

INSTITUTE OF CURRENT WORLD AFFAIRS

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Peter Byrd Martin
Institute of Current World Affairs
4 West Wheelock Street
Hanover, New Hampshire

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Dear Peter,

The last shall be first and the first last!

That is as reasonable a formula as I can find for sending you this particular, out-of-sync account of my adventures in Iraqi Kurdistan, starting with the last chapter and not the first. My excuse is that my experiences have become so swollen that everytime I sit down to edit earlier notes I get caught up in something new, and thus feel obliged to report on the culminative rather than the periodic.

Well, there comes a time when you have to fish or cut bait, and so I have elected to report on my most recent adventure, a journey to the neglected eastern sector of Kurdistan in order to make an assessment of the situation for my quasi-employers here, the New York based International Rescue Committee. How and why that relationship developed is sufficiently covered in exactly those reports you have not yet seen...In any case, I took the trip against orders, and then put it together in the form of a field report in an effort to get the IRC back out into the forefront of the Great Kurdish Relief Effort. An oral debriefing I gave to the IRC staff here appears already to have had the proper effect.

But as you will see, the paper is a real mixed bag: part travelogue, part political primer, part IRC situational assessment and part ICWA report. It is perhaps too many things, but that is the way it is.

Also, I just said that this is the last chapter of my journey through Kurditsan. Somehow I suspect that it is really the pentultimate one, and that I will take a final tour through the landscape before pulling out early next week, sorting out my notes in Turkey before departing for Central Asia via Azerbaijan by July 1st.

Thus, without any further ado or excuse, the mixed IRC/ICWA report from deepest darkest Kurdistan.

Thomas Goltz is an ICWA fellow studying the Turkic Republics of Central Asia, but now temporarily in Iraqi Kurdistan

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Impressions From The North-Eastern Sector of Iraqi Kurdistan
(and oblique suggestions for future IRC activity)

From the beginning of the relief effort to aid the Kurdish refugees in Northern Iraq, IRC has been identified as a leader and has every right to be proud of its staff and their accomplishments at the camp for displaced people outside Zakho.

But now, I fear that the organization is in danger of falling behind the lines by over-committing to the Zakho camp management operation. Once the refugee beachhead, Zakho has now become a refugee backwater, a place where only the least active NGOs are to be found.

The Zakho camp is draining daily; as I write this, the total number of people is down from a peak of some 60,000 to less than 10,000. As such, it seems increasingly questionable that IRC continues to commit so much in the way of human and material resources (underground sanitation pipes connecting uninhabited tents, hospital staff to look after chronic illnesses, etc) to an area that will soon be of no importance whatsoever as the refugees/displaced persons move South and East and away from the allied forces' security zone.

Perhaps IRC will decide that its role in the relief operation in Northern Iraq will end with the life of the Zakho camp, and, mission accomplished, go home with its laurels in tact. But one thing is perfectly clear: if IRC is to maintain its status as a "leading agency" in the Kurdish relief effort, it must now rethink its current program, re-order its priorities and get back out on the front lines--just as it did in Zakho when the prospect of initiating a program in the newly-formed security zone in late April/early May gave lesser NGOs pause.

Now, a similar situation pertains in the eastern sector of northern Iraq, where refugees are about to become "displaced persons" upon returning to their country, but not to their homes. Estimates of the numbers of Kurds who fled to Iran hover at around 500,000, and most are as ambivalent about their returning to Iraq as were the hundreds of thousands who fled to Turkey but were coaxed back due to the security umbrella created by the coalition forces.

Curiously, and despite the many similarities between the situation in the eastern sector now and the northern sector then, there has been remarkably little interest in conducting even a basic assessment of the eastern region to determine what new role IRC might play.

In addition to security concerns--trusting the armed forces of the coalition more than the armed forces of the Peshmergah--politics have been a factor in this cautious attitude: the IRC and other NGOs now fall under the umbrella of the UN, which is now coordinating relief agency activity with Baghdad. And the UN, conspicuously absent in the early days of the Zakho camp, appears reluctant to step on Iraqi toes.

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Indeed, it might not be going too far to suggest that the UN is allowing itself--and thus the NGOs associated with it--to be manipulated in such a manner as to render its services far less effective than could be desired. As an example, I would submit the ring-around-the-visas game concerning Dohuk and Mosul: it took weeks of waiting for the UN/Baghdad negotiations to allow for out-of-sector travel and activity for the Zakho-based NGOs. One result of this protracted discussion was the reluctance of most NGOs--including the IRC--to even step out of the security sector, thus restricting their field of activity to Zakho. A trip to Dohuk was regarded as a gamble!

In practical terms, that has now further delayed any in situ assessment of the eastern sector, and de facto prevented any IRC representation at the first NGO meeting to be held in the key city of Diyana, which might well be regarded as the new Zakho of the region. The only NGOs able to attend that meeting appear to be those willing to violate the de jure closing of the eastern sector by taking an extremely bad road running down the Zab River valley into the region, thus avoiding Iraqi military check-points on the better roads to the south.

Well, I could not resist the urge to take that road to see what there was to see, and now, less as an official assessment than as a series of impressions, I would like to submit the following notes from my journey to the region over the period of June 14-17th, 1991, of which I gave an oral presentation to the IRC staff upon my return. I present it in the hope that it might influence the decision-making process in the direction of action now rather than later, although it may well serve as the basis to take no action at all.

