



UvA-DARE (Digital Academic Repository)

Iraqi Kurdistan: Contours of a Post-Civil War Society

Leezenberg, M.M.

DOI

[10.1080/01436590500127867](https://doi.org/10.1080/01436590500127867)

Publication date

2005

Document Version

Final published version

Published in

Third World Quarterly

[Link to publication](#)

Citation for published version (APA):

Leezenberg, M. M. (2005). Iraqi Kurdistan: Contours of a Post-Civil War Society. *Third World Quarterly*, 26(4-5), 631-647. <https://doi.org/10.1080/01436590500127867>

General rights

It is not permitted to download or to forward/distribute the text or part of it without the consent of the author(s) and/or copyright holder(s), other than for strictly personal, individual use, unless the work is under an open content license (like Creative Commons).

Disclaimer/Complaints regulations

If you believe that digital publication of certain material infringes any of your rights or (privacy) interests, please let the Library know, stating your reasons. In case of a legitimate complaint, the Library will make the material inaccessible and/or remove it from the website. Please Ask the Library: <https://uba.uva.nl/en/contact>, or a letter to: Library of the University of Amsterdam, Secretariat, Singel 425, 1012 WP Amsterdam, The Netherlands. You will be contacted as soon as possible.

Iraqi Kurdistan: contours of a post-civil war society

MICHIEL LEEZENBERG

ABSTRACT Iraqi Kurdistan began the road to reconstruction after it became an autonomous region following the 1991 Gulf war. Although many of the difficulties facing post-Saddam Iraq are similar to those facing Iraqi Kurdistan in the early 1990s, the experience of the North cannot be treated mechanically as a model for the country as a whole. The paper traces political and economic developments since 1991 and concludes that many of the factors which led to destabilisation in the North in the 1990s are present today in the rest of Iraq. These include the use of violence to create ethnic and sectarian tensions in pursuit of political ends, dependence on centralised food distribution, and foreign interference. The 1990s also witnessed the emergence of new clientelist networks, which cut across the distinction between state and civil society. The rehabilitation of the oil industry and a geographically fair division of its considerable revenues may hold out the prospect for a peace dividend, but this is not guaranteed unless issues of security, genuine political participation, massive unemployment and clientelism are addressed.

At first blush, Iraqi Kurdistan seems the neoliberal success story of post-Saddam Iraq. For decades a poor, underdeveloped and conflict-ridden part of the country, it has emerged as by far the most stable, secure and prosperous region. From 1991 onwards a *de facto* independent area under international protection emerged in the north of Iraq, which, despite external interference and internal infighting, has blossomed economically, especially since the start of the UN oil-for-food programme in 1997.

As much as it had suffered in the decades-long Kurdish insurgency, during the Iran–Iraq war and in the aftermath of the 1991 Gulf war, Iraqi Kurdistan hardly sustained any damage in the 2003 war. The only major battle ground in the Kurdish-held areas was the mountainous terrain near Khormal on the Iraqi–Iranian border, where American aerial bombardments prepared the way for a ground attack against local positions of the Islamist Ansar al-Islam.¹ These and other operations, however, hardly affected the local population. Even the contested city of Kirkuk fell without much of a fight; moreover, its takeover by Kurdish forces led to neither a much-feared showdown between Kurdish *peshmergas* and Turkish troops,

Michiel Leezenberg is in the Department of Philosophy, University of Amsterdam. Email: m.m.leezenberg@uva.nl

nor to an even more anxiously anticipated outburst of inter-ethnic violence. Subsequently power was transferred to the Americans, and attempts at establishing a pluralist local government have been at least in part successful.

