

## Saddam vs. the Kurds

by Barham Salih

Saddam Husayn's recent attempt to intimidate Kuwait and the United Nations reminded the world that many issues raised during the Kuwait war remain unresolved. Iraq's Kurdish population, congregated north of the 36<sup>th</sup> parallel and protected by U.S. forces stationed in Turkey, constitute one of these loose ends.

Barham Salih, the liaison of the Kurdish movement to the U.S. government, recently discussed his people's difficult situation with members of the Middle East Forum.

**Background.** Saddam Husayn sees the Kurds of Iraq as enemies to be destroyed, using any available means. Toward this end, his troops in the mid-1980s employed land mines, artillery, and poison gas in a genocidal campaign that killed hundreds of thousands of Kurdish civilians. At least four thousand Kurdish villages were destroyed, their inhabitants either killed or rounded up and placed into concentration camps (cynically titled "new towns"). This onslaught made the need for a truly autonomous Kurdish entity painfully clear.

**War and aftermath.** The Allied victory in the Kuwait war appeared to offer an opportunity to establish such a state. The United Nations-mandated "Operation Provide Comfort" kept Iraqi forces out of Kurdish areas and gave the Kurds precious time to recover and consolidate. They used the time well and on May 1, 1992, they elected

their first-ever parliament. In addition, they also made strides to put in place a judicial system and a basic law.

This unprecedented step towards democracy met with some severe difficulties, however. In May 1994, a land dispute led to combat between the two major Kurdish militias. It appeared likely that the fighting would lead to civil war but the factions met in July and reached a cease fire. Given the fledgling nature of Kurdish democracy, it is less surprising that a violent dispute should emerge than that these embryonic democratic institutions could quell the disturbance.

**Prospects.** Kurdish democracy may have weathered its first internal crisis but it faces many formidable challenges. Kurds of Iraq face the approaching winter with minimal supplies of food, fuel, and medicine. Iraq, already reeling under a U.N. embargo, has banned transportation of supplies into Kurdistan. Thus, the Kurds suffer from a "double embargo" and are, ironically, the group most hurt by U.N. sanctions designed solely to punish Saddam Husayn.

Political concerns also cloud the future of the Kurdish nation. Saddam's army retains more than enough firepower to crush Kurdistan's lightly armed forces, making the Kurdish autonomous zone inherently unstable. In addition, the Turkish government has to be convinced that Kurds do not seek a

full-fledged state that would challenge the Republic of Turkey's integrity; nor would they provide a haven for the PKK rebels currently fighting in southeastern Turkey.

Some have suggested that a regional autonomy be established, in which all Kurds obey their respective national governments but are accorded a degree of political, economic, and religious freedom. This has the benefit of keeping current borders intact but it is hard to envision such an arrangement surviving for long in the violent, volatile world of Middle Eastern politics.

Conclusion. While the future of Kurdistan and

its people is uncertain, it is clear that Operation Provide Comfort has allowed the Kurdish people to recover at least partially from the depredations wrought by Saddam Husayn. For that reason alone the operation should be continued. Also, someday the Kurds might provide a strategic counterweight to some of the more volatile Gulf states. Thus, continued U.S. assistance is both morally sound and strategically wise.

*Summary prepared by Nick Beckwith, an intern at the Middle East Forum.*