The motivation for my journey was the invitation of a scion of one of the main Kurdish clans in the region, the Surci, that I come and take a look at the situation pertaining among the refugees/displaced persons of the eastern sector who had enjoyed none of the material or psychological aid pumped into the country in and around the security zone established by the coalition forces in the northwest. Complementing this was a second invitation to me by the public relations point-man for the Democratic Party of Kurdistan (KDP) to the city of Amadiyah to explain the KDP's position on a number of different social and political issues as well as to brief interested parties on the state of negotiations between Saddam Hussein and KDP chief Massoud Barzani.

The KDP is the leading party in the Kurdish Front, an umbrella group comprised of eight different political organizations in the North. Others involved in the Front include the second main partner, the Patriotic Union of Kurdistan (PUK), the Kurdish Socialist Party, a second socialist party with the acronym of PASOK (not Greek!) and

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smaller entities like the Assyrian Democratic Movement, the Islamic Sufferance Party and even the Communist Party of Iraq, whose membership has traditionally been Kurdish or Assyrian Christian.

Two other parties funded by Iran, the Hizib al Qurani, or Party of the Quran, and the Hizbullah Kurdi, or Kurdish Hizbullah ala the Baaka Valley in Lebanon fame, are not represented in the front and are not really of any note.

I think it is significant to note that none of these groups, including the KDP, maintain a particularly high profile in Zakho. Initially, I found this a point to criticize--why isn't the Kurdish leadership keeping the people posted on political developments and the state of the autonomy negotiations?--but after my tour of the region, the reasons for the Front's low profile in the Zakho camp became abundantly clear: both in terms of territory and population, the Zakho region pales in size and importance when compared with the rest of Iraqi Kurdistan. But I am getting ahead of myself.

In the event, I traveled from Zakho to Amadiyah via Dohuk and Sarsenk, stopping off at the last to pay my regards to one Mr Khairi, the leader of Iraq's estimated 100,000 Yezidi, or Zoroastrian Kurds. Like most of the other clans in the North, the Yezidies are waiting for their traditional lands to be opened up for resettlement and are unwilling to return to the "concentration camps" they were forced into starting in 1975, following the collapse of the last Kurdish revolt. As such, the Yezidi attitude toward their "return" is exactly the same as hundreds of thousands of other Kurds who fled to Turkey and Iran in March: "home" dates back to the pre-1975 order, and includes vast tracts of agricultural land stripped away from the Kurds and given over to Arabs. In some areas, such as the Sulwani Plain between Zakho and Dohuk, Arab settlers were brought in to displace the Kurds, and given homes in new "model" villages; in other areas, the Kurds were allowed to stay in the region, but forced into the new, aggregate settlements. In both instances, though, the traditional Kurdish villages were destroyed, and it is to those destroyed and abandoned villages that most Kurds now wish to return.

(The exception to this appears to be in the previously mentioned Sulwani Plain, where the Kurds have assumed ownership of 14 "model" villages built by the government for Arabs who then abandoned their homes during the course of the March Revolt. The issue of ownership here is so ticklish that even the KDP is officially frowning on NGO aid to the 14 settlements lest it aggravate the course of the autonomy negotiations in Baghdad. IRC, to its credit, has professed an interest in addressing the sanitation needs of some of these villages, but has not yet consulted the KDP about its plans.)

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KDP Plans

Indeed, the theme of The Return was a primary element in the KDP presentation at Amadiyah, attended by myself, two gentlemen from the UN and a handful of journalists.

Our host was Mr Siamand Bana, the KDP spokesman, who insisted that the NGOs are losing a golden opportunity to work in the most important sector of Kurdistan--the neglected East--out of an exaggerated concern for security, or the lack thereof.

According to Mr Bana, there are some 1.2 million people in the eastern sector, making it perhaps ten times as large as the security zone set up around Zakho. Despite the size of the area and the numbers of displaced people, virtually no NGOs are in the sector because it has never been under the control of the coalition forces, and is thus regarded as insecure. But in an effort to allay fears, Bana made the curious argument that the eastern zone may actually be even safer than the present security zone by the very absence of the coalition forces: there are no "grey areas" of authority in the East, while there are plenty in the northern security zone due to the mixture of Peshmergahs, Coalition forces and Military Police as well as the residual Iraqi security apparatus Baghdad has been allowed to maintain. In the East, all authority is in the hands of the Peshmergah, who thus find themselves making the transition from being a group of 22,000 partisan fighters to being, in effect, a quasi-governmental police force. This claim seemed to be confirmed during my visit to the region, but of that more later.

The other main thrust of Mr Bana's presentation was to get NGOs involved in a number of development projects in the region. Bana stopped short of criticizing such organizations as the UNHCR and the Red Cross directly, but asked them and others in the region to pay less attention to red tape and bureaucracy and to use their "imagination" more. As an example, he mentioned the compromise reached on the 120,000-ton wheat harvest in the North, to which three parties laid claim: the original Kurdish land owners; the Arab settlers; the Arab/Kurdish farmer/harvesters. An impasse had been reached on this subject which threatened to result in the rotting of the bumper crop in the field while individuals and delegations shuttled from the Ministry of Agriculture to the Ministry of the Interior to sort out who the real owners of the crop were, or could be. Then a certain Fred Cooney, a member of the DART team associated with the US State Department, sliced through the knot by going out of sector and finding Saddam's man in Mosul and reaching a formula that was good enough for most of the parties concerned. We need more people like Cooney, Bana said, we need people willing to bend the rules and get things done.

