

The Kurdish Question in Iraq, 1914-1974

Dr Gareth Stansfield, University of Exeter

Introduction

Before the defeat of the Ottoman Empire, the ‘Kurdish Question’ did not exist. The Kurds – a distinct people of Indo-European origin speaking a language most closely related to Persian – inhabit the mountainous areas that sit astride the border regions of Turkey, Iraq, Iran, and Syria. But, in 1914, this border region was part of the Ottoman and Qajar empires and only rarely had individual Kurds raised nationalist notions. This would change in the aftermath of the Ottoman Empire’s defeat. Following the occupation of the *vilayets* (provinces) of Basra and Baghdad by British forces during World War I, the situation of the predominantly Kurdish-populated *vilayet* of Mosul became of increasing importance due to its strategic location and the presence of newly found hydro-carbon reserves near to the city of Kirkuk. With the carving out of new states from the territories of the Ottoman Empire, the ‘Kurdish Question’ was aired for the first time and focused upon whether the Kurds should be granted an independent state, or whether it would be more beneficial – from the perspective of the imperial powers – to incorporate them into other states dominated by other peoples. This question developed over subsequent decades into one of how to manage the Kurds within the confines of states defined by the nationalist projects of Arabs, Turks, or Persians.

The Kurds in World War I

The Kurds in World War I were roughly divided into those that were pro-Ottoman, and those that were pro-British. The most notable of the latter group was the prominent Kurdish leader [Sheikh Mahmoud Barzinji](#) who was the pre-eminent figure of authority in and around the city of Suleimaniyya. With his pro-British credentials, Sheikh Mahmoud was identified by the British as being an ideal figure capable of keeping the Mosul *vilayet* firmly under control. The first British political officer to negotiate with Kurdish leaders was [Major E. M. Noel](#), a figure with considerable experience among Kurdish communities in Diyarbakir, who was tasked with visiting Kurdistan in November 1918 to appoint Sheikh Mahmoud as Britain’s representative in Suleimaniyya. However, British policy was already at odds with the aspirations of the Kurds. While the British were increasingly of the opinion that Kurdistan would fall within the boundaries of the new Iraqi state, Sheikh Mahmoud and other Kurdish tribal leaders were adamant that Kurdistan should be separated from Iraq and not be administered from Baghdad.

Sheikh Mahmoud was confirmed as the governor (*hukumdar*) of Suleimaniyya on 1 December 1918, with his authority derived from the British administration. However, this is not how Sheikh Mahmoud acted when in post. Rather than accepting his limited governorship, Sheikh Mahmoud believed that he now had authority over all the Kurds of the Mosul *vilayet* and quickly began to use his new-found power to consolidate his power-base. A new political officer, Major E. B. Soane was rapidly despatched to Kurdistan to rein in the errant sheikh. Far less sympathetic to the vanity of Sheikh Mahmoud than was Noel, the appointment of Soane spurred Sheikh Mahmoud into raising a tribal army and, on 23 May 1919, he ordered the arrest of all British personnel in Suleimaniyya. Sheikh Mahmoud, now the self-proclaimed '[King of Kurdistan](#)', would only be defeated by the British at the end of June 1919. He was then sent into exile but the fire of Kurdish nationalism in Iraq had been lit.

Gaining and Losing Kurdistan

Meanwhile, Britain had other issues to deal with in addition to managing the domestic politics of the Mosul *vilayet*. The emergence of a new nationalist government in Turkey led by Mustafa Kemal Atatürk forced Britain to renege on earlier promises made to the Kurds in the Treaty of Sèvres of August 1920. The terms of this treaty made provision for an independent Kurdish state to be carved out of south-east Anatolia, with the Kurds of the Mosul *vilayet* then given the option of joining the new state at a later date (Section III, Articles 62-64). If the terms of the treaty had been implemented, it is likely that there would be a Kurdish state on the map of the contemporary Middle East. However, it was not to be. The war-weary British were in no mood to force the terms of Sèvres upon Atatürk's newly reinvigorated Turkish state. Replacing Sèvres, the Treaty of Lausanne of July 1923 did not mention Kurdish independence but partitioned Kurdistan into the various components of the coalescing state system. Northern Kurdistan (i.e. the Kurdish areas north of the Mosul *vilayet*) was recognized as being Turkish territory, with the Mosul *vilayet* falling under the *de facto* control of British-mandated Iraq.

