish problem, the Iraqi Ba'ath Party granted special powers to Hassan al-Majid, a cousin of Saddam Hussein. Al-Majid conducted a series of military actions, called as Anfal, between 23 February and 6 September 1988 against the Kurds in northern Iraq. He described his mission as "to solve the Kurdish problem and slaughter the saboteurs." In fact, Al-Majid targeted all the Kurds living in rural areas and during the Anfal at least fifty thousand people, including many women and children, were killed. During these operations, Iraqi forces used chemical weapons along with the advanced conventional weapons. In fact, Iraq became the first state in history to attack its own civilian population with weapons of mass destruction.²⁴ During the largest chemical attack on March 16, 1988 in Halabja, between 3,200 and 5,000 civilians died.²⁵ Iraqi forces did not only kill the civilians but at the same time they destroyed about 4,000 of 5,000 Kurdish villages.

Iraq's attacks on the Kurds with chemical weapons did not receive enough attention in the Western media and at the governmental level. Most of the Western states preferred to take no action about Iraq's genocide policy.²⁶ Although in the US, the senate unanimously passed the Prevention of Genocide Act, 1988 and called for economic sanctions against Iraq, the Reagan Administration strongly opposed the senate bill. The US Secretary of State Shultz declared that "the attacks on the Kurds were 'abhorrent and unjustifiable.'" One of Shultz's deputies argued that to impose sanctions was "premature". "We need 'solid, businesslike relations' with Iraq," said another. The bottom line,

²⁴ Ibrahim al-Marashi, "Saddam's Iraq and Weapons of Mass Destruction: Iraq as Case Study of a Middle Eastern Proliferant," *Middle East Review of International Affairs*, Vol. 8, No. 3, September 2004, p. 84.

²⁵ Human Rights Watch/ A Middle East Report, *op. cit.*, pp. 1-15.

²⁶ Rezun, *op. cit.*, p. 43.

as laid out in an administration memorandum, was that “there should be no radical policy change now regarding to Iraq.”²⁷

During the Iran-Iraq war, the US supported Iraq against an unfriendly regime in Iran. The Iran-Iraq war ended in 1988 but even after that the US continued to provide economic, political and military assistance to Iraq until its invasion of Kuwait on August 2, 1990. The argument for a change in the US policy toward Iraq at the beginning of the Bush Administration did not pay enough attention and the administration did not see Iraq as a possible threat source to the US interests in the Middle East.²⁸ When George Bush took the office, he continued Reagan’s policy about Iraq and signed the National Security Directive (NSD) 26 on October 2, 1989. With NSD 26, President Bush aimed to “propose economic and political incentives for Iraq to moderate its behavior”, increase the US “influence within Iraq” and bring Saddam Hussein and his country into “the family of nations.”²⁹ The NSD 26 “noted that “access to Persian Gulf oil and the security of key friendly states in the area” remained vital to US national security and that the United States was “committed” to defending those interests, “if necessary and appropriate through the use of US military force.” The NSD 26 went on to conclude that the evolution of “normal relations between the United States and Iraq would serve our longer-term interests and promote stability in both the Gulf and the Middle East.”³⁰

The 1991 Gulf War and the Kurds in Northern Iraq

After the Gulf War conducted by the US-led international coalition against Iraq, the Kurds in northern Iraq once again revolted against the Iraqi central government. At the same time, the Shi’ites, the majority population in Iraq, also revolted against Saddam Hussein. Since the

²⁷ Bruce W. Jentleson, *With Friends Like These: Reagan, Bush, and Saddam 1982-1990*, New York: W. W. Norton & Company, 1994, pp. 68-69.

²⁸ Alexander L. George, *Bridging the Gap: Theory and Practice in Foreign Policy*, Washington, D. C.: United States Institute of Peace Press, 1993, p. 34.

²⁹ Quoted in Jentleson, *op. cit.*, pp. 15-16.