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Bana also had a number of specific ideas for NGO involvement, primary of which was the symbolic Barzan Project, the home region of the Barzani clan and arguably the most neglected and destroyed area in Iraqi Kurdistan. Specifically, the KDP wanted to interest NGOs in the physical and psychological reconstruction of 32 villages around Barzan which had been stripped of able bodied men. He related how on August 4th 1983, the Iraqi army had come and removed 8,000 youths from the 32 villages, allegedly to draft them into the army for the war against Iran. But none ever returned, or even arrived at the front: rumors had it that the boys had been used as guinea pigs for chemical weapons research; another rumor had it that they served as living blood banks: the essential fact, though, was that none have ever been seen since, and are thus presumed dead. Later, the women and children of the 32 villages were rounded up and put in a concentration village in a place called Kustepe, 20 kilometers south of Arbil while the emptied villages were reduced to piles of rubble. During the March Revolt, though, the families managed to leave the concentration village and return to the Barzan region before joining the mass exodus to Turkey and Iran.

Now, however, the group--like all others--wants to resettle their traditional lands. The problem is that in a patriarchal society, they are now largely a group of women and children and older men and lack the muscle to rebuild and have no ready means of supporting themselves. Bana and the KDP think that creating a light industry like bee keeping would be most beneficial for a group like this.

There were other pet projects brought up on the table, ranging from the supply of mules to access fruit orchards owned by Christians in the mountains behind Diyana to creating local fish industries along the tributaries of the Zab. But the main thrust of Bana's talk was not so much NGO participation in

any given development project as their simple presence in the region. This argument is similar to that made by the Agha Khan in reference to the United Nations policemen/observers currently in the area: the real need is less for a buffer between the Kurds and the Iraqi security apparatus than for a foreign presence to give the people the sense of assurance needed to pick up the pieces of their lives.

Next, two young Kurdish engineers involved in the newly-formed Kurdish Development Agency gave a short presentation on their pilot project to rebuild the village of Kani Mani, a few kilometers outside Amadiyah. The two hoped that their project would inspire similar reconstruction efforts in the eastern sector, where over 4,000 villages have been systematically destroyed in the post-1975 period. When I asked why the KDA was focusing on heaps of crushed concrete as opposed to quasi-functional villages like those in the Sulwani Plain, Bana and the engineers confessed that a political decision had been made to not aggravate tensions between Arabs and Kurds by appearing to support the idea of occupying homes built by and for Arabs.

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This was refreshing in that it suggested that the Kurdish leadership is truly interested in the negotiating process and not in revenge or irredentism pure and simple. Bana even went so far as to say that "legitimate" Arab farmers--those who actually worked the land--might be allowed to resettle on their recently lost lands.

The Road to Barzan

Following the KDP briefing, I linked up with my guide to the eastern sector, IE, one of the six brothers who control the Surci clan and its traditional lands, located in the region between the Bekhma Dam and Rawnduz.

Our route East led along the northern bank of the Zab and with each kilometer, the security situation seemed to change. First were British and then French check-points, then joint French-Peshmergah check-points, and then only Peshmergah. We picked up a 12-gauge Browning automatic shot-gun and a Kaleshnikov at Sheladiziah where my hosts had checked them on their way into the sector.

More than personal weapons, we needed a four wheel drive with heavy suspension. It was a hell of a road. Shortly after crossing the Lesser Zab, the tarmac faded away and the track was reduced to a winding Thank-God-Its-Not-My-Car sort of dirt, gravel and rock *PATH* leading to the destroyed village of Barzan, the eponymous homeland of the Barzani clan.

It might be said that the Barzanies have been in a state of revolt against outside authority for the past 300 years and, by their very survival, have earned the right to lead the Kurds. There are those who disagree with this leadership-through-suffering theory behind closed doors, but scarcely anyone dares say so in public.

The village of Barzan, though, has no closed doors. It has no doors at all. Nor walls or floors or ceilings. And yet it was clearly once a very lovely place, despite its planned removal from anything resembling a beaten track. Now, set among long-neglected vegetable and fruit tree terraces, Barzan was a tumble of planned destruction. The only standing piece of human endeavor in the area was the remains of a large, palatial wall, the sort of structure that would evoke archaeological interest if it were only a few hundred years older, and elsewhere. All other houses had been blown out from the inside and then pulverized and I had to marvel at the sheer amount of effort put in to making the place unlivable for anyone or thing save lizards and birds. Mr Bana of the KDP had suggested that the reason for the destruction was two-fold: 1) a forceful means of expressing dissatisfaction toward a dissident group (with local antecedents going all the way back to the razing of Mede villages by Nebuchadnezzar) and 2) a means of terminating, once and for all, the traditional economic independence of the Kurds and forcing them to join in the greater Iraqi economy, preferably as cheap, unskilled laborers.

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As far as Bana's encouragement to NGOs to rebuild the area, I had several immediate questions: why, aside from participating in a symbolic act, should any NGO concentrate its energies so far off the beaten track when there were so many other ruined villages much closer to access points? And why, if the policy of the UN (and thus the NGOs) is for "normalization" between the Kurds and Baghdad, should any effort be put into getting the Kurds back into the remote, romantic splendor of the past?

Kasra Surci

The next stop on my itinerary--albeit removed from Barzan by three hours over the bad road--was a studying in contrast with the ruins of Barzan. I refer to Kasra Surci, the home of the Surci clan, who were to be my hosts for the next few days.

The Surci are one of the main Kurdish tribal confederation leaders in northern Iraqi and control some 50 villages in the region. Ties through marriage have extended Surci influence to other clans in Kurdistan, and created a network of leading families related by blood. More to the point, the Surci have long been regarded by the Peshmergah fighters as "Jash," or Kurdish collaborators with the regime. If the Barzan clan has suffered for generations at the hands of the various regimes in Baghdad, the Surci have thrived, enjoying government largesse as expressed in contracts for major construction projects. Rumor also has it that at least one of the clan leaders served as a local head of the Mukhabarat, or secret police, and all members of the tribe asked me if I knew various American "diplomats" who had once stayed at their abode.

