

M I D D L E E A S T

Useful victims

*Once again,
the Kurds are
victims of
American
realpolitik in
the Persian
Gulf.*

By James Ciment

In the past several weeks, there has been a dramatic realignment of forces in Iraqi Kurdistan. Cornered by the Iranian-backed Patriotic Union of Kurdistan (PUK), the Kurdish Democratic Party (KDP) invited Saddam Hussein and 30,000 of his Republican Guards to help re-establish a balance of power between the two factions in the U.S.-created safe haven in northern Iraq. When the dust settled, the KDP had chased the PUK's leadership to the Iranian border and established hegemony over the safe haven.

The United States once again took it upon itself, despite serious dissent from some of its allies, to teach Hussein the lesson that "aggression will not be tolerated." Yet the recent U.S. attacks on Iraqi air defenses and the extension of the no-fly zone to include Baghdad's largest air base belie the administration's con-

cern. Aimed at Iraq's south and intended, according to administration spokespersons, to shore up the defense of Kuwait, these actions will have little effect on the new balance of forces in the north.

The current U.S. muscle-flexing over the safe haven is further evidence that the United States had an ulterior motive for leaving the "beast of Baghdad" in power in 1991. His presence on a perch above the Persian Gulf offered a strategic justification for a long-term U.S. presence in the region. But it was the formation of the Kurdish safe haven in northern Iraq that provided the humanitarian gloss. In the name of protecting the Kurds against Iraqi repression, the United States has been able to maintain a fleet of more than 24 military aircraft at Turkey's Incirlik Air Base, including F-15s, F-16s and AWACS, all within easy striking distance of Baghdad and Teheran. Hussein is the useful bully; the Kurds the necessary victims. The only problem is that the latter have not played their part very well.

The roughly 30 million Kurds, who inhabit a broad swath of mountainous terrain in the northern Middle East, have been called "history's losers." A fiercely independent and culturally distinctive Muslim people, the Kurds have had the misfortune of occupying the territory of several aggressive and repressive regional powers, including Turkey, Iraq and Iran. Regimes in each of these countries have been determined to build coherent nation-states where none existed before. Viewing the Kurds as an obstacle to that mission, these regimes have dealt ruthlessly with them. After the Iran-Iraq War, to take the most horrifying recent example, Baghdad murdered up to several hundred thousand Iraqi Kurds, some by chemical attack, in retaliation for their support for Teheran.

Still, much of the Kurds' suffering has been self-inflicted. If Kuwait is a feudal emirate where one family holds a virtual monopoly on power, Iraqi Kurdistan, only part of which lies within the safe haven, is little better, though much poorer. It is a house divided against itself. On one side stands the Kurdish Democratic Party led by Massoud Barzani, the current beneficiary of Hussein's intervention, and on the other, the Patriotic Union of Kurdistan, led by Jalal Talabani, which Iran supports. Don't let the high-sounding democratic and nationalist names of these organizations fool you. They are the latest manifestations of centuries-old tribal confederations.

The two leaders' commitment to democracy and even Kurdish nationalism has been, to put it charitably, uneven. Barzani, son of the greatest Kurdish Iraqi chief of the 20th century, Mustafa Barzani, is no democrat. He established an authoritarian regime on his turf in the safe haven. One refugee from KDP-controlled territory, writing under the pseudonym Azad Sulaiman for *Kurdish Life*, a publication

of the Brooklyn-based Kurdish Cultural Institute, compared Barzani's rule to Hussein's. Both, he said, maintain total control of the media and ruthlessly repress critics. Most ordinary Kurds live in fear of losing access to the food and medical aid controlled by Barzani. But as the head of the Kurdish Cultural Institute, Vera Beaudin Saeedpour, argues, "At least Barzani has that sense of noblesse oblige befitting his rank" as a traditional paramount chief. By contrast, Kurds refer to Talabani, a Western-educated lawyer, as "the man with many orifices," for his willingness to accept any offer of help from any party to further his personal and tribal interests.

These two men and their armies of *peshmerga*, or traditional tribal militias (literally, "those who stare death in the face") have been at each other's throats for decades. During the 14-year Kurdish insurgency against Baghdad from 1961 to 1975, the two parties belied their loudly trumpeted commitment to Kurdish nationalism by forming and re-forming a bewildering array of alliances between themselves, and with both Baghdad and Teheran. The eight-year Iran-Iraq war offered similar opportunities for political and military back-scratching and -stabbing.