Even then, the British had to remain vigilant in withstanding Turkish pressure to annex the Mosul *vilayet*. But there were now two major reasons why London would ensure that the southern Kurds would remain part of Iraq. The first reason was that the scale of the oil reserves situated around Kirkuk was becoming increasingly apparent and, with the Royal Navy moving from operating coal-fired to oil-fired vessels, the Mosul *vilayet* became of significant geopolitical value. The second, related, reason was that the British military remained seriously damaged by the exertions of World War I, and the depleted British treasury was also incapable of funding expensive overseas defensive arrangements. Quite simply, Iraq, and [its oil fields](#), could be defended at far less cost from behind the natural topographical barrier of the mountains of the Mosul *vilayet*, rather than the expansive plains of

the *jazira*. The Iraqi-Turkish boundary was identified by a [League of Nations commission](#) that reported its findings in December 1925. The former Ottoman *vilayet* of Mosul was awarded to Iraq, effectively removing the possibility of a Kurdish state emerging for nearly the next century. It also brought the Kurds of this area into the political orbit of a newly-formed Arab-dominated government in Baghdad.

Tribal and Nationalist Revolts

With the chances of an independent Kurdistan being granted quashed, the remainder of the 1920s proved to be a relatively calm period for the Kurds in Iraq. The new Iraqi government seemed content to recognize Kurds as being an integral part of the new state, and the Kurdish population proved willing to participate in elections, thereby giving their collective consent to their inclusion in the new entity. But Kurdish calmness was intrinsically tied to the perception that their rights were being protected by the British. When it became apparent in 1929 that Iraq would seek entry into the League of Nations and thereby secure its independence from Britain, Kurdish concerns about how they would be treated by the Iraqi government again resurfaced. [Petitions](#) were signed by the leading Kurdish tribes that sought autonomy under British auspices, but it was not only the tribes that were now agitated. This time, the urban-based Kurds of the towns and cities of the north began to express their discomfort through a Kurdish nationalist discourse. This discomfort reached dangerous levels in Suleimaniyya in September 1930, when a demonstration collapsed into violence, resulting in the deaths of 14 civilians. Seizing the opportunity, Sheikh Mahmud once again joined the fray by demanding an independent Kurdish state, crossing the border into Iraq from Iran and raising a tribal army. This time, however, he was quickly defeated at Penjwin in May 1931 and sent into exile in southern Iraq, but the rising nationalist sentiment had brought another family to the fore – the Barzanis – and ensured that the cities of Kurdistan were increasingly nationalist in their outlook.

The Formation of the Kurdish Democratic Party

Kurdish nationalism had therefore emerged as a dynamic that the Iraqi government, and their British advisors, could no longer ignore. Following Sheikh Mahmud's final defeat at Penjwin, other tribal leaders had emerged – most notably Sheikh Ahmed Barzani – and the massacre in Suleimaniyya in 1930 also fuelled further the animosity growing toward the organs and officials of the Iraqi state. But the Kurds were divided between the prominent, rurally-based, tribes, and the urbanite intelligentsia of the major cities and towns. The two had few points of commonality, beyond opposition to Baghdad (again for different reasons). The tribes focused principally upon their land ownership and only afterwards on greater notions of Kurdish nationalism, if at all. The urbanites, conversely, viewed with

unbridled opposition the tribal way of life and were instead motivated by *Kurdayeti* (Kurdish-ness) and promoting the Kurds' right to self-determination.

The two sides of the movement had little contact in the late 1930s. New political parties emerged in the cities of Suleimaniyya and Erbil with leftist and nationalist orientations, but their membership was almost wholly city-based. In the mountains, the tribes continued with their sporadic rebellions against the government, with [Mulla Mustafa Barzani](#) clashing with police in 1943 in an event that would elevate him from tribal leader to nationalist symbol. But the two sides ultimately needed each other. Barzani needed the ability of the leftists to influence the political tide of the cities, and the leftists could not seriously promote the Kurdish agenda without the unifying effect of the charismatic and popular Barzani. The [Kurdish \(later, Kurdistan\) Democratic Party](#) (KDP) was therefore formed on 16 August 1946 as an awkward but necessary alliance between the tribal, rurally-based Kurds and their urban-dwelling, generally leftist-oriented cousins.

The KDP would soon fall under the control of the leftists and in particular the erudite Ibrahim Ahmed, as Barzani himself could not return to Iraq from his exile in Iran. With the Iraqi government attempting to arrest him, and the Iranian government wishing to inflict upon him the same fate as that suffered by Qazi Mohammed in Mahabad, of hanging, Barzani had little choice but to flee north with his closest followers and seek refuge in the Soviet Union. He would not return to Kurdistan or Iraq until the overthrowing of the monarchy and his subsequent pardoning in 1958 by Abd al-Karim Qasim.