Yes, the Surci clearly enjoyed a unique relationship with many regimes. The roads in the region are all paved, and five of the six brothers (my host the exception) who represent the core Surci family have spacious, well-appointed houses with swimming pools and more servants than a Mafioso family, which is essentially what they are.

There is a joke among Kurds that ends with the punch line that the difference between a Peshmergah and a "Jash" is a piece of cloth. I never quite understood why this sent people into paroxysms of laughter, but I suspect it has something to do with clans like the Surci, who have hedged their political bets for generations.

All the family members I spoke to admitted that the clan had never "been against the government", which was, in fact, an admittance that they had been with it, although not to the level of cooperation as the Zibari clan, who are still loyal to the Baath regime in Baghdad.

But in March, even the Surci decided to bet the house and threw their lot in with Barzani's partisans against Saddam. Their haste in doing so has now made them truly marked men, for if Saddam knows how to treat with enemies, he knows how to treat with traitors even more. The curious then, is that after

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the Peshmergah folded in mid-March, and ran helter-skelter toward the hills, the Surci stayed in place and converted their village into a mini-fortress, swearing that they would rather die there than run away to Iran. Happily for the Surci, Saddam's counter-attack was halted North of Arbil, and the clan was not obliged to fight their former patron. Thus they never became refugees in any sense of the word (save for several family members who maintained residence in Arbil) and thus represent a unique class in the chaos of Kurdistan: local landlords whose power and authority has perhaps been enhanced by the course of events.

(And peace makers, of a sort: Hussein Agha, or don of the Surci clan, had just negotiated a deal over the grain harvest between members of the Barzani and Zibari clans, who are, remarkably, related by marriage. Main Peshmergah and main Jash clans share women and wheatfields? It gives a sense of the confused mosaic of loyalties in Kurdistan.)

After paying my regards to Hussein Agha, I was invited down to dinner at "the office", a non-functioning chicken hatchery owned by Muhammad, the third brother, who was formerly a colonel in Saddam's army and who ran the security service for the massive Bekhma hydro-electric project prior to the revolt. Here, too, was a conundrum: Muhammad's former position was to guard the living symbol of Iraqi oppression of the Kurds, a dam that was designed as much to inundate a problematic Peshmergah valley as it was to generate electricity. But Muhammad, too, had flipped sides, and was now functioning as a point man in the dismantling of the very project he had spent years guarding: several caterpillar tractors and other large construction equipment with the Bekhma insignia stood on flat-bed trailers in his yard, waiting to be shipped to the Iranian frontier and sold. But of this, more later.

A lamb was slaughtered in my honor, and several heavily armed servants went about building a bonfire to roast the meat; a case of beer and a case of Araq were cracked open for libations, with a large bottle of whiskey set on the table as an option. Folks started coming in: Mam Salah, the youngest of the core clan, who had held a position in the police for a few years before leaving to start a business as a contractor; the son of Omar Agha, the number two leader in the clan, who had studied in Boston and Walid, an ex-policeman who served as a sort of Kurdish conceiver (to stay with the mafia comparison) with the clan, who was, strangely enough, half Turkish. Conversation soon flowed, focusing on the usual subjects: if and when the Americans would depart and what the Surci would then do; rumors on the radio that the Americans had found a pile of uranium outside of Mosul, that Bush was not going to run for president in 1992, that the Turks had opened up their frontier to Kurds for travel without passports, that the Americans had been importing heroin to give to the Kurds. (One guess who must have started that rumor!) Time was also devoted to remembering the good old days when "ambassador" William

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Eagleton had come to stay, and when April Galipsie (sic) had come to scour the region for archeological stuff. It was a remarkably pleasant evening, and about as far away from the subject of "refugees" as one could get, given the circumstances.

The Iranian Frontier

The next morning we woke early and hit the road to Diyana, a small, dumpy market and administration town set at the mouth of a gorge leading to the Iranian border post of Hajji Umran, one of the two main gateways out of Iraq and into Iran at the height of the Kurdish exodus.

Already, the tell-tale signs of a growing returning refugee population lined the road both inside and outside the city--homemade tents interspersed with street-side stands and salesmen hawking all manner of Iranian goods--tires, fruit drinks, cigarettes and crackers. Gas was another hot-selling item, despite costing 400 percent more than at the state-pumps in Zakho and Dohuk. Little, if any of the standard refugee market kitsch culled from western relief shipments in the western camps was to be seen.

Perhaps the most surprising thing in Diyana was the level of order maintained in the streets. Now, it wasn't Bonn, Germany, where people won't walk on the grass, but neither was there the total chaos that I had somehow expected given the fact that there was no police to enforce anyone's law. That task, presumably, had been assumed by the ubiquitous Peshmergah in addition to their regular work of whizzing down dusty roads in the back of pick up trucks.

I had been told that the German/Austrian Matlese Cross Organization was working the hospital in Diyana, and I had planned on stopping in, but somehow we ended up just driving through town and then linking up with the main, winding road to the Iranian frontier. My interlocutor from the house of Surci assured me that the passage from Choman--a veritable cemetery for Iraqi military trucks, all picked clean by scrap metal vultures--to Hajji Umran on the border took up to 18 hours at the height of the exodus, with cars and trucks and tractors jammed bumper to bumper.

Now, a new wave of traffic was making its way across--Mercedes Benz sedans, BMWs and Toyoto pick-ups. Most had recently minted Baghdad license plates suggesting the real provenance of the cars--Kuwait. Adding to the one-directional traffic of luxury vehicles was a regular, slow stream of heavy-duty construction equipment, some moving by their own volition, others moving on the back of flat-bed trucks, but all stamped with the company insignias of those firms involved in the Bekhma dam project. Many of the cars and equipment merchants were already disappointed by the rumor that the Iranians had closed the frontier; they seemed less concerned about the secondary rumor that the Iranians had just announced that the

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estimated half a million refugees still there had been given a week to clear out.