Many of the difficulties facing post-Saddam Iraq are eerily familiar to those facing Iraqi Kurdistan in the early 1990s: attempts to create a stable civilian government, eradicating the totalitarian heritage of three decades, and interference from neighbouring countries, to name but a few. Even economic sabotage of the kind seen in Iraq since the 2003 war (which includes pillaging electricity installations and cutting off water supplies, attacks on truck transport, and sabotage of oil transport) is nothing new to anyone who has followed developments in Iraqi Kurdistan in the 1990s. These developments include relatively successful local elections in 1992, from which two parties, the Kurdistan Democratic Party (KDP) headed by Massoud Barzani and the Patriotic Union of Kurdistan (PUK) led by Jalal Talabani emerged victorious; the steady erosion of the elected bodies by a strict 50:50 division between both parties of parliamentary seats, cabinet posts and other positions; the outbreak of several rounds of increasingly destructive infighting between the PUK and KDP in May 1994, exacerbated by the interference of the Baghdad government and neighbouring states; and, following the end of fighting, the political stabilisation of two one-party statelets under the control of the KDP and the PUK, respectively. Under the oil-for-food deal a remarkably flourishing economy emerged, in spite of the continuing UN embargo against Iraq.

At present Iraqi Kurdistan is long past the reconstruction stage. The rehabilitation of basic infrastructural facilities, which in Iraq as a whole has yet to get off the ground, has made considerable progress in the Kurdish-held north since the establishment of a *de facto* independent entity there in 1991. Today infrastructural facilities, such as schools and health care, though not everywhere of first world quality, are certainly quite good by regional standards. Kurds are reported to have come from neighbouring Turkey to Kurdish-held Iraq for medical treatment because of its superior facilities.

It would therefore be tempting to treat the experience of the north mechanically as a model for Iraq as a whole, and even as grounds for a moderate optimism on this score.² There are dangers in overemphasising such parallels, however: the differences between the Kurds and the other parts of Iraq are by no means negligible. First, although they have as much reason to be wary of US intentions as any Iraqi, the Kurds have never been ideologically anti-American. Allied presence and protection was and is far less controversial in Iraqi Kurdistan than in the rest of the country: there has never been an armed resistance against the Americans of the kind now seen further South in Iraq. Further, in the Kurdish north radical political Islam was a relatively minor, though by no means negligible, social factor during the 1990s, and was virtually crushed in the wake of the 2003 war; in Iraq as a whole, however, it seems to be not only the predominant form of political discourse, but also the major vehicle for the articulation of opposition against the US and other foreign troops among the Shi'ite and Sunni Arab population.

In the violent atmosphere of post-Saddam Iraq the question of whether the country can be turned into a liberal democracy under the rule of law is becoming increasingly academic. In the shorter run the question of public security is vastly more urgent; but, even here, the situation is highly volatile and unpredictable. For this reason, I will largely abstain from speculation about what might be plausible scenarios for a future Iraq, and instead restrict my discussion to the enduring or structural features of present-day Iraqi Kurdistan. Specifically, I will discuss whether there are any lasting effects resulting from the decades-long Kurdish insurgency and its suppression, the eight-year Iran–Iraq war, the Gulf war and the uprisings and sanctions regime in its aftermath, and the Kurdish infighting that raged from 1994 to 1997. Iraq Kurdistan had been solidly integrated into Iraq’s evolving economy and polity until, and in several respects even after, the 1991 establishment of *de facto* Kurdish self-rule. For reasons of space, I will not discuss pre-1991 influences and post-1991 parallels in detail, but focus on regional developments since the early 1990s.³

From Stalinist state to network society?

Affluent oil-producing states have always constituted something of an anomaly for dependency theorists, who tend to depict dependent or peripheral economies as wholly derivative from, and kept deliberately poor by, first world capital. In general, Iraq had an unusual status among developing nations: it had a relatively strong state, an elaborate bureaucracy and a government that because of its expanding oil income was relatively autonomous from society. It thus constituted what conventional Marxist-inspired analyses would call a ‘rentier state’, as its income derived from foreign capital acquired through the export of non-labour-intensive raw materials rather than from the productive activities of its own working class. The differences between Iraq and other canonical rentier states, however, even regional ones like Egypt and Syria, are as significant as their similarities.⁴ In general, traditional political economy approaches tend to represent the economy as a more unambiguously determining force than it is. For example, Faleh Abdul Jabar argues that rentier states are more likely to pursue their foreign policies by aggressive rather than diplomatic means:⁵ However, Saudi Arabia and the smaller Gulf monarchies are as much rentier states as was Saddam’s Iraq, yet their domestic and foreign policies have been far less violent and destructive than were Iraq’s. Iraq’s systematic use of violence at home and abroad should be seen not in terms of political or economic necessity or expediency but as a *style* of governing which was articulated in terms of an obsession with sovereignty, treason and espionage, and which was primarily inspired by Stalinist practices.