The Gulf War was too short and too decisive to offer much room for traditional Kurdish maneuvering vis-à-vis Baghdad, so the PUK and KDP went elsewhere in their quest for support. Talabani flew to Washington within days of Hussein's invasion of Kuwait to offer his *peshmerga* to Washington, going so far as to inquire if the Bush administration would like him to assassinate the Iraqi leader on its behalf. Publicly, Talabani made the offer in the name of Kurdish unity and Iraqi democracy. But those close to Talabani say it was just another twist in the PUK's decades-old effort to outflank Barzani. The offer was not so politely declined. State Department officials refused to meet with Talabani and brushed aside the Kurds as an irrelevance. At that point, the Bush administration was too busy rounding up allies in an effort to make its anti-Hussein strategy appear international. Only later would it reassess the usefulness of the Kurds as victims.

Meanwhile, the Barzani confederation was sidling up to Turkey, and vice versa. Ankara has its own Kurdish problem, arguably more threatening than Iraq's. More than 16 million Kurds inhabit Turkey (between 20 and 25 percent of the total population), versus 5 million in Iraq (between 15 and 20 percent of its population). By contrast with the tribalism of Kurdish

parties in Iraq, Turkey's Kurdish rebels, led by the left-wing Kurdish Workers Party (PKK), are united under a distinctly nationalist and anti-tribal banner. Turkish Kurdistan's tribal leadership was decimated in a series of brutal military campaigns between the two world wars. Evidence of the PKK's effectiveness can be measured by Ankara's response: 15,000 guerrillas have kept hundreds of thousands of Turkish troops and billions of military dollars pinned down in Turkey's Kurdish southeast since the mid-'80s.

Former Turkish President Turgut Ozal first publicly aired the idea of a safe haven on the *MacNeil/Lehrer NewsHour* shortly after the end of Desert Storm. Many Ankara observers wondered at the time why the Turks would want to give the neighboring Iraqi Kurds a leg-up on self-determination. Ozal, however, had a plan. There is an old Turkish saying: "Who better to fight a Kurd than a Kurd?" Ankara would offer the Iraqi Kurds support in return for their help in shutting down PKK attacks on Turkey launched from Iraqi Kurdistan.

The United States quickly threw its support behind Turkey's plan, recognizing that it jibed with its own hopes of expanding its military presence in the region. In short, all three parties—the Iraqi Kurd leadership, Turkey and the United States—saw the proposed safe haven as a win-win situation. The losers, it turned out, were the PKK and, more important, the Iraqi Kurdish people themselves, who rose up against Baghdad after the Gulf War, only to be forced to flee as remnants of Hussein's Republican Guards moved into the region.

Observers of the failed post-Gulf War Kurdish uprising and refugee flight to Turkey say these events may not have been as spontaneous as they were portrayed in the international media. While the United States and Turkey

The Players

Kurdish Democratic Party (KDP): The oldest Kurdish party in Iraq, the KDP was founded shortly after World War II as a political front for the Barzani confederation of tribes. Until its recent alliance with Iraq, the KDP was viewed as the more independent and anti-Baghdad of the Iraqi Kurdish parties. Traditionally, the KDP's stronghold has been in the northwest of Iraqi Kurdistan, adjacent to the Syrian and Turkish frontiers.

Patriotic Union of Kurdistan (PUK): Founded in the 1960s by Jalal Talabani as a coalition of tribal confederations in opposition to the KDP, the PUK has frequently sided with Baghdad in the past. More recently, the organization has received aid from Teheran. Its stronghold is in eastern Iraqi Kurdistan, next to Iran.

Kurdish Workers Party (PKK): A leftist nationalist organization, the PKK was founded in the late 1970s by former university student Abdullah Ocalan. It launched its military campaign against Turkey in 1984. Once steeped in Marxist-Leninist ideology, the PKK has recently modified its demands for an independent, socialist Kurdistan in Turkey's southeast. Today, it calls only for autonomous status.

Kurdish Democratic Party of Iran (KDPI): Once fiercely independent of other Kurdish groups, the party's leadership has been decimated by assassinations in recent years. The current leadership has aligned itself with the PUK. Over the past several years, the safe haven-based KDPI has engaged in a desultory series of raids against Iranian Kurdistan, prompting armed and diplomatic responses from Teheran.

avored a protected Kurdish enclave within Iraq, neither wanted a fully independent Kurdish state. Broadcasting over a CIA-run radio station from Turkey, Bush called for the Kurds to rise up, then did nothing to aid them. Iraqi Kurd leaders themselves also seemed to deliberately pull back. For decades, they had resisted Hussein's military, even when it employed chemical weapons in the wake of the Iran-Iraq War. Surely, they could have stood up to a decimated post-Gulf War Iraqi army that, while the eyes of the world were upon it, wouldn't dare use chemical weapons. Yet Barzani and Talabani's forces fled with hardly a fight. A *New York Times* reporter on the scene suspected foul play when refugee after refugee told him that they were ordered to flee by the Iraqi Kurd *peshmerga*.