The significance of this latter traffic is clear for anyone with eyes to see: 500,000 returnees, none who have enjoyed the pampering delivered to those coming out of the Turkey sector, walking into an area almost totally dependent on supplies from the South. There was one encouraging indice in this regard: the Red Cross had registered a knot of ladies just in from Iran who were waiting by the side of the road, eager for the Red Cross truck to arrive from Shaqlawa outside of Arbil. They had been there for hours, and were about to despair, and my host suggested that the Peshmergah had probably stolen the food. On our way back, though, we saw the reason for the long wait: the Red Cross vehicle had overturned on one of the hair-pin turns in the road, depositing a hundred bags of flour on the highway.

At the zero point on the frontier, I inspected a number of the semi-trailer trucks waiting for the Peshmergah "customs" excise of around 10 percent of the value of any of the stolen vehicles moving into Iran. A Toyota pick-up, for example, was charged 8,000 Dinar (around \$1,200 at the black market rate of exchange); a Mercedes was charged around 20,000 Dinar (\$3,500), depending on the model and year. Other taxed items included electrical cables, transformers and generators. It was all rather sad--most of the stuff was exactly what was needed to begin the long task of reconstruction, but it was being flogged to Iran to raise immediate cash to pay the salaries of guerrilla fighters, or just for personal gain.

After the visit to the frontier, my escort and I sought out one of his old family friends--one Sheikh Mustafa Naqshibendi, his title suggesting religious as well as political authority (most Kurdish clans are so divided). The good Sheikh spends about half his time on the Iraqi side of the frontier and the other half on the Iranian, and thus had a pretty good perspective about the state of affairs on the latter side of the frontier. One interesting point that he brought up was that there was no gravy train in Iran--the refugees were obliged to pay for everything, even if payment was token. Over lunch and tea at his headquarters, we also went over what was becoming standard political banter: did the United States sell out the Kurds? When would the allies withdraw? Could Saddam be trusted to fulfill any bargain, anytime and anywhere? The Sheikh was personally concerned about much of this, because he, like the Surci clan, had long been in the good graces of the government until the events of March, and now felt himself to be a marked man. The 30 caliber machine gun parked in the driveway underlined this phobia rather dramatically. It also might have served as a warning to a small group of fundamentalist Kurds camped nearby: funded by Iran, they were outside the umbrella of the Kurdish front, and trusted by no-one.

The significance of the meeting?

Although I don't want to exaggerate, it was another indice that in dealing with the Kurds, the idea of separating or

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forgetting clan and religious affiliation is not a good idea. Not only have folks gathered around traditional leaders in their hour of need because of the evident staying power of the Aghas and Sheikhs, but those same Aghas and Sheikhs have proven their ability to shift sides to insure their own survival. In essence, it would seem wise to cultivate relationships both among the high-profile parties like the KDP and the PUK, but also to hedge one's bets by developing relations among the traditional clan and religious leaders like the Surci and Naqshibendi.

Rawnduz

From Hajji Umran, we proceeded back down the valley through Choman toward Rawnduz, passing knots of recently encamped refugees who had made shelters out of bombed buildings and overturned trucks. A quick survey indicated that many were recent arrivees from Iran who had no intention of going home to Arbil or Mosul until a lasting peace (or the ousting of Saddam) be achieved. It was an old story, heard from nearly everyone of my interlocutors in the Zakho sector for weeks, but it took on far more immediacy here, where no one was enjoying the international aid by having registered as a resident of a tent city.

The residents of Rawnduz, clearly, were much luckier. Their houses seemed to be in order, and life had returned to the town's market. Again, the main products were imports from Iran. The local hospital was functioning, and basic services appeared to be in tact. The city itself was rather picturesque, meandering up a steep knoll that was doffed by an erstwhile luxury hotel overlooking the Diyana valley and the canyon/mountain ranges leading into it. The hotel had been converted into a Peshmergah headquarters.

Next door was the house belonging to the cousin of my escort and we stopped there for coffee. The cousin, sadly, had been dead for some five years, shot down in some typically Kurdish blaze of fire for no apparent reason--meaning clan politics. Perhaps it was the memory of the dead cousin, or maybe the inverse of serenity when looking over the valley that had seen so much human suffering, but soon the conversation moved to tales of violence and revenge, the two shadows that walk behind every Kurd. One particularly gruesome tale concerned three men from Diyana who were being sought by the feared Baath party cell within the military intelligence/security apparatus for unknown reasons. The two friends were apprehended, but no amount of beating would reveal their crime nor the location of the third because they simply didn't know. So the Baath cell brought in the missing man's wife, a school teacher, who also claimed not to know her husband's whereabouts. Tell us or we will send for a dozen soldiers to have their way with you, said the Baath agents. The poor woman had nothing to say, and so the gang rape began. Tell us where your friend is, or we will

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invite the next group of soldiers to have their way with you, the Baath agents said to the two horrified captives. There was nothing left to do but save their honor, so the two men began to rant and rave and curse the name of Saddam Hussein, hoping the agents would kill them for their audacity before anal raping them. Remarkably, the ploy worked--after a severe beating, the two were hauled off to Mosul prison for further torture and interrogation, but were spared the ignominy and stigma of having become sodomized. The school teacher was sent home, and still works in Diyana.]