Likewise, important analyses like Chaudhry (2002) threaten to dissolve the specifics of the Iraqi state in the generalities of the contemporary economic and political order. Chaudhry criticises the widespread assumption that the Iraqi state of the 1970s and 1980s, because of its oil wealth, needed no broad social base. Despite all its repressive apparatus, she argues, the Baathist state

was not able to control or regulate the forces of the internationalised market, as it could not, for example, durably attract capital from Iraqi expatriates during the 1990s.⁶ According to this analysis, the Iraqi state was at once the only protection against an unbridled capitalism, and a major source of oppression in itself—a paradox she sees as central to the modern state at large (2002: 262).

Inspired by another approach, one could argue that Iraqi Kurdistan, and Iraq as a whole, are part of a 'regional conflict formation' like Afghanistan, the Great Lakes region or the Horn of Africa (cf Rubin, 2003), witness the political and economic spill-over of internal conflicts across state boundaries, the weakening or even collapse of the state, and the emergence of a shadow economy and even shadow state. The notion of a regional conflict formation was introduced as a counterweight to more traditional, state-biased approaches; it seems fruitful for Iraq, but should not ignore some of its rather distinct features. First, the state in Iraq (as in its neighbours Iran and Turkey) has traditionally been strong, well entrenched, and centralised; second, as I will argue below, the infrastructure-dependent but lucrative oil industry in Iraq has in the past been a major incentive for striving towards a stable and state-like polity.

What, then, was the character of the Iraqi state under Saddam? The conventional notion is that it was turned into a Stalinist one-party totalitarian state with a pervasive apparatus of surveillance and repression that remained largely intact even during the 1990s. Unlike Stalin, however, Saddam did not purge all regional and especially clan and kinship ties from the state apparatus: on the contrary, his closer and more distant relatives formed the backbone not only of his regime but also of the core or new economic elites. This style of government has repeatedly been compared to the management of a mafia clan (see eg Perthes, 2002: 278).

There is another way in which tribalism is important in Iraqi power. The absolute concentration of power and the permanent and omnipresent apparatus of surveillance and repression may correspond to the self-image the Baath wished to project, especially in the cities; but the real articulation of power relations was always more complex, especially in the countryside. In the 1980s the regime strengthened, and in part even created, (quasi)tribal structures in the Kurdish north as a means of creating irregular troops for the northern Iraqi countryside rather than diverting military personnel from the war with Iran. In the early 1990s this retribalisation policy, which involved a partial privatisation of the state monopoly on violence, was extended to Iraq as a whole.⁷

Post-1991 Iraq under Saddam developed a form of crony capitalism, where the new economic elites were in part protected by tribal and mafia-like networks that could use violence to protect their markets. In many respects the same situation holds in the north. It would of course be grossly unfair to suggest that the two Kurdish statelets have merely reproduced the Baathist model; life in the Kurdish-held north is incomparably more prosperous and less precarious than it was under Saddam. Nevertheless, the emerging societies and economies do display significant structural similarities.

The relative peace and prosperity of present-day Iraqi Kurdistan are unprecedented; one could even say with some justification that it is this stability, rather than armed conflict and economic underdevelopment, which would seem the anomaly. Since at least the early 1960s the region has suffered severely under successive, and in part overlapping, forms of large-scale armed conflict. The successive stages of insurgency and repression since 1961 have affected the whole region. The 1980–88 war with Iran primarily affected the border areas, but the counterinsurgency operations carried out in its wake led to the destruction of thousands of villages and even several larger cities, like Halabja and Qala Diza. The brutal crushing of the uprising in the aftermath of the 1991 Gulf war caused an enormous (if largely temporary) population displacement and widespread looting; and, finally, infighting between the Kurdish parties between 1994 and 1997 caused further havoc. The questions I will address below include whether the region's current prosperity has developed in spite or rather because of these conflicts; where this prosperity comes from; how it is divided among the population, and how secure the region's current position is.