The subsequent history of the safe haven has revealed that each party in fact had a different idea of what a winning situation was. Turkey envisioned a temporary alliance with a short-lived Kurdish political entity in northern Iraq. Initially, Barzani and Talabani forces did

cooperate with the Turks in several military campaigns against the PKK. The United States hoped for a more long-term arrangement in northern Iraq than the skittish Turks. In seeking to justify its military buildup in the region, the United States has brushed aside the criticisms of its allies and maintained stiff sanctions against Iraq. Its recent grudging acceptance of a U.N. deal allowing Iraq to trade oil for food and medicine does not mark a change in policy. It was no secret that Hussein found the deal's many restrictions an affront to Iraqi sovereignty. Hussein's decision to support Barzani in the safe haven may have been his way of sending a loud Bronx cheer to the United States, indicating that he had changed his mind about accepting the deal.

For the Iraqi Kurd leaders, the safe haven was supposed to be a stepping-stone to their age-old dream of an independent state—or at least a free hand to rule the roost in their area. While Barzani and Talabani suspected that Ankara didn't care who ruled the safe haven so long as they helped fight the PKK, they knew that the West liked democracies.

So they established one—or, as one Kurdish refugee put it, they "forged" one. The result was a near farce. Virtually no international observers were present during the 1992 Kurdish elections, which resulted in an abruptly canceled runoff for president and a power-sharing arrangement transparently worked out between Barzani and Talabani.

Unfortunately for Ankara and Washington, the Kurds failed to keep up their end of the bargain. By 1994, the KDP and the PUK were once again engaged in a bitter power struggle in Kurdish Iraq, leaving the Turkish Kurd militants of the PKK to go about their business of conducting a guerrilla war from Iraqi territory. This was an embarrassment for Washington, but an outright catastrophe for Turkish military strategists. The Iraqi Kurdish infighting helps explain Ankara's 35,000-man invasion of the safe haven in March 1995, the largest extraterritorial military effort in the republic's 75-year history. Now Turkey has taken advantage of the recent turmoil to establish a free-fire zone on Iraq's side of their border. As with earlier Turkish incursions, the United States sided with Ankara. The hypocrisy of the U.S. position is breathtaking: On the one hand, it is not OK for Hussein to re-establish authority over his own territory, even when invited to do so by the Kurds, but on the other hand, it is acceptable for Turkey

Kurdish rebellions since World War II

	Allies	Results
IRAQ		
1961-75	Shah of Iran, U.S.	Abandoned by allies after the Shah signed an accord with Baghdad.
1980-88	Islamist Iran	Decimated by Saddam Hussein's forces at the end of the Iran-Iraq War.
1991	U.S., Turkey	Resulted in the establishment of the safe haven.
1994-96	Iraq (for KDP), Iran (for PUK)	Civil war ended in rout of PUK forces by KDP/Iraq coalition.
IRAN		
1946	Soviet Union	Soviet support collapsed under early Cold War pressure by U.S. and Britain.
1979	Iraq	Post-revolution uprising crushed by Khomeini forces.
1980-88	Iraq, U.S.	Gradually defeated by resurgent Iranian forces toward the end of the Iran-Iraq War.
TURKEY		
1984-	Syria (Turkey alleges PKK also supported by former Soviet Union, Greece and Iran.)	Ongoing



the attention of the international community, few in the West were willing to listen. Thus, Baghdad may have felt it had to back Barzani as a counterforce to what it perceived as an unholy PUK-Iranian alliance.

And round and round it goes. While U.S. policy toward Iraq is unlikely to change, there is growing evidence that Washington's relations with the Iraqi Kurds might. Clinton administration officials hint that the United States may be attempting to distance itself from the KDP and PUK. The former's recent alliance with Hussein, following two long years of civil war between the two factions in the safe haven and several unsuccessful U.S.-brokered attempts at peacemaking, has made it increasingly difficult to portray the Kurds as victims. The fact that the United States chose to go after targets in southern Iraq rather than in the north, where Hussein's supposed aggression occurred, supports this conclusion.

to violate Iraqi sovereignty.