³⁰ Kenneth I. Juster, “The United States and Iraq: Perils of Engagement,” in Richard N. Haass and Meghan L. O’Sullivan, (eds.), *Honey and Vinegar: Incentives, Sanctions, and Foreign Policy*, Washington, D.C.: Brookings Institution Press, 2000, p. 55.

Shi'ites comprise about 60 percent of the Iraqi population,³¹ after the Shi'ite uprising more than 70 percent of Iraq's population became no longer under the control of the central government in Baghdad. Things were going out of US's control and therefore, instead of continuing to support the revolts against Saddam, General H. Norman Schwarzkopf³² "lifted ceasefire restrictions on Saddam's helicopter force and allowed it to crush the revolt."³³ The US had three main reasons to follow such a policy. First, the breakup of Iraq would disturb the stability in the Middle East. Second, an Iraq under the Shi'ite control would be in the benefit of Iran. Therefore, the US did not want to allow transformation of power to the Shi'ites. Third, the US wanted to see a coup led by one of Saddam Hussein's top colonels, but certainly not a widespread uncontrolled revolt.³⁴

As a result of the Iraqi Army's offensive against the Kurds in northern Iraq, tens of thousands of Kurds died and about two million Kurds left their villages and fled into the Turkish and Iranian borders.³⁵ Upon this humanitarian crisis, the UN Security Council passed the resolution 688 and authorized the use of force to protect the Kurds in northern Iraq. The US, French, and British forces established a 'safety zone' in northern Iraq to protect the Kurds against Iraqi Army's assault. Under the 'Operation Provide Comfort,' in April 1991, the US sent about 10,000 troops to protect the Kurds in northern Iraq. In addition to these US troops, other allied countries sent about 11,000 troops to the area. After this security measure, most of the displaced

³¹ Jentleson, *op. cit.*, p. 40.

³² Michael R. Gordon, "US is Wooing a Shiite Exile to Rattle Iraq," *The New York Times*, November 25, 2002, pp. A1-A14.

³³ David Wurmser, *Tyranny's Ally: America's Failure to Defeat Saddam Hussein*, Washington, D. C.: The AEI Press, 1999, p.10. Also see "Iraq Under Pressure: View From Northern Iraq," *PBS:NewsHour with Jim Lehrer*, November 28, 2002, available at http://www.pbs.org/newshour/bb/international/july-dec02/wright_11-28.html, accessed on January 13, 2003.

³⁴ Wurmser, *ibid.*, p. 10.

³⁵ Robin Wright, "Iraqi Kurds Say US is Back," *Los Angeles Times*, November 12, 2002, available at <http://www.latimes.com/news/custom/showcase/la-fg-kurds12now12.story>, accessed on January 22, 2003.

Kurds returned to their homes by the end of May 1991.³⁶ While deploying ground troops in northern Iraq the allied forces also ordered Saddam Hussein to stop flying his planes in the area north of the 36th parallel.³⁷ When the US threatened use of force, Iraq stopped its offensive against the Kurds and Saddam Hussein did not challenge this order in northern Iraq until 1996.

By Operation Provide Comfort, the US first of all wanted to protect the Kurds in northern Iraq from Saddam Hussein. In addition to this effort, the US also wanted to reassure its longstanding and strategically very important ally, Turkey, that the US was not going to destabilize its internal stability.³⁸ The main concern of Turkey was to prevent creation of an independent Kurdish state, because such a state would threaten Turkey's territorial integrity. Officially, the US is still pursuing the policy of unified Iraq and, therefore, Turkey and the US seem to be agreeing at least on the basic principles of the policy toward Iraq.³⁹

After the 1991 Gulf War, the US and its allies chose not to create a separate political entity in northern Iraq. Such an entity would disturb not only Turkey but also many other Arab states. As Byman and Waxman put it aptly, "the Arabs sympathized with the Kurds' sufferings, but they opposed any plan that might contribute to dismembering a major Arab power."⁴⁰ A new independent entity in northern Iraq would change the whole balance of power in the Middle East and obviously most of the Arab states, if not all, were not willing to see such a change in the region.