My interlocutor then expanded on this theme of sexual violence elsewhere in Iraq; members of the extreme Islamic Dawa party in the South were allegedly subjected to this sort of treatment on a regular basis, with sisters, wives and mothers used as direct victims in order to encourage anti-government activists to confess to various anti-state crimes. It was a peculiarly vulgar and awful litany of treatment to be related in such pleasant circumstances, but somehow underlined the psychological state of many of the refugees and displaced people in the region, as well as the inchoate fears of former collaborators and "Jash" like my friends in the Surci tribe and I include the references in this report in that spirit: beyond the fear of being killed by chemical gas attacks, there is the real and well founded fear of dying slowly and miserably and in circumstances so humiliating that dying of exposure in the mountains is to be preferred.

Then, as if to cleanse our minds and hearts, we proceeded from Rawnduz to the nearby resort area of Beykhal, a fantastic place where a wall of water literally gushes from the living rock before cutting its way down mountain to the base of the Geli Ali Beg, or Master Ali's Canyon. A sign only partially obscured by graffiti announced that Kurdistan Is In Your Heart And You Are In The Hearts Of All Kurds!--one of the favorite honorifics referring to the Heroic President and his unique relationship with the Kurds...

After drinking an Iranian-made Seven-Up! and chatting with a knot of Peshmergah about why they fled the front in Arbil, thus precipitating the headlong flight of civilians, we turned south, driving along the canyon rim toward Surci and Shaqlawa. The visual impression of the landscape gave ample evidence to why many call this area "Wildest Kurdistan"--it was an area of splendid, rough-hewn vistas, sheer-drop canyons and roaring rivers. The same canyon system, though, also pointed to incredible bottle-necks in transportation--especially when many people, like refugees, are on the move all at once down the same limited corridor. On the Turkish frontier, one could more or less find one's own goat path; here, egress was limited to nature's one-way streets carved between cliffs.

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Shaqlawa

After passing back through Khalifan and Surci, we entered the well-watered Harrir Plain, a vast wheatland area sprinkled with the monotonous remains of destroyed villages, represented here by remaining orchards and lumps of cement and rock sticking out of the yellowed fields. Unlike the residents of the destroyed villages in the western sector who were obliged to move into town and give their lands to Arabs, most Kurdish farmers here were herded into large, grey and nasty collective villages built by the state, and left to work the same lands. Set up on grids and enclosed behind wire, the new settlements are referred to as "concentration camps", and they do have that look and feel about them, but are probably not as bad as they are made out to be. One such village, Harrir, even had working electricity when we passed through it, which I found marginally surprising for a place allegedly behind the lines.

The real surprise and delight, however, was Shaqlawa. Set in a well-watered ravine on a hillside, it is a garden city, covered with fruit-trees and small, private orchards, and it is as much for this fact as any strategic interest that the city was selected as a Peshmergah headquarters in the early days of the revolt, and then again after the March routing of the Kurdish forces. In addition to the many pleasant villas in the town there are also a number of hotels, which have now been taken over by the various factions included in the Kurdish Front.

As such, it was an odd mixture of peaceful repose and potential violence, and I reflected on this peculiar dichotomy as I sat under a mulberry tree in the garden of the head of the local Communist Party as a family shook the branches of the tree to drop the ripe, white, luscious fruit into my hands. There were apricots, too, but green, though the plums were ready to pluck.

The old Communist was a bird man, and kept separate cages for a covey of pigeons and four canaries. Three partridges, oblivious to their fate, enjoyed individual cages as they fattened themselves for an eventual feast. A beautiful song bird, too young and untrained to fly, hopped around the lawn, begging bits of mulberry from one of the old Communist's sons. Two other sons had fled to Iran years before, he related, and he had not seen them for years. One, though, upon hearing of the collapse of the Kurdish Revolt, had managed to collect and send a truck-full of supplies to the border. The aid was needed, said the old man, because the Peshmergah leadership in town were hijacking all the international assistance designated for the town and then hawking it on the black market.

This begged a little investigation, and so taking our leave from the old Communist, we sought out the Red Cross warehouse in town, which was even then loading up a truck-load of processed cheese to send to the frontier. There was, the Peshmergah volunteer guard assured me, not even a distribution

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point in town, as all the supplies were designated for the displaced people along the frontier. Taking directions from the Peshmergah guards, I sought out and found the Red Cross residence and had this bit of information confirmed. The Red Cross ride shotgun with their supplies all the way to the point of distribution, and if there is leakage, it happens after they off-load.

I was surprised at the very presence of the Red Cross in the area, and said so. The director, a Swiss national by the name of Mister Jil, informed me that the organization had actually been in place for two months. Even more surprising for me was that the Red Cross was taking all its supplies via Baghdad, and without hitch. Then when I asked him about other NGOs in the area, he in turn evinced surprise that I did not know about most of the other NGO groups active in the sector, nor about a planned coordination meeting in a few days in order to avoid duplication of services, especially in the areas of sanitation and health. At first I thought that I had simply not paid attention to the subject of NGOs in the eastern sector, but upon my return to Zakho, no-one else in IRC knew of the meeting or other NGO activities either.

The Autonomy Agreement

This information gap was not reserved for the IRC and the NGOs, for back at Camp Surci that evening, as the brothers roasted up the remainder of the last night's lamb, we were visited by a band of six Peshmergah. In their possession was a copy of a telegram from Massoud Barzani pertaining to the state of negotiations between the Kurdish front and Saddam. This was remarkable, as it was the first word anyone had heard about the protracted negotiations in weeks, but it was exactly what both refugee and NGO were waiting to learn about in order to plot their respective courses for the future.