The Kurdish Revolution

The 1950s was, in many respects, a difficult decade for the Kurds in Iraq but not because of tribal unrest or government oppression. Rather, socio-economic developments principally caused by the expansion of the oil industry caused population movements to the cities from the rural areas. The rising urban population combined with the fact that Iraq's oil wealth failed to trickle down to the lower echelons of society, all provided the KDP and other leftist parties (such as the Iraqi Communist Party (ICP)) with ample opportunities to recruit to their ranks disgruntled Kurds. The KDP grew and a new leadership was appointed in 1956, with Jalal Talabani now coming to the fore. As a major leftist political force, the KDP had steadily distanced itself from the monarchy and had contacts with Qasim's Free Officers. When the monarchy was deposed on 14 July 1958, Qasim showed his gratitude to the Kurds by issuing a new provisional constitution stating that 'the Kurds and the Arabs are partners within the Iraqi nation' and, more importantly, allowing [Mulla Mustafa Barzani](#) to return to Iraq.

Barzani returned to a very different KDP than that which he agreed to lead in 1946. By 1958, it had turned into a left-wing, socialist, party with strong links to the ICP and with a support base in Kurdistan's major now expansive urban areas. Furthermore, a new cadre of leaders had emerged in Barzani's absence, with Ibrahim Ahmed and Jalal Talabani now challenging what had previously been seen as the undisputed right of Barzani to lead the movement. But Barzani still had his own constituency among the tribes of Kurdistan, particularly as they recognized him as a figure that could influence Qasim's policies and it would not take him long to rebuild his authority, whether by force or by diplomacy. His success at achieving this was met with concern in Baghdad, as the Iraqi government again had to deal with renewed Kurdish demands for improved rights. The collapse into rebellion happened almost inadvertently, with disgruntled Kurdish landholders taking action against the land reforms. As this happened, Barzani attacked those tribes opposing him in order to consolidate his position, and then mobilized his forces against the Iraqi state and army. On 11 September 1961, Barzani issued a proclamation to all Kurds to take up arms against the forces of the Iraqi government, in what Kurds refer to as the '[Kurdish Revolution](#)'. It would be a revolution that would continue, in a variety of forms, until 2003.

The Kurdish Civil War

The 1960s was a tortuous decade for Iraq, with changes of government occurring in 1963 and 1968, and with the Kurdish rebellion going from strength to strength. But the Kurds themselves were struggling to maintain their unity as the division between Barzani and the leftists became wider. The first indications of serious political differences within the ranks of the KDP became apparent in the mid-1960s and again reflected the dual-nature of the party. The uneasy alliance between tribal conservatives and urban leftists had, by the mid-1960s, deteriorated into dangerous squabbling as each faction began to view the other with heightened suspicion. The main point of contestation was over the leadership style of Mustafa Barzani and particularly his tendency to ignore the political bureau of the KDP when formulating strategies and making decisions. By 1964, the [disagreements](#) escalated into full-scale confrontation as the principal leaders of the political bureau, namely Ibrahim Ahmed and Jalal Talabani, sought to expel Barzani from the party. While they ultimately failed to do this, the fault-line between those who would support the undisputed right of Barzani to lead the Kurdish national movement and those who favoured the leftist agenda of Ahmed and Talabani, had opened.

The existence of this fracture made it a relatively straightforward task for the Iraqi government to further weaken the Kurdish political front by supporting one group against the other, which happened at regular intervals from the mid-1960s through to 1996. The first occurrence of this saw the Ahmed-

Talabani faction receive support from Baghdad to take up arms against Barzani in 1966. But, with support coming to Barzani from Iran and Israel, the Kurdish revolution continued and was firmly under the control of Barzani. The return of the Ba'th Party to power in 1968 would herald in a new era in which the Kurds of Iraq would gain more than they had ever won before, but also endure almost unimaginable levels of suffering and hardship.

The March Agreement and the Autonomy Law

As a new revolutionary government, the Ba'th regime proved unable to defeat the forces of Barzani and the KDP, even though they continued to support the Ahmed-Talabani faction against Barzani. Taking advantage of the situation, Barzani escalated the fighting throughout 1969, attacking the oil installations of Kirkuk, and benefiting from the support of Iran. These successes forced the Iraqi government to negotiate with Barzani in December but, even though Baghdad was very much weakened, the Ba'th regime still could not meet Barzani's demand of not only having an autonomous region for the Kurds, but of also including Kirkuk within it. Instead, the Iraqi government insisted that the boundary of Kurdistan in Iraq would depend upon where there existed a proven majority, to be decided in a future plebiscite. But Barzani was in a position of some strength and, with the major concern of the Ba'th regime being to merely survive in power, the vice-president of Iraq, Saddam Hussein, was despatched to Kurdistan to reach an agreement with Barzani. Saddam's position of weakness was duly emphasised by him presenting Barzani with blank sheets of paper on which the Kurdish demands should be written. These demands formed the basis of the March Agreement of 1970.