Given the region's violent past, it makes sense to take open, violent conflict not as a temporary or anomalous deviation from a normal form of society as 'civil', but as a permanent risk or condition of social life. This is not the place for extended theoretical discussion, but in different areas—like ethics and social, political and legal theory—society has been fruitfully conceptualised as based not on the end of conflict as liberal theories would have it, but as irreducibly involving conflict or antagonism of one form or another.⁸ In Iraq's highly conflictual recent history the uncritical usage of such apparently neutral liberal oppositions—between the official and the informal economy, between legitimate rule and oppression, between legal trade and smuggling and between state power and crime—may actually lead to the tacit introduction of all kinds of misleading normative assumptions of civility and legitimacy.⁹ In such a constellation it may be the stability and legitimacy of any authority that calls for explanation as much as any conflict or shift of power. The legitimacy of, say, the Baath regime or the respective Kurdish regional administrations, not to mention the local predominance of warlords or tribal leaders can always be contested; a central question for conflict approaches is why such challenges emerge only relatively rarely. In this respect, 1990s Iraqi Kurdistan was a fascinating if disturbing laboratory, showing how quickly power relations can reconfigure. In early 1992 civilians could still challenge the authority of armed militiamen or *peshmerga* with relative ease but, a mere two years later, during the party infighting, it had become much more difficult (if not dangerous) to do so openly.

In such an antagonistic constellation, in other words, the main question is not so much when power is challenged, but rather when authority is perceived, or succeeds in presenting itself, as legitimate at all. As an analytical tool, I will therefore employ Charles Tilly's provocative thesis that once one abstracts away from questions of legitimacy, the activities of states and organised criminal gangs do not differ all that much (Tilly, 1986). Analytically, activities like taxation, ie the extraction or extortion of money

in exchange for protection against real or imagined dangers (which may in fact be created or imagined by the very agents subsequently offering protection), and the self-arrogated right to wage war or more generally to use or even monopolise violence, are common to both states and criminal gangs. The difference between them lies not in what they are doing, but in whether they are perceived as having the right to do it.

Politics and economics since 1991

The economy of 1970s Iraq, based on Eastern bloc models, was state-driven and quasi-socialist. In the early 1980s Iraq developed a war economy in the classical sense: increased state intervention and industrial production actually strengthened the labour force and encouraged the participation of women, and even unintentionally stimulated the independent trade organisations. However, from 1983 onwards in the agricultural sector, and from 1987 in the urban industries, the regime started a drive to dismantle this state-led economy. Even before the 1990 crisis and the ensuing war the Iraqi welfare state underwent a rigorously and painfully applied economic shock therapy. This shock therapy, however, was but briefly pursued; it was interrupted by the social and economic havoc it caused, and even more by the occupation of Kuwait and the ensuing sanctions and war (cf Chaudhry, 1991; 2002).

The Kurdish-held north was of course an integral (if in some respects 'peripheral') part of the Iraqi economy before the uprising; but, even afterwards, it maintained a kind of symbiosis with it. The 1991 establishment of a Safe Haven along the Turkey – Iraq border contributed to the creation of a juridically anomalous *de facto* independent entity: it was no longer part of Iraq, yet not recognised as distinct; the UN Security Council Resolution 688 that sanctioned it was interpreted as setting a precedent for humanitarian intervention, yet in fact it protected Turkish state interests against Kurdish refugees (cf Leezenberg, 1997). By the summer of 1991 most refugees had returned to their homes, many of which had been looted by government forces. An uneasy balance of power was reached between Iraqi government forces and Kurdish insurgent troops and after several bloody clashes, the Iraqi regime withdrew its military and other personnel from most of the Autonomous Region in October 1991. At the same time, it imposed an economic blockade, gradually reducing oil supplies and centrally distributed foodstuffs.¹⁰

Next to the temporary dislocations caused by the 1991 war there were more enduring demographic problems, mostly resulting from the conflict between the central government and the Kurdish insurgency. There were not only the *mujamma'ât* or relocation camps, where hundreds of thousands of deported villagers had been reduced to a non-productive life of total dependence on government handouts; there was also a steady influx of Kurds and Turkomans, especially from Kirkuk, as a result of government policies of ethnically based expulsions that went back to the mid-1970s.

