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THE KURDISH FRONT IN THE IRAN-IRAQ WAR

Hillel Frisch

At the same time that Americans debated the sagacity of the United States' commitment to defend Kuwaiti ships carrying American flags in light of a possible aggressive Iranian response, the Iraqis were looking worriedly to the northeast. Iran and her Kurdish allies staged another offensive in the oil-rich Sulaimaniyya region and captured the small Iraqi border town of Mawut.

Iraq must take the threat on the Kurdish front seriously. After six years of fighting, the war in the Gulf seems to be at a standoff with each side possessing an advantage which makes it unbeatable. The Iranians hold a distinctive demographic advantage which translates into more men on the battle-

field. However, since the Gulf zone encompasses largely open terrain, Iraqi air superiority has proven lethal.

In the hilly and often mountainous area of eastern Iraq where the Kurds live, the effectiveness of airpower is considerably diminished. Iran realized this in 1983 when it decided to launch its first offensive into Iraq together with the Kurdish Democratic Party (KDP), the major Kurdish guerrilla group headed by the Barzani brothers. These offensives have been conducted as one long war of attrition rather than campaigns designed to score victories, as in the Gulf, for good reason. Since Iran's population is nearly three times that of Iraq, wearing down the Iraqi enemy makes good sense. The Iranian

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regime's religious fervor can be counted upon to cope with the psychological problems stemming from a war of attrition. By contrast, the Iraqi regime which centers around the deification of an individual, its leader, Saddam Hussein, may not be able to bear constant defeat, however small the blows.

For the Iraqis, the fall of Mawut was a bitter reminder of how the Kurdish pawn has changed hands. At the beginning of the war in late 1980, the Kurdish problem was definitely to Iraq's advantage. Though the three million Kurds residing in Iraq comprise 23 percent of the population, it was the Kurds of Iran, a community of similar size, who were more politically turbulent. The frustrated Kurds traditionally have attempted to realize their aspirations for independence during times of weakness in the three states in which they live in substantial numbers -- Turkey, Iraq, and Iran. They rose in rebellion against Turkey before the Turkish Republic finally asserted itself in 1924 and against Iran in 1946 after the USSR invaded Iran during World War II. The Kurds at the time succeeded in creating a republic, but it collapsed as soon as the Soviets withdrew from Iran under combined Anglo-American pressure seven months later. In 1979, the Kurds took advantage of internal dissension within the newly born Islamic Republic of Iran to demand full fledged autonomy. The government refused to grant it and in 1980, two Iranian Kurdish parties, the Kurdistan Democratic Party of Iran (KDPI) and the Marxist Komala, joined forces in rebellion against the Iranian state. Iraq vigorously supported these two Kurdish parties.

But the Kurdish nationalist movement, like most nationalist movements, was never of one stamp. Iran quickly established relations with the largest Iraqi Kurdish group, the KDP, formerly led by Mustafa Barzani, and now by his two sons, Mas'ud and Idris, persuading them to join forces in the campaign against the two Iranian Kurdish parties. Iran was thus able to

exploit long-standing animosities between the two major language groups which comprise the Kurdish people in the area.

Barzani's party centers mainly in the Kurmanji-speaking area of Barzan of northern Iraq and Iran. The two Iranian Kurdish parties, by contrast, base themselves in the Sorani-speaking south. The differences are not only linguistic but sociological. The Soranis on both sides of the Iran-Iraq border are more urban and educated. The northern Kurmanjis are more rural and tribal. The south spawned Kurdish cultural nationalism while the north traditionally led the fighting. Ideologically, the parties in the Sorani areas are more radical and socialist than the Barzanis' KDP. On the Iranian Sorani side, the Kurdish Democratic Party of Iran is social democratic and the Komala is Marxist, with many of its members former activists of the Tudeh - the Iranian Communist Party. In the Iraqi Sorani-speaking area, the socialist Political Union of Kurdistan (PUK) is led by veteran Kurdish nationalist, Jalal Talabani. The party draws its greatest support from the town of Sulaimaniyya and the surrounding area in which the town of Mawut is located.

Ostensibly Iraq had the initial advantage. It was directly supporting two Kurdish parties who were both Sorani and leftist. This should have encouraged the Iraqi PUK to maintain neutrality at the very least. Meanwhile Iran was backing only one major party, the KDP. However, to Iraq's regret, internal dissension which often degenerated into open fighting between the two Iranian Kurdish parties, the KDPI and the Komala, destroyed any chances of effective resistance to the Iranian offensive against its own Kurdish rebels, which was staged in 1981 with the aid of the Barzanis' KDP. All the towns controlled by the rebels were lost. The Iraqi PUK maintained, at best, strained relations with either of their colleagues on the Iranian side. The KDPI was forced to retreat into Iraqi-held territory and there set up their base of operations.