When allied forces withdrew their ground troops from northern Iraq the no-fly zones in north of the 36th parallel and south of the 32nd parallel were left in place. Originally, the no-fly zones were designed to protect the Kurds in the north and the Shi'ites in the south from the

³⁶ Daniel L. Byman and Matthew C. Waxman, *Confronting Iraq: US Policy and the Use of Force since the Gulf War*, Arlington, VA: RAND, 2000, pp. 43-44.

³⁷ Bruce W. Nelan, "A Land of Stones," *Time*, Vol. 139, No. 9, March 2, 1992.

³⁸ Byman and Waxman, *op. cit.*, p. 44.

³⁹ Kemal Balci, "US Assures Turkey, No Separate State in Iraq," *Turkish Daily News*, October 17, 2001.

⁴⁰ Byman and Waxman, *op. cit.*, p. 46.

Iraqi air strikes. Although the US claims that the no-fly zones are based on the UN Security Council Resolution 688, there are some authors suggesting that no-fly zones, in fact, do not have any bases in international law and the UN did not authorize them.⁴¹ “Since France withdrew from the northern zone at the end of 1996 and suspended its participation in the southern zone at the end of 1998,”⁴² until the beginning of the US-British war against Iraq, only the US and British aircrafts were patrolling the no-fly zones. After the French withdrawal from patrolling the zones “the US and Britain escalated their military role to include assaults on antiaircraft batteries that fired at allied aircraft enforcing the zones. This role was escalated further when antiaircraft batteries were attacked simply for locking on their radar screens on allied aircraft, even without firing. Then, the Clinton administration began attacking radar installations and other military targets within the no-fly zone, even when they were unrelated to alleged Iraqi threats against US aircraft.” Even before declaring war against Iraq, the current Bush Administration started “targeting radar and command-and-control installations well beyond the no-fly zone.”⁴³

In October 1991, the Iraqi government decided to withdraw its troops and all funding from three governorates in northern Iraq. Hence, the region came under the Kurdish control without having a formal status. Saddam Hussein imposed a blockade on the north, he also halted the payment of salaries to government officials there, ordering them back to Iraqi-held territory. Arabs working the north obeyed, but Kurdish officials remained at their posts. That is when the Kurdistan Front, the coordinating body for the various Kurdish parties, took over the administration of northern Iraq, assuming the responsibility for paying the salaries of essential workers.” In addition to Saddam Hussein’s sanctions against northern Iraq, the UN economic sanctions against Iraq were also imposed on the area.⁴⁴ When the oil-for-food

⁴¹ For the discussion about legal issue concerning no-fly zones, see Bennis, Zunes, and Honey, *op. cit.*, pp. 5-6; Sarah Graham-Brown, “No-Fly Zones: Rhetoric and Real Intentions,” *MERIP Press Information Note 49*, February 20, 2001.

⁴² Graham-Brown, *ibid.*

⁴³ Bennis, Zunes, and Honey, *op. cit.*, p.6.

⁴⁴ Jennifer Washburn, “US has to meet Responsibility to Kurds,” *Newsday*, The Long Island Newspaper, October 2, 1996.

agreement was reached, it was decided that about 15% of the total revenues from this oil trade would be spent in northern Iraq⁴⁵ but even after this arrangement the UN economic sanctions continued to affect the Kurdish population.

The no-fly zone in northern Iraq that was in effect from 1991 to March 2003 was not coincident with the line of the Iraqi troops' withdrawal. "The no-fly zone, therefore, included Mosul, still under government control, but excludes Sulaimaniyya, the largest city of the Kurdish-controlled region, along with the southern part of that governorate. Also outside the zone is the city of Kirkuk, a center of the Iraqi oil industry that remains under government control."⁴⁶

As a result of the US and British aircraft patrol on northern Iraq, the Iraqi aircrafts were no longer a danger for the Kurds. The Iraqi aircrafts were effectively deterred from flying over the area, but this restriction did not apply to the Turkish and Iranian aircrafts. In many cases, Turkey used the airspace on northern Iraq to attack the PKK and sent ground troops with temporary missions to the area. Although the UN and the EU protested Turkey's operations in northern Iraq, the US did not raise strong opposition against any of these operations.⁴⁷