Apart from the large numbers of internally displaced persons from Kirkuk, Sinjar and Khanaqin, the Kurdish-held region harboured considerable

numbers of refugees from neighbouring countries, notably Iranian Kurds and Fayli Kurds. The latter had been expelled from Iraq in 1971 and 1980 for allegedly having Iranian rather than Iraqi nationality; many of them were forcibly repatriated by Iran to the Kurdish parts of Iraq in the course of the 1990s. Further, in 1993 several thousand Kurds fled Turkey and established a camp at Atrush in Kurdish-held territory, which was subsequently transferred to Makhmur further south.¹¹ Finally, in some of the more remote mountainous areas there are pockets of remaining—and rather demoralised—PKK fighters. It is relatively unlikely that either Turkey or the USA will mount any large-scale military operation against them; if there were an amnesty perceived as fair, the vast majority of them would probably return to Turkey.

By far the largest flow of refugees during the 1990s, of course, was out of Iraq and towards western Europe. One main route of transportation ran through Turkey and the Mediterranean; another led through the Ukraine and other parts of the former Soviet Union. In 2001 and 2002, just before the American-led war against Iraq, there was a discussion in the Netherlands and other European countries about whether northern Iraq was safe enough for the involuntary repatriation of rejected asylum seekers. The two Iraqi Kurdish administrations did not dismiss these proposals outright, but emphasised that they did not have the financial and other infrastructural means to accommodate returnees without substantial support from abroad.¹²

Apart from these groups the need for emergency relief was relatively short; but it proved a hard task to get from short term-relief to longer-term reconstruction. There were not only political factors like the UN sanctions against Iraq, Baghdad's blockade of the north, and the interference of neighbouring states; there also were structural factors, such as urbanisation and the long-term decline of Iraq's agricultural sector within the international market. It proved difficult to reverse the long-term trend towards urbanisation: for years agricultural activity had been undermined by the Iraqi government's agrarian policies (in part inefficient, in part destructive), and especially by the system of subsidies on basic foodstuffs. Following the imposition of an internal blockade in 1991, transport from local production centres became prohibitively expensive. Misguided policies, protracted conflicts and the international market, not to mention the enticements of an oil economy, have not wholly destroyed the local agriculture; but they have seriously jeopardised the prospect of self-sufficient agriculture, in Iraqi Kurdistan as elsewhere in Iraq.¹³ With the industrial sector the situation was even worse. The Kurdish north had never witnessed a degree of industrialisation even remotely comparable to that of the Baghdad area and, following the imposition of sanctions, what industry there was suffered further because of a lack of spare parts.

The emergence of a new regional industrial sector, therefore, was always unlikely; Iraq's oil production was and remained the major source of income. None of the country's major oil fields had come under Kurdish control during the 1991 uprising but a lively and lucrative transit trade in petrol products from Iraq to Turkey developed afterwards, mostly going

through the KDP-held Ibrahim Khalil checkpoint. Obviously this form of oil export was officially forbidden by the UN sanctions regime, and ruled out by Baghdad's internal blockade, but it was in fact tolerated if not encouraged by local authorities. Moreover, the petrol trade was increasingly 'privatised': in a sense it replaced the state supplies of oil to the north, at far greater cost to the local population. On the Iraqi side, Saddam's son Uday was in control of this privatised smuggling; on the Kurdish side, Barzani's nephew Nechirwan (who subsequently was to become prime minister of the Arbil-based cabinet) appears to have steadily increased his control over the transit trade. The oil-for-food programme does not seem to have reduced the income generated by this smuggling to any significant degree. More generally, the rapidly expanding (semi-legal) import of luxury goods formed an increasingly visible reflection of rising prosperity. Especially in Duhok, near the Turkish border, huge shopping malls emerged; trade opportunities were so promising that, in June 2004, an Iraqi Kurdistan trade forum was organised in London.¹⁴ The late 1990s also saw the re-emergence of the local tourism sector: the Kurdish region, with its numerous summer resorts in the mountains, had long had, but not yet realised, a promising economic potential in this field. Between 200 000 and 300 000 tourists were expected in the summer of 2004, mostly from the Arab parts of Iraq and from neighbouring Arab countries.¹⁵ Needless to say, however, only a small minority of the local Kurdish population benefited from these new developments: although they did yield increased employment opportunities in construction and services, they primarily led to an enormous increase in income disparities.