In *any* event, the update on the draft agreement did not purvey a lot of new information, and there were many vague points, but taken as a whole, and if accurate, the agreement-in-principle represented a veritable wish-list fulfilled for the Kurds. I thought it indiscreet to take out a paper and pen, so the following representation is essentially from memory, with my comments and reactions:

- 1) Democracy in Iraq; no explanation of what that means in real terms, IE, elections, constitutional rights, etc
- 2) A Kurdish vice premier and a Kurdish vice foreign minister; both powerless positions
- 3) A reflection in the cabinet (number of ministers) of the percentage of Kurds in the population as a whole; same as the 1970 agreement
- 4) Kurdistan to enjoy a percent of national budget reflecting the percentage of Kurds in the country

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5) Borders of Kurdistan still stuck on the question of Kerkuk; to be shelved for the time being, but with possible solutions being to divide Kerkuk and create new provinces, some Arab, some Kurdish

6) Northern sections of Mosul province such as Acre and Sharafane (Ain Sifne) to be disassociated from that administration and connected to the Kurdish province of Dohuk

7) Kurdish soldiers to make up armed forces in Kurdistan; no mention of what is to happen to "special" forces, like the Baath intelligence cells

8) Kurdish to be taught to all Iraqi citizens; an incredibly positive development, but if there is one dead-letter in the agreement, this is it

9) A council of three Kurds and three Arabs to oversee implementation of Kurdish policy

Now, some of these points are taken directly from the dead-letter 1970 agreement, which enjoyed a life of about three months before both the spirit and letter of the agreement were violated by Baghdad. Notably within this agreement, there was no mention of guarantees aside from the six-man commission in (my) point nine. Nor was there any guarantee that Saddam could or would not stack the council deck by putting, say, two "Jash" or collaborators into the council. In any case, the draft agreement was to be brought to the "people" (IE, clan and political party leaders) for some manner of referendum, although now, three days later as I write this, no text of any sort has been issued for perusal and study.

My Surci hosts and I went to bed cynical and skeptical.

The Bekhma Dam Project

Before departing to Zakho and parts West, I asked that I be given a tour of the Bekhma Dam project in the morning. Aside from being generally curious about the "deconstruction" of the project and the trade in construction machines, I was personally interested because I had followed the bidding and initial civil works construction phase from Ankara, where I had reported on international contracting for several magazines belonging to the McGraw Hill publishing empire. The project was bid out during the Iran-Iraq war, a fact that had kept many international contractors away, and in the end the scheme had been won by a consortium led by the Turkish ENKA and the Yugoslav Hydrotechnik with consultancy work done by the San Francisco-based Bechtel, International. I had asked periodically to be allowed permission to visit the site during its construction phase, but had been politely refused by the Iraqis, who cited security concerns.

Well, now I had my chance, even if what I was to observe was going to be the deconstruction and not the construction of the massive, mega-buck project. (I wish I had my notes on the exact figures for the dam, but I do not, and so I will not even

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venture into guessing its costs, breadth or height or kilowatt hours--suffice it to say that the project ranked right up there with the biggies.) I do remember some interesting details, however: that as an essential part of the project, ENKA was responsible for the construction of some 1,000 worker homes, which would then be converted into luxury villas at the end of the day; there was also a rumor that the entire project was gratuitous because a) Iraq does not and will not need any more power and b) the site-design of the dam suggested a calculated means of creating the largest (and thus not most efficient) reservoir possible, which would create, in effect, a "security" lake in central Kurdistan and inundate dozens of problematic villages in so doing.

Without studying the design specifications, I cannot intelligently comment on these last allegations, but this is exactly what the local population believed, and they were now taking advantage of the lack of security to wreck their vengeance on the largest and clearest symbol of Iraqi Arab domination over them.

The looting was phenomenal. The few light poles left standing only bore witness to the fact that the rest had been knocked down, and then gutted of their wires. Not one of the 1,000-odd worker houses had a window or a door left; the furniture had long been removed. The private villa of ENKA chief Sarik Tara had had the wall paneling and ceiling insulation torn off, just to see what wires or cables might be removed. The power house had been stripped, and the vast parking lot of construction machines--huge dumpers, graters and plows--was being reduced before my eyes as one after another of the machines were taken away. A man in a car stopped ours and asked to be directed to the area where he could *buy* slabs of steel. It was beyond sad--it was insane, and my Surci host begged me to leave lest he be seen and associated with travesty.

Then, at the bottom of the site, I spotted a number of Peshmergah, presumably responsible for selling or taxing or somehow organizing or at least monitoring the ravishing of the site. The building they occupied, too, had been sacked, with the remnants of cable and wire still protruding from the walls. I asked to see the commander and was introduced to a pleasant, English speaking gentleman from Mosul who introduced himself as Doctor Sabah, a psychiatrist.

It was too good or too insane to be true, so I asked him point blank 'why?', and waved a hand at the machine rape in progress before our eyes.

"In psychology, we call it 'displacement'," he calmly explained, "Among primitive people--and our people are sadly primitive in many ways--any symbol of the oppressor or enemy is fair game for attack, and the people are merely taking out decades of pent-up hatred on Saddam who is represented here by his machines."

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What about the future development of Kurdistan, I asked, and Dr Sabah gave me a mere shrug in response. There was nothing to be done until the people had gone through their catharsis. The argument suffered, I have to say, by the lack of spontaneity among the plunderers. People had come prepared, looking for specific things, armed with enough money to pay the Peshmergah excise, and with flat-bed trucks to haul the heavier equipment away. If it were all nothing but rage, the Kurds would have acted much more like members of Earth First! at a caterpillar picnic, and just poured sugar into the motors before starting them up. It goes without saying that both past and future requests for big-ticket aid items (like graders to make necessary roads through Kurdistan) would have to be strained through this particular experience. As my baffled and depressed escort from the Surci clan expressed it, this was not Kurdistan, but Dizistan--the land of the thieves.