While these things were going on after the 1991 Gulf War, the two main Kurdish political parties in northern Iraq, the PUK and KDP, continued their rivalry for controlling the area. During this struggle between the two parties various combinations of alliance were formed. For example, when the armed conflict erupted in July 1996, the PUK aligned itself with Iran and started being offensive against the KDP. In response, the KDP asked the US to stop the PUK. But when the US refused to intervene, the KDP sought Saddam Hussein's help. On August 1996, the Iraqi forces moved into northern Iraq and the PUK was defeated. During this operation, the Iraqi troops took much of the northern Iraq, arrested and executed many opposition members. Apart from that, thousands of opposition members were evacuated to the US. After the Iraqi-KDP victory over the PUK, the US responded to Saddam Hussein by carrying out the "Operation Desert Strike". The

⁴⁵ Peter Feuilherade, "Iraq Agrees Oil for Food Deal with UN," *The Middle East*, July/August 1996, p. 9.

⁴⁶ Graham-Brown, *op.cit.*

⁴⁷ *Ibid.*

US launched 44 cruise missiles against the targets in southern Iraq. The US also extended the no-fly zone in the southern Iraq from the 32nd parallel to 33rd parallel. After the strikes, Saddam Hussein withdrew his forces to the cease-fire line.⁴⁸

During the post-1991 Gulf War era for the first time in modern history, excluding short experience of the Mahabad Republic, the Kurds gained the opportunity to control a huge territory and since May 1992 they have had a 'democratically' elected government based in Erbil.⁴⁹ The Kurdish parliament that was established after the 1992 elections could not be effective because of the rivalry that lasted during the 1990s between the KDP and PUK. The parliament's last meeting during the 1990s was held in 1996 and it did not have any other meeting until 2002 because of the high scale military clashes between the two Kurdish parties. After this six-year of inactive role the parliament met for the first time on October 4, 2002 in Erbil. During the parliament's meetings in early November, the constitution for Regional Kurdish Authority was adopted, and Kirkuk was declared as the Kurdish region's capital⁵⁰. As mentioned earlier, this Kurdish region does not have any formal status and in the long term it will be very difficult to keep it in its current situation. There can be different scenarios for the future of northern Iraq like its full independence or its status as an autonomous region and, finally a return to the pre-1991 Gulf War conditions.

The changes that have taken place in northern Iraq after the end of the Gulf War have caused big concerns in Turkey. Turkey is not only a country where approximately half of 30 million Kurds live, but it is also a country where a serious separatist Kurdish movement took place during the 1980s and 1990s. According to the sources from the Turkish

⁴⁸ Byman and Waxman, *op. cit.*, pp. 58-59; Husayn Al-Kurdi, *What Really Happened in Iraq?*, October-September 1996, available at <http://www.sonic.net/~doret/Issues/96-10%20OCT/whatreally.html>, accessed on November 12, 2002.

⁴⁹ Chris Kutschera, "Kurds in Crisis," *The Middle East*, November 1995, p. 6.

⁵⁰ Ilnur Cevik, "Kurdish Regional Parliament Convenes in North Iraq Today," *Turkish Daily News*, October 4, 2002, available at <http://turkishdailynews.com/FrTDN/latest/for.htm>; NTVMSNBC, "Kuzey Irak Anayasasi Parlemtoda", November 1, 2002, available at <http://www.ntvmsnbc.com/news/185399.asp>, accessed on January 22, 2003.

government, during the fifteen years of conflict, from 1984 to 1999, more than 30,000 people, including the PKK members, have lost their lives, more than 3,000 Kurdish villages were destroyed and about 3,000,000 Kurds were displaced.⁵¹