And what were the KDP and PUK leaders so busy fighting over that they forgot about the PKK? The usual: contraband. With its territory abutting Turkey, Barzani's KDP was making a small fortune smuggling food into Iraq and fuel oil out in direct violation of the U.S.-backed international sanctions against Baghdad. Talabani, situated on the less lucrative Iranian border, was both envious and fearful. Lacking funds to pay his *pesh-merga*, he turned this time to Teheran in a quid pro quo deal not unlike that reached earlier with Turkey. In exchange for halting the operations in the safe haven of Iranian Kurds in revolt against Iran, Talabani was rewarded with Iranian arms.

This weaponry emboldened Talabani to push into and occupy Barzani territory, including the supposedly neutral safe haven "capital" of Erbil with its lucrative smuggling operations. Baghdad has long known that Teheran was covertly aiding Talabani. When it tried to bring this to

If the United States chooses to abandon the Kurds in the near future, it will not be the first time. After cutting off military aid to the Kurds in 1975, thus betraying them in their struggle against the then pro-Soviet, anti-Shah Baghdad government, Henry Kissinger was heard to remark: "Covert action is not missionary work." Indeed.

James Climent is the author of *The Kurds: State and Minority in Turkey, Iraq and Iran* (Facts on File Publishing, 1996).

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Nightmare on Helms Street

Can an older, wiser Harvey Gantt drive a stake through the heart of Jesse Helms' Senate career?

By Gary Barlow
RALEIGH, N.C.

“I’m six years older, six years wiser, six years grayer and six years tougher,” declares North Carolina senatorial candidate Harvey Gantt, wryly alluding to his narrow, heartbreaking loss to Sen. Jesse Helms in 1990. In that race, progressives across the country held their breath as Gantt came dangerously close to unseating the man who is arguably the country’s most despised politician. But after trailing the challenger by four to eight points until the final week of the campaign, Helms won by a scant four percentage points.

Helms’ come-from-behind victory in that race owed much to vicious, last-minute attack ads created by Dick Morris, the now-disgraced political consultant who was recently forced out of the Clinton campaign when his indiscretions with a prostitute became public. The televised ads depicted white male hands holding a job-

rejection slip as a voice-over announced: “You needed the job, and you were the best qualified. But they had to give it to a minority because of a racial quota. Is that really fair?” This time, Gantt vows that he will be ready for anything Helms throws at him in the final days of the campaign. He has staked his chances on a tougher, more populist image and a heavily media-driven campaign, a strategy many observers consider risky.

But all his life, Gantt has beaten the odds. Born poor in South Carolina, he helped his father build their family’s home. As a young man, he was the first African-American to attend Clemson University, graduating with honors. After obtaining a master’s degree from MIT, he built a prosperous architectural firm, Gantt Huberman, in Charlotte. In 1975, he entered Charlotte politics as a member of the city council. Eight years later, he confounded political experts by winning Charlotte’s mayoral election, even though the city was only 22 percent African-American at the time.

Before facing Helms this November, Gantt had to fight hard to win the Democratic Party nomination. In the May 7 primary, Gantt faced wealthy Glaxo Wellcome Pharmaceuticals executive Charlie Sanders, who had the support of many in the Democratic Party establishment. Striking a theme many perceived as racist, Sanders ran as the “electable” alternative to Gantt, implying that Gantt couldn’t beat Helms because the state’s voters wouldn’t elect an African-American to the Senate. But despite being outspent mightily by Sanders, Gantt surprised the political experts again, trouncing his opponent by a 10-point margin. Gantt supporters point to that victory as proof that Gantt’s appeal transcends racial divisions.

They also argue that their candidate is better defined than he was six years ago. Many observers ascribe some of the blame for Gantt’s defeat in 1990 to his “fuzzy” campaign—he essentially ran as “not Jesse Helms.” This year, Gantt has returned as an issues-oriented populist, focusing on the economic fears of middle-class working families. He has positioned himself resolutely as the candidate of the people, railing against the tax breaks that make it profitable for drug companies—major employers in North Carolina—to export jobs overseas. He has called for stronger severance packages for laid-off employees (and for making severance pay tax-free), expanded job-training programs and incentives for companies to encourage employee stock ownership.

As for health care policy, Gantt has called for protecting, not cutting, the Medicare budget. He argues that the federal government should aim to guarantee health insurance for every American. Until that goal is achieved, Gantt proposes measures to make health care more affordable, such as making health insurance completely tax-deductible. He advocates requiring drug companies to give local pharmacies the