The Road Home

My Surci hosts and I parted company at the entrance of the Bekhma project, where I turned north to travel over a good, tarmac (IE, military) road that rose at least 500 meters to go over the Bredost (Brother-friend) mountains to Sardawa. This was another "planned" community made up of residents of destroyed villages and the headquarters of Massoud Barzani, and where I was scheduled to meet with the KDP spokesman Siamand Bana.

I was late and Bana was gone, but the Peshmergah in the camp insisted on giving me lunch and then grilled me on the status of the US and coalition forces. At the end of our discussion, and as I got up to go, I asked how the roads were leading West. One gentleman who appeared to be in some position of authority shook his head and made the comment that the government had left the region without decent roads and that perhaps the coalition might send in some road-making equipment as part of an aid package.

It was not a good moment.

"But you have machines," I said.

"Where?" came the reply.

"In Bekhma but on their way for sale in Iran," came my retort.

"By the Quran, you're right!" wailed the man, "It is education that we need! Please do not blame the people!"

From Sardawa, I pushed West, passing a growing number of trucks and pick-ups and tractors, all piled high with people and their belongings as they moved out of Iran. The good road ended at a town called Mergasun, where several Peshmergah were guarding a row of howitzer canons. I had the distinct impression that they were needed just there, lest the canons' wheels end up in Iran.

The road split just outside the town with one fork going north to a place called Sherin and the Turkish frontier, and

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the other snaking its way south across the Barzan mountains to the home town of the KDP leader I had passed through on my way East. The countryside, again, was astoundingly beautiful, a land of rivers and valleys and towering peaks and bluffs, some seeming cut by a heavenly ax and revealing every geological secret held by the hills. Beauty aside, though, I had to ask myself once again about the wisdom of the KDP plan to get NGOs active in their pet Barzan Project. Aside from ferrying in all resources, personnel and equipment via Chinook helicopter, access to the area is limited indeed, and totally brutal on any sort of land transportation.

My driver, Salah, gave praise to the one God when our wheels touched tarmac again, and gave a small cry of joy when he spotted the first French Army check point on a bridge across the Lesser Zab outside the town of Sheladiziah. Here, we were momentarily stopped by another French post and asked about weapons. We were now formally back in the security zone, and our trip was at an end.

This report has gotten just a little out of control, ballooning from an anticipated 1,000 words to nearly 10,000 as I found myself unable to resist throwing in extraneous details and impressions that have only a peripheral connection to immediate NGO concerns. I can only hope that the "local color" aspect may fill in some blanks and answer some questions which a normal assessment team might ask but not have the opportunity to do so.

Thus, in an effort to reduce this to its essentials, I offer the following short summary of what I imagine are the most immediate NGO concerns.

Security: Aside from the large number of armed men wandering around, at no point did I have any sense of being in danger or seeing or hearing of anyone else who felt they were. The Peshmergah seem to have a central discipline, and their leadership is obsessed with keeping their sector as clean as possible in order to encourage NGOs to come, and as observers more than anything else.

In addition to relying on the good graces of the KPD/PUK Peshmergah forces, though, I think it wise to make as much contact with local landlords as possible in order to maintain a balance of services to various parts of the community as well as to recognize that the Kurdish Front is not the only armed force in the area.

Health and Sanitation: The eastern sector has suffered destruction for decades, and so there is, in theory, as much reconstruction work as one could possibly imagine and in every

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possible sector. Basic sanitation and health services could be provided in temporary camps for those coming from Iran, in any of the 4,000 villages destroyed in the course of the past 15 years or in the damaged "model" villages set up by the government. I think that the optimal mode of operation for the IRC or similar NGOs would be to get involved in the limited reconstruction of certain villages nearer main roads, avoiding the symbolic projects offered by the KDP like the Barzan Project.

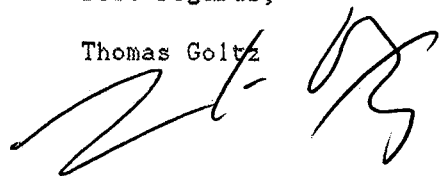
Peripatetic clinics or inoculation teams are also a distinct possibility and much needed in an area that has suffered for decades from a variety of chronic diseases. Wandering teams would also serve the "observer" aspect of relief work that the Kurdish leadership is calling for. The cities and towns in the area could also benefit from a survey of services ranging from sanitation to education, but this may be far over-reaching *the* concept of emergency relief and just be making up for inherent problems in shoddily constructed systems.

Development Work: This would seem to me to be the most exciting sector to work in, and the one the local population feels most in need of, mainly because of the "observer" aspect of foreign involvement in the region. Projects in this area run the entire gamut of possibilities, ranging from setting up chicken farms and hatcheries to supply locally produced eggs and poultry to creating a local tourism sector for white-water raft and trekking enthusiasts. I am quite serious about this last, for in the short term, it might be easier to generate income in many of the more remote areas by hiring locals as cooks and guides and muleteers than in getting them engaged in normal economic activities (or in dream/~~ER~~ projects like bee-keeping in and around Barzan).

Summary: The eastern sector is the front for future relief assistance and related development work in Kurdistan. For IRC to refrain from direct, immediate involvement in the sector will mean losing its leading role in the relief effort as a whole. But at the same time, it has to ^{be} recognized that inherent in the decision to become involved in the relief effort is a decision to become involved in reconstruction and development as well as ⁱⁿ the political process as relief volunteers find themselves acting primarily as observers and monitors.

Best regards,

Thomas Goltz



Zakho, Iraq,
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