At the political level there were significant and serious attempts to create a civilian and pluralist government for the region (especially through the May 1992 elections). These were equally hampered by a lack of international recognition of the elected bodies, and by the emergence of a form of parallel government by the relatively richly endowed foreign (or foreign-funded) ngos.¹⁶ The equal division of both parliamentary seats and government posts between the KDP and PUK provided ample opportunity for corruption, and increasingly for competition between these two parties elected into the regional government.

The revenues of the transit trade in oil were an enormous source of wealth, and hence a potential bone of contention: disagreement over the division of these revenues was one of the main causes of Kurdish infighting. The outbreak of clashes between, primarily, the KDP and PUK in May 1994 should be seen, however, not as a victory of the executive over the legislative, but as a victory of the party politburos over the elected government (cf Leezenberg, 1997). The infighting not only led to the withdrawal of many foreign ngos; it also increasingly affected life in the cities; Arbil especially descended into an ever-greater chaos and anarchy. Fights around the Kesnezan checkpoint led to the repeated shelling, and even the looting, of Arbil's nearby main hospital. Local strongmen could set up their own checkpoints in the city, and kidnappings and other forms of extortion reached a high point.¹⁷

In this period there was a serious danger of the region sliding into a Lebanon-style social anarchy, in which urban and rural warlords would violently dominate life. The dramatic climax was undoubtedly the KDP's military takeover of Arbil with the aid of the Iraqi army on 31 August 1996; however, somewhat surprisingly perhaps, the fighting abated in the second half of the 1990s. It quickly became clear that the KDP, by taking not only Arbil but also Sulaimaniya, had overstretched its military capacities; the equally rapid recapture of Sulaimaniya by PUK troops and the establishment of a new demarcation line just east of Arbil proved that neither party had the military means to eliminate the other.

Direct and high-level US mediation led to the formal cessation of hostilities in the so-called 'Washington agreement' signed in September 1998. Both party leaders pledged to work towards the re-establishment of the elected regional parliament and government. But nothing of the sort happened. Despite weekly 'normalisation talks' between the two parties from late 1997 to just before the 2003 war, few if any substantial steps (other than the exchange of prisoners of war) were taken towards the reconvening of the regional parliament elected in 1992 and the reunification of the two administrations.¹⁸

It was not war fatigue or US diplomatic pressure, however, that brought an end to the open conflict and social anarchy of the mid-1990s. Another—and perhaps decisive—factor was the implementation of the oil-for-food agreement from 1997 onwards. Of its revenues 13% were earmarked for the Kurdish-held region. The allocation and implementation processes were slow, inefficient and corruption-prone; nonetheless, the programme proved a strong incentive to ceasing hostilities, especially as it involved lucrative contracts for local distribution and infrastructural projects. Through the new contracting business the two parties further consolidated their positions in the territories under their military control, even though the allocation of resources was not strictly in their hands but in those of the UN officials and even the Iraqi regime.

In retrospect the implementation of the programme appears to mark a turning point for the better; one cannot help wondering whether this reintegration through oil revenues might not constitute an optimistic scenario for the future of Iraq as a whole. It should be kept in mind, however, that whatever the undoubted benefits of the oil-for-food programme, it did not solve any of the underlying structural weaknesses of the regional and national economy. For decades Iraq had had a centralised food distribution system; in October 1991 this system was discontinued in the Kurdish-held north, and by the mid-1990s it was in danger of being discontinued in the rest of the country. Under the oil-for-food scheme it got a new lease of life. In a sense the programme extended the phase of relief aid at the expense of efforts to rehabilitate a self-sufficient economy: to some extent it has actually undermined the rehabilitation of agricultural production. More generally, it has had contradictory aspects and effects regarding state sovereignty: it undermined the Iraqi state's sovereignty over its own population, yet strengthened the

regime; it institutionalised the special status of the north, yet gave the Baghdad administration more leverage there.