The Iranians, having firmly secured their hold on the Kurds on their side of the border, then proceeded to aggravate the Kurdish problem on the Iraqi side. In 1983, Iranian troops, fundamentalist Kurds, most of whom are members of the Kurdish Shi'ite minority in the southernmost reaches of Iranian Kurdistan, and the KDP acting as scouts, invaded the Qasi Shririn region near the oil-rich field of Khanigin. They were soon joined by opposition groups operating within Iraq such as the Shi'ite Al-Da'wa group and the Iraqi Communist Party. The Iraqi Communist Party is not Kurdish, but most of its military are. Talabani's PUK, on the other hand, initially sided with the Iraqis, his former enemies.

The Iraqis entered negotiations with Talabani in the hope of creating an axis of three Kurdish parties against the Iranian-supported KDP, the Iraqi Communists and another smaller socialist Kurdish party in Iraq. However, negotiations with Baghdad broke down in 1985 and, worse still for the Iraqis, small scale fighting erupted between the PUK and the KDPI, Iraq's Kurdish mainstay.

Three offensives by Iran on the Kurdish front since 1983 have significantly tipped the scales in favor of Iran in its dealings with the Kurdish nationalist movement. In February 1987, the Iranian government convened a "Cooperation Conference for the Iraqi People" under the auspices of the Council of the Islamic Revolution in Iraq, founded in 1982. The Council's main task was to unite all groups in opposition to the Iraqi regime. It began by ironing out

divisions within the Islamic Shi'ite movement and then claimed to have effected a rapprochement between Barzani's KDP and Talabani's PUK, thus bringing most of the Kurdish nationalist forces under Iranian sponsorship. At the three-day-long conference, the Council claimed to have succeeded in bringing about coordination between the Shi'ite opposition and the bulk of the Kurdish national movement.

For the Iranians the significance of this achievement extended far beyond the war waged against Iraq. The keynote speakers of the Conference, which included Khomeini and Iranian Prime Minister Mir Hussein Musawi, warned countries such as Turkey and Syria (which had refused to attend the conference on the grounds that the Iraqi Communist party, its ally against the Iraqi Ba'athist regime, was not invited) against exploiting internal divisions within Iraq, as Iran had done, to press historical claims they had on that country.

Two fronts in one war reflect two basic Middle East realities. The Gulf war front is easily comprehensible to the Western mind; its military dimension, the war over passageways and oil, are topics which the Washington foreign policy elite can discuss with facility. The motley Balkan-like reality of the Kurdish front, the unknown names, parties, and peoples involved, the dubious roles of the various states, are facts harder to master. Yet the Kurdish front might be equally significant for the peoples of the Middle East, if not for the West. Certainly for the Kurdish people it has been devastating.

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A NEW MAGAZINE FOR JORDANIANS ABROAD

Judging from its sleek cover, the new Arab magazine, Al-Mughtarib al-Arabi, appears little different from the many other magazines displayed on the newsstands of European cities catering to the growing Arab expatriate population there. The cover portrays a well-known Arab singer against the background of a setting sun in a romantic port. But behind its frivolous appearance lies serious business. The magazine, written in Jordan, printed in Cyprus, and sold in Europe, aims at bringing the Arab expatriate home or, at the very least, encouraging him to visit, spend, and invest in the land of his birth.

For Jordan, strengthening its links with the expatriate population is vital to securing its economic future. Today, Jordan can no longer depend on a steady stream of aid from other Arab states in an age of lower oil revenues and must look for other sources of income. Jordanians living abroad, who account for anywhere from one-third to one-half of the country's total workforce, are a potential alternative source. But these expatriates can also play an important role in directing economic growth. Many of them achieved substantial economic success in their new countries of residence in the Gulf States, Latin America, and Europe. Moreover, they are, in many cases, exceptionally well-educated. For the Gulf States and Saudi Arabia, encouraging the return of entrepreneurial or technical talent is a more urgent matter than encouraging investments; for countries like Jordan and Egypt, both issues have become top priorities. For the past three years, both Jordan and Egypt have hosted annual conferences for their expatriates, devised various investment schemes, and passed laws and regulations giving them special tax concessions if they would return. Now the Jordanians have enlisted the media to disseminate this idea.

Al-Mughtarib al-Arabi uses an indirect approach. The first article focuses on the virtues of Nicosia, Cyprus as a haven close to home. Its fine restaurants and beaches, its large Lebanese community and the fact that many Greek Cypriots speak Arabic thanks to their former service with the British army in Arab countries, are noted in sharp contrast to unmentioned Beirut. But then every Arab knows why so many Lebanese are there.