Many people view the PKK as the biggest threat to the Turkish State and its territorial integrity since the foundation of the republic in 1923. At the end of the 1991 Gulf War, the PKK found a more suitable ground to increase its power as a result of the new situation that no central authority existed in northern Iraq. In addition to the absence of the central authority, the existence of about 4 million Kurds in northern Iraq gave the PKK an opportunity to move easily in that part of Iraq. As a response to the PKK's increasing activities in northern Iraq, Turkey cooperated with the Kurdish parties in the region, mainly with Barzani and to smaller degree with Talabani, against the PKK. The KDP did not want its relations with Turkey to be jeopardized because of the operations carried out by PKK at Iraqi-Turkish border. Therefore, in fall of 1992, Barzani's forces, with the assistance of Turkey, fought against the PKK, and at the end of these battles the PKK lost several of its bases in northern Iraq.⁵² When a full-scale fighting broke out between the KDP and PUK in May 1994, the former took advantage of the situation and reestablished new bases in northern Iraq near the border with Turkey. In order to prevent existence of PKK in the area, Turkey launched several cross-border operations into northern Iraq. As a result of the Turkish Army's cross-border operations, by 1997-98, PKK's ability to operate from northern Iraq had significantly declined.⁵³ As mentioned earlier, the Iraqi aircrafts were effectively deterred from flying over no-fly zones but this restriction did not apply to the Turkish aircrafts. From time to time

⁵¹ Again, these numbers include PKK members that were killed by the Turkish security forces and PKK has also blamed the Turkish Army for death of civilians in eastern part of Turkey. These numbers are quoted in Gunter, *op. cit.*, p.54.

⁵² Ferhad Ibrahim, "The 'Foreign Policy' of the PKK: Regional Enemies and Allies," in Ferhad Ibrahim and Gulistan Gurbey, (eds.), *The Kurdish Conflict in Turkey: Obstacles and Chances for Peace and Democracy*, New York: St. Martin's Press, 2000, p.106.

⁵³ William Hale, *Turkish Foreign Policy: 1774-2000*, London: Frank Cass, 2000, pp.307-311.

some people in the US have suggested Turkey's seizure of Northern Iraq as the most convenient alternative for both the US and Turkey.⁵⁴ Even the Kurdish leaders in Northern Iraq namely, Barzani and Talabani, considered the possibility of joining Turkey as an alternative immediately after the 1991 Gulf War. During their visits to Turkey they raised this possibility publicly. The Turkish President of that time, Turgut Ozal, rejected this offer. Turkey already had problems with the PKK's uprising and such a territorial expansion would just contribute to make Turkey's internal Kurdish problem much more severe.

US War on Iraq and the Kurds

Many external actors have played very significant role in the Kurdish issue and it is quite probable that these actors rather than the Kurds themselves will shape the future of the Kurds. In the current circumstances, it will not be wrong to say that the US is the most important external actor in the Kurdish issue. Since we cannot expect the US or any other country in that matter, to follow a policy against its own interests, while analyzing the US's Kurdish issue we should keep in mind the US interests in the Middle East. It has been widely accepted by many scholars, policy makers, and government officials that maintaining the flow of oil and gas from the Persian Gulf at reasonable prices is one of the most important national interests of the US. Oil is not the sole interest the US has in Middle East. Besides the oil factor, the US has many other national interests in the Middle East: ensuring security of Israel, maintaining stability in the region, halting proliferation of weapons of mass destruction, and preventing emergence of a dominant or regional influential power hostile to the US.⁵⁵

⁵⁴ John O'Sullivan, "If at first... (Turkey Should Seize Northern Iraq Territory) (Editorial)," *National Review*, Vol.48, No.19, October 14, 1996.