The institutionalisation of patronage

Despite its distinct course of development, then, Iraqi Kurdistan shares many structural features with the country as a whole. It is therefore worth looking at the character of state–society relations in the region. Contemporary Iraqi Kurdistan has no recognised state, and is not quite a rentier state (or quasi-state) in the classical dependency–theoretical sense of the word, as the wealth generated appears not so much the result of the extraction of non-industrial raw materials, but rather of transit trade. It may be more useful to qualify it as (to coin a term of art) a ‘post-civil war society’, in which the heritage of domestic conflict has strengthened and even institutionalised patronage relations, primarily through the maintenance of different forms of scarcity. One open question is whether this reflects the more general demise of the state in its classical form, and the concomitant rise of networks. Has Iraqi Kurdistan become a ‘network society’ (Castells, 1996), reflecting the weakening of the state as a general historical trend of the information age?

The importance of networks of patronage has indeed increased since 1991. In 2003 unemployment for Iraq as a whole was estimated at some 50%; there is little reason to believe that Iraqi Kurdistan was essentially better off. Typical for the region is an extreme economic inequality. According to UN figures, in the summer of 2002 some 50% of households in Iraqi Kurdistan had to survive on the equivalent of US\$25 a month; this sub-poverty income was supplemented by a food basket worth \$50 every month, financed by the oil-for-food programme.¹⁹ The enduring poverty and dependence of the bulk of the population provided the opportunity structure for widespread patronage and corruption from above. Traditionally anthropological studies describe patronage as informal and perceived as basically illegitimate. The parties’ persistent attempts to monopolise, and indeed institutionalise, clientelist networks suggests that the formal–informal distinction, or even the concept of patron–client relations may not be the most useful here.²⁰ Both regions nominally have multiparty systems; but even the opposition parties are actually on the payroll of the main parties.²¹ Apart from the Islamist Yekgirtuy islami or Islamic League, which weakened considerably following the 11 September 2001 assaults, no serious mass opposition movements have emerged. Before 2005 KDP candidates were not allowed to run in local elections in PUK territory, and vice versa.

It may be that this institutionalised patronage has weakened the chances for the emergence of a new social contract, that is, an ultimately voluntary and non-violent form of pluralist political association in the region, and in Iraq as a whole. In Eastern Europe one of the longer-term effects of communist rule was an enduring mistrust of the state and its institutions; where resources are supplied by the state, these tend to be seen as a source of private profit rather than of common good. At present it is hard to say

whether and how strongly a similar attitude obtains among the Iraqi population as a whole.²² In the Kurdish north decades of totalitarian rule, corruption and violent repression may have durably undermined the very idea of state legitimacy as founded on a social contract of sorts. There seems to be a widespread perception that institutionalised clientelism, and having to bribe officials for various kinds of civil services, is, if not the norm for legitimate government, then at least the normal factual state of affairs. People may be dissatisfied with the authorities in power, but they often not only lack the means and the media for voicing their protests; they are also too financially dependent on the parties to engage in any genuine public oppositional activities. In late 2003 a 'referendum movement' emerged which by early 2004 claimed to have gathered the signatures of almost two million Iraqi Kurds, but this movement was at least as much a sign of opposition against the Kurdish leadership as of a wish to secede from Iraq. By early October 2004 the referendum movement had organised massive demonstrations in several major Kurdish cities.²³

The post-1991 region has witnessed a rapid and relatively smooth reconfiguration of networks and change of elites. The previous generation of local economic elites had emerged in the course of the 1980s; it included tribal leaders like those of the Surchis and the Herkis, who had profited especially from the lucrative contracting business and headed internationalised business empires as much as 'traditional' tribes. Consequently some of the infighting between 1994 and 1997, including the KDP's notorious destruction of the traditional Surchi stronghold of Kilekan just before its takeover of Arbil in the summer of 1996, should not be seen in terms of quasi-tribal conflicts but rather as an attempt to monopolise and secure regional strategic interests (especially the supply lines between the KDP heartlands in the north, the Spilk military base and the city of Arbil).