Quite simply, until the post-2003 period, the March Agreement was the best deal ever offered to the Kurds. A special commission of prominent Kurds and Arabs was established in order to consider where Kurdistan's boundary should lie, and President Hassan al-Bakr appointed five Kurds to the cabinet in Baghdad. Furthermore, the governorates of Dohuk, Erbil, and Suleimaniyya constituted, in effect, a *de facto* autonomous Kurdish region governed by the KDP.

But the relationship between the KDP and the Ba'th had never been one based on trust and both sides began to make demands of the other, or not meet key parts of the agreement. Barzani attempted to include more demands, including the removal of the Iraqi army from Kurdistan, but also failed to secure the border regions with Iran – something which caused Baghdad considerable cause for concern. As far as the KDP and Barzani were concerned, the Ba'th had failed to appoint Kurds to prominent positions in government and the military; had not supported the return of dispossessed Kurds to their villages; and even attempted to assassinate Mulla Mustafa himself in 1971. Barzani

remained confident that his forces were more than equal to those available to the Iraqi government, particularly as he was sure that he could rely upon the support of Iran and even the US in his struggle against the Iraqi government. However, with hindsight, he was sorely mistaken. While Mulla Mustafa was again increasing his demands by demanding the inclusion of Kirkuk into a Kurdish region, Saddam was already negotiating a *quid pro quo* arrangement with the Shah of Iran. The price was simple – for Iran to abandon the Kurdish rebellion in Iraq, Saddam would cede control of the Shatt al-Arab waterway in the south of the country.

With this understanding in place, the Ba’th regime announced its intention to draft an autonomy law for Kurdistan and held discussions with 600 anti-Barzani Kurds. The [Autonomy Law](#) of 11 March 1974 still offered the Kurds more than they had ever received before (apart from those terms of the March Agreement), but fell short of Barzani’s demands regarding Kirkuk’s inclusion into a Kurdistan region and also effectively maintained Baghdad’s authority over the administrative offices of the Kurdistan region. The law was rejected by Barzani and the KDP. The scene was again set for war.

Rebellion and Collapse

With both wings of the KDP unified, Barzani again recommenced the rebellion against the Iraqi government, but this time enjoyed significant support from Iran as the Shah was keen to exert pressure upon Iraq. It was this support that saw the Kurds make major gains against Iraqi forces, but would ultimately see them collapse when it was withdrawn. Following the earlier discussions regarding the possible change in ownership of the Shatt al-Arab, at a meeting of OPEC leaders in Algiers on 6 March 1975, Saddam Hussein met with the Shah and came to an agreement, known subsequently as the Algiers Agreement, which would see Iran ceasing its support for the Kurdish rebels in Iraq, with Iraq then ceding control of the deepest point of the Shatt al-Arab (the *thalweg*) to Iran in return. Support to the Kurdish rebels was stopped immediately and Iraqi forces launched a major attack against the strongholds of the KDP in the high mountains. Barzani had been defeated not by Saddam’s military prowess, but by his political manoeuvring with regional powers. It was a defeat that would prove too great for him to recover from. On 23 March, the order was issued to abandon the rebellion and to surrender to Iraqi forces. Barzani went into exile in Iran, never to return to Iraqi Kurdistan or Barzan and dying of cancer in March 1979 in Washington DC. For the Kurds, however, the collapse was not absolute.

With Barzani no longer able to enforce his will upon the political direction of the Kurdish national movement in Iraq, other forces emerged including the leftist groupings that had been coalescing around Jalal Talabani since the mid-1960s. By June 1975, Talabani had regrouped his forces and

formed the Patriotic Union of Kurdistan (PUK). Similarly, Mulla Mustafa's sons, Idris and Massoud, would reassemble the shattered ranks of the KDP and re-continue the struggle which their father had led. But, there remained ahead nearly three decades of brutal fighting, genocide, and inter-Kurdish conflict before the Kurds of Iraq would again enjoy the same autonomous circumstances as those that characterised the period of 1970-1974.

Citation:

Gareth Stansfield, 'The Kurdish Question in Iraq, 1914-1974', *The Middle East Online Series 2: Iraq 1914-1974*, Cengage Learning EMEA Ltd, Reading, 2006

© *Middle East Online: Iraq*, Cengage Learning, 2006