⁵⁵ There are many different views about the US national interests in the Middle East and instead of listing all these interests in this paper, we have presented the ones that have been cited quite often. For various thoughts and lists about the US interests in the Middle East, see Donald E. Nuechterlein, *America Recommitted: A Superpower Assesses Its Role in a Turbulent World*, 2nd ed. Kentucky: The University Press of Kentucky, 2001, pp.200-202; Juster, *op. cit.*, pp. 51-69; Richard M. Preece, *CRS Report for Congress: United States-Iraqi Relations*, Congressional Research Service, The Library of

Creation of an independent Kurdish state in northern Iraq would not only cause destabilization in the Middle East, but also by weakening Iraq's power would provide Iran a higher influence in the region. Therefore, it is not very desirable for the US to see an independent Kurdish state emerging in the Middle East. When the current Bush Administration was preparing to go to war against Iraq by holding several meetings with the Kurdish parties in northern Iraq, it tried to ensure, as a form of guarantee, from the Kurds that they would not be seeking independence in case of a war in this region. Although the military campaign against Saddam Hussein did not last long and took less than two months for George W. Bush to declare the victory⁵⁶, the post-war era proved to be more challenging to manage. After the fall of Saddam regime, Iraq went through a religio-sectarian violence in the intra-state level and within the chaotic situation, the Kurdish areas seem to be most stable part of Iraq. As a result of this new political environment in the post-war era, the Iraqi Kurds have gained many new rights and along these new rights they have gained power, too.

Theoretically, the Kurds in northern Iraq are not independent now, but they have a powerful state structure; they have an army, and although they are still part of Iraq, they are affected very little by the central government in Baghdad. In addition to these factors, Kurdish leaders have been able to control the most important positions within the central Iraqi government. The leader of PUK, Jalal Talabani, as being the president of Iraqi government, is holding the highest position within the central government. In addition to this, the former

Congress, July 30, 1986, p.12; Alan Friedman, *Spider's Web: The Secret History of How the White House Illegally Armed Iraq*, New York: Bantam Books, 1993; Valerie Seward, *The Middle East After the Gulf War*, London: Wilton Park Papers 53, March 1992, p.7; Richard N. Perle, "Iraq: Saddam Unbound," in Robert Kagan and William Kristol, (eds.), *Present Dangers: Crisis and Opportunity in American Foreign and Defense Policy*, San Francisco, California: Encounter Books, 2000, pp.99-110; Statement by Madeleine K. Albright, Secretary of State, *Preserving Principle and Safeguarding Stability: United States Policy Toward Iraq*, Washington, D.C.: Department of State, March 26, 1997; Phyllis Bennis, "And They Called It Peace: US Policy on Iraq," *Middle East Report*, No. 215, Summer 2000.

⁵⁶ Timothy Garden, "Iraq: The Military Campaign," *International Affairs*, Vol.79, No.4, 2003, pp.701-708.

spokesman of KDP, Hoshyar Zebari, has been the foreign minister of the central government since 2003. Ironically, these two members of central Iraqi government are members of Kurdish parties, who do not hesitate to talk about possibility of an independent Kurdish state in the future. The Kurdish region that was divided between the KDP and the PUK for decades has been united since May 8, 2006 as the Regional Kurdish Government. Although it is difficult to predict the unity of Iraqi Kurds, so far they have been successful in developing common policies against other groups within Iraq.⁵⁷

When it comes to the Kurdish issue, Turkey is another important international actor. Since 1991, Turkey has continuously supported territorial integrity of Iraq and opposed any independent Kurdish state in the region. This is a reflection of Turkey's security concerns because of the large Kurdish population within its territories. Turkish authorities are panicked that any independent Kurdish state would affect the Kurds living in Turkey and at the end would threaten Turkey's territorial integrity. Although Turkey cooperated with the KDP and PUK, it was always suspicious about their real intentions. Although leaders of both parties, Barzani and Talabani respectively, made several declarations about having no intention of declaring an independent Kurdish state in northern Iraq in the contemporary situation, especially Barzani, several times has indicated the Kurdish right to and dream about an independent state. Barzani has repeated his position on this issue during the US Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice's visit to Iraq on October 05, 2006. Therefore, Turkey's security concerns have not been satisfied by the existing situation. In the current situation, the two parties are officially still supporting the territorial integrity of Iraq and demanding a federal status within Iraq in the post-Saddam era.