The story of Abd al-Majid Shuman, an Arab Palestinian banker who rose from rags to riches in the United States in the first two decades of the century and then to even greater wealth upon his return to Palestine in the thirties, has an obvious moral to it. First, Abd al-Majid returned to his homeland, but even more important, his bank, now centered in Amman, financed much of the Arab Palestinian movement in Mandate Palestine. Shuman is held up as the model expatriate that the reader would do well in emulating.

An interview with the head of manpower in the Jordanian armed forces, General Abdullah Zariqat, on the subject of "serving the flag," as compulsory conscription is called in Arabic, provides the most serious reading in the magazine. Many of the issues raised are well known to Israeli expatriates: Under what conditions will the sons of Jordanians living abroad be conscripted? Can they visit Jordan without fear of being conscripted by the army? Is there any possibility of buying one's way out of army service? General Zariqat notes that such a proposal was offered at last year's conference of expatriates, but to no avail. The Hashemite Kingdom of Jordan will not accept the shirking of one's national duty even though such practices are widespread in the Arab world. The impression General Zariqat gives of his country, an impression indeed reflected throughout the whole magazine,

is that of a self-confident state firmly in control with the right to make demands of its citizens around the globe. "Every citizen would do well to obtain the booklet on serving the flag from their local Jordanian consulate," he sternly advises.

A short description of the University of Yarmuk, Jordan's second largest university which specializes in science and technology, is somewhat related to an interview with a Jordanian who emigrated to Brazil. While a Jordanian emigre to the United States might prefer an American education for his children, the emigrant to Brazil might be convinced to choose this Jordanian alternative to a Brazilian university. Turning university education into a foreign exchange earner is a widespread practice which countries such as Greece, Yugoslavia, and Romania have been doing for years. What is new is focusing on one's own expatriate clientele.

An article on the holy month of Ramadan, news on investment opportunities, and

an interview with the Syrian Minister of Tourism, which fill the remaining pages, all have an important message behind them. The religious motif is a clarion call to those who left the "diar al-muslimi," the Muslim part of the world, while the interview with the Syrian Minister of Tourism is a reminder that the Arab cold war might finally be over. Only six years ago Syrian troops were amassed along its border with Jordan. No doubt Jordanian expatriates will find this interview a positive sign.

All in all, given the high level of belligerence found in most of the Arab press, Al-Mughtarib al-Arabi, by comparison, reads like a peace proclamation. Mobilizing the Arab expatriate for the sake of economic progress and strengthening the spiritual links between the expatriate and the nation he left behind is welcome news in this part of the world where mobilization takes place so often for the sake of destructive causes.

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DATA BASE: COMPENSATING FOR THE DECLINE IN FOREIGN GRANTS TO JORDAN

The following two tables underscore the importance of attracting Jordanian expatriates to visit and invest in Jordan. The first table shows the marked decline in foreign grants from their peak levels in the early 1980s as a part of total state revenues. They had reached more than 50 percent of total state revenues in the aftermath of the Baghdad Conference in which Jordan committed itself against the Camp David peace process. Today, however, these funds are no longer available in such amounts and their share of total

Jordanian revenues has significantly declined. Therefore, Jordan is actively seeking alternative revenue sources.

Table II shows how Jordan earns revenue on "invisible exports," i.e., services such as tourism, but suffers from large deficits in the "visible" trading of goods. Jordanian expatriates might be able to help on both counts, providing an alternative source of "foreign aid" as well as assisting as tourists who spend foreign currency in Jordan.

TABLE I: JORDANIAN STATE REVENUES

(in 000 J.D.)

Year	Total	Domestic	Foreign Grants	% of Total Revenues
1976	173,825	107,587	66,238	38.1
1977	264,451	142,249	122,202	46.2
1978	240,187	158,488	81,699	34.0
1979	398,197	187,895	210,302	52.8
1980	435,451	226,148	209,303	48.1
1981	522,737	309,199	206,312	39.5
1982	561,774	362,042	199,582	35.5
1983	599,858	399,968	197,014	32.8
1984	530,734	411,671	106,107	20.0
1985*	645,032	424,532	187,800	29.1
1986*	690,268	517,168	143,700	20.8

* Preliminary

Sources: Jordan Ministry of Finance
Central Bank of Jordan

TABLE II: MAIN ITEMS IN JORDAN'S BALANCE OF PAYMENTS

(in 000,000 J.D.)

Year	Total Goods and Services		Goods		Services		Balance of Trade
	Credit	Debit	Credit	Debit	Credit	Debit	
1982	1122	1613	265	1141	857	472	-491
1983	1103	1540	210	1101	893	438	-436
1984	1257	1640	291	1069	967	571	-383
1985	1221	1636	310	1073	911	564	-414
1986	1081	1335	256	848	824	487	-254

1 Jordanian dinar = U.S. \$3.00