When the probability of the US intervention appeared to be high, the Turkish authorities repeated the unacceptability of an independent Kurdish state in northern Iraq. At the same time, the plan for the Kurdish parliament's first meeting in six years had increased Turkey's concerns about northern Iraq. Upon this change, the former Turkish

⁵⁷ Patrick Cockburn, "Kuzey Irak Giderek Bağımsızlığa Yaklaşıyor," *Radikal*, (in Turkish), June 25, 2006, p. 10.

Prime Minister, Bulent Ecevit, in October 2002, declared once again that Turkey wants "Iraqi territorial integrity to be firmly secured." Furthermore, Ecevit warned the Kurdish parliament by saying that "if it goes beyond limits, Turkey will take every necessary measure against such a situation." More explicitly, Ecevit said that Turkey would "intervene with all its weight" if the *de facto* Kurdish state inclined to be more official one.⁵⁸ In fact, this was not a change in Turkey's policy and it is the position of the Turkish National Security Council. As an influential Turkish columnist Cengiz Candar puts it, "in a possible operation against Iraq what the Turks asked from Americans were guarantees for the territorial integrity of Iraq." This is, in Candar's words, "not the kind of relationship that the Turks asking to the Americans, 'please stop the Kurds from forming an independent state.' It is a declaration on the Turkish part to the Americans that we will not permit it."⁵⁹

After the Kurdish parliament's meeting on October 4, 2002, the Turkish officials became much more concerned about the future of northern Iraq. In an interview former Prime Minister, Ecevit, said that Turkey did not "want war" but it [Turkey] was "drifting into it with developments."⁶⁰ On various occasions other Turkish officials raised their concern about the same issue. Some Turkish officials believe that "some people in Washington are 'encouraging' the Iraqi Kurds and are also inclined in playing the 'Kurdish card'"⁶¹ against Turkey. Although

⁵⁸ *Turkish Daily News*, "Turkey Serves Veiled Warning to Iraqi Kurds," October 4, 2002, available at <http://www.turkishdailynews.com/FrTDN/latest/for.htm>, accessed on November 22, 2002.

⁵⁹ Quoted in reports of Elisabeth Farnsworth, "Reluctant Ally: Turkey and the Iraqi Kurds," *PBS News Hour with Jim Lehrer*, October 23, 2002, available at http://www.pbs.org/newshour/bb/middle_east/july-dec02/kurds_10-23.html, accessed on January 26, 2003.

⁶⁰ Fikret Bila, "Gelismeler bizi savasa surukluyor," *Milliyet*, (in Turkish), October 14, 2002, available at <http://www.milliyet.com.tr/2002/10/13/yazar/bila.html>; About the analysis of the same interview see, Mete Belovacikli, "Kirkuk-Ankara line," *Turkish Daily News*, October 16, 2002, available at <http://www.turkishdailynews.com/FrTDN/latest/mete.htm>, accessed on January 16, 2003.

⁶¹ "Turkey to US: Make up your Mind on Iraq," *Turkish Daily News*, October 23, 2002, available at <http://www.turkishdailynews.com/FrTDN/latest/for.htm>, accessed on January 22, 2003.

the US officially continues to support territorial integrity of Iraq, from some Turkish officials' perspective, former US Secretary of State, Colin Powell's letter to the Kurdish parliament is an indicator of the US's support to an independent Kurdish state in northern Iraq.⁶²

Apart from opposing creation of an independent Kurdish state in northern Iraq, Turkey also demands a fair representation of Turkmen minority in the Kurdish parliament. The Turkmen were invited to the Kurdish parliament's meeting that was held on October 4, 2002, but they rejected to join it because they claimed that they were under represented in this parliament.⁶³ In northern Iraq about 15% of the population are Turkmen.⁶⁴ "The Turkmen have lived for millennia in northern Iraq, especially in the oil-rich region around the cities of Kirkuk and Mosul. Like the Kurds, Turkmen want autonomy in that region in a federal Iraq if Saddam Hussein is overthrown."⁶⁵

The new government in Ankara that came to power after November 3, 2002 elections has followed the previous government's policy toward Iraq. The Turkish parliament, where the Justice and Development Party (AKP-Adalet ve Kalkinma Partisi) has the majority of seats, rejected the bill allowing the US troops to use the Turkish territories. Rejection of this bill also limited Turkey's ability to have a greater influence in northern Iraq. Because according to the previous negotiations between the US and the Turkish government, the Turkish troops would take part in operations in northern Iraq alongside

⁶² For the text of this letter see, Colin L. Powell. "Message to Joint Assembly of the Kurdish Parliament," October 4, 2002, available at <http://www.krg.org/news/powel-letter-4october2002.asp>, accessed on January 22, 2003.

⁶³ Ilnur Cevik, "PUK to host 2nd Session of Kurdish Parliament," *Turkish Daily News*, October 8, 2002, available at <http://www.turkishdailynews.com/FrTDN/latest/for.htm>; Murat Akgun, "Turkmenler esit sartlar istiyor," *NTVMSNBC*, October 4, 2002, available at <http://www.ntvmsnbc.com/news/180038.asp>, accessed on January 26, 2003.

⁶⁴ In an interview conducted by Elisabeth Farnsworth, Orhan Ketene from Iraqi Turkmen Front claimed that Turkmen are about 13 to 15 percent of the total population in northern Iraq. In another interview conducted by Murat Akgun, Turkmen representative Mustafa Ziya claimed that 20 percent of the total population in northern Iraq is Turkmen. For details, see, footnotes 59 and 63.

⁶⁵ Farnsworth, *ibid.*

the US troops. In the era following the Second Gulf War in 2003, Turkey has made several attempts to prevent emergence of an independent state in northern Iraq. In addition to these attempts, the PKK is still using northern Iraq as a base for its operations against Turkey and the Turkish government has been trying to develop a new mechanism with the US to end PKK's presence in northern Iraq.⁶⁶ The US seems to be willing to end the PKK presence in that area because in the current Iraqi territory, northern Iraq is the only stable area that the PKK may jeopardize.⁶⁷

Turkey is not the only country that has concerns about creation of an independent Kurdish state in the Middle East. Other countries in the Middle East, especially Iran and Syria, which have significant Kurdish population within their territories, are opposing such a new entity in the region as well. These countries are not opposing only the creation of an independent Kurdish state but also any change to the *status quo* in the region.

Conclusion

The Kurds in northern Iraq once again found themselves in the middle of the ongoing war between the US-led forces and Iraq. In the Middle Eastern political arena, there are so many signals about what they intend to do and how they are going to pursue their goals.⁶⁸ The Kurds in Iraq cooperated with the US and Britain against Saddam Hussein, but this did not end decade-long disagreements among the Kurds. Although in the current situation, Kurds in northern Iraq have gained autonomy from the central Iraqi government, they are still skeptical about intentions of the US in Iraq. It is because of the Kurds' previous experiences with the US in 1975 and 1991 that have taught them, if anything else, not to rely on the US.

⁶⁶ Both countries have recently appointed a coordinator to deal with this issue.

⁶⁷ Deniz Zeyrek, "ABD'siz bir operasyon çok zor", *Radikal*, (in Turkish) July 19, 2006, p. 6.

⁶⁸ For the perspectives from the Kurds about ongoing events, see *Kurdish Regional Government*, available at <http://www.krg.org/> ; *Kurdish Media*, available at <http://www.kurdishmedia.com>, accessed on February 20, 2003.

Any change in northern Iraq will inevitably affect the Kurds living in other countries. Now many countries are worried about how to hold Iraq together without creating a larger destabilization in the Middle East. In other words, currently main concern of many states in the Middle East is to preserve the *status quo* if this is not possible to get the most preferable outcome for their national interests. Although it is possible that the Kurds are going to be the group that is affected most by ongoing situation, they do not have much power to shape the overall outcome. Their history has taught them not to trust the big powers but it seems that they are following the path they followed several times in the past. Nonetheless, they hope that history will not repeat itself. But the existing reality and critical development essentially do not bring prospect of materialization of this sort of conclusive outcome in the near future. Effective stand basing on past experiences and dynamic diplomacy of the Kurds will ultimately bring a new chapter for all.