An analytically distinct but partly overlapping kind of network, in Iraqi Kurdistan as in Iraq at large, is formed by the various organised crime rackets. Not all of these networks are politically or tribally defined, but there is certainly an exchange between them. The convenient self-image of many Iraqis is that, at least until the 1970s, Iraq had a relatively low rate of both common and organised crime. This does not match very well with the well known social anarchy of the late Ottoman age and, of course, smuggling has been a major activity in the Kurdish region as long as there have been international borders. But it is undoubtedly true that the 1970s and 1980s marked a new phase in both the development of an informal economy and the growth of organised crime. A first important factor was the creation in the 1970s of a highly inefficient and corruption-prone Eastern-bloc style state-driven economy, funded by the rapidly increasing oil revenues. Second, the war economy of the 1980s created further opportunities for a shadow economy: the entirely artificial official exchange rate, state controls on food prices and on the import of cigarettes and alcohol made black-market activities all the more lucrative. It was primarily the existing power elites that profited from this situation.

Following the state collapse in the north in 1991 and in the whole of Iraq in 2003, various tribal, political and criminal groups engaged in acts of economic sabotage, or in what Bozarslan (1996) has called 'predation'. However, there were also other, more intrusive and violent forms of crime, like the kidnapping of foreign truck drivers, reconstruction workers, security personnel and even diplomats. In present-day Iraq many of these kidnappings have an ostensibly political motivation, but as often as not they (also) aim at extorting substantial ransoms. Moreover, such kidnappings have been taking place in Iraq on a large scale for over a decade, and even now target rich Iraqi civilians rather than foreigners. In other words, there is a clear overlap between governments or political movements and organised crime in activities, tactics and in part even personnel.

Another, and probably more important, illegal or semi-legal activity is smuggling. In the local context the demarcation between smuggling and regular trade, or between legitimate taxation and illegitimate extortion, becomes problematic. For example, the massive and lucrative oil transports through Habur gate between Turkey and Iraq were in violation of UN sanctions, but the KDP administration regulated and hence legitimised it by imposing customs duties. At first, non-petrol smuggling centred around cigarettes, alcohol, pornography, narcotics and luxury technological goods; in the course of the 1990s, however, there was a steady rise in the trade in passports, exit visas and refugees. At rates of up to \$5000 per person, such transports became an increasingly lucrative option, and carried far lower risks of long-term imprisonment for the personnel involved than did drug trafficking, for example.

The large-scale transport of refugees, involving boats carrying hundreds of Iraqis at a time across the Mediterranean, required a high degree of international co-operation. Yet, despite this high degree of internationalisation, the traffickers apparently formed loose networks rather than strictly hierarchical organized criminal gangs. Further, they cultivated good relations with the people they transported, and appeared to be relatively autonomous from other forms of organised criminal activity. Finally, they were strongly intertwined with the legal economy, and with different parts of the state apparatus (especially the police and immigration officials) in the various countries involved.²⁴

It seems, then, that the post-civil war economy and the forms of scarcity created before, during and after the different conflicts, have facilitated not only the rise and even institutionalisation of clientelist relations, but also the formation and strengthening of networks which overlap, but by no means coincide, with party hierarchies. In this respect Iraqi Kurdistan is probably atypical of a (post)conflict zone, in that a more-or-less functional state bureaucracy has remained in place or re-emerged, and a strong financial incentive developed against the continuation of large-scale civil conflict.²⁵ The region has maintained an indirect dependence on Iraq's oil income, and shown a paradoxical rehabilitation of the Iraqi state food distribution system under a UN umbrella.

Conclusion: balance and prospects

Iraqi Kurdistan shares many structural features with the rest of the country. Many of the factors that in the 1990s contributed to destabilisation in the north (protracted foreign interference, a weak elected government, problems with the demobilisation of fighters, economic scarcity, an increase in organised forms of (semi)illegal activities, and a pervasive sense of insecurity among the population) at present also pertain in the rest of Iraq. But can developments in Iraqi Kurdistan since 1991 serve as a model, or at least as a plausible scenario for the post-war reconstruction of Iraq as a whole? Moreover, what will be the future relations between the Kurdish region and the rest of the country? And more generally, are there any broader theoretical implications of the experience of the Kurdish-held north?

First, in the north, conflict has contributed to the creation of the very scarcities and dangers the conflict partners could then offer protection against. Or, to put the point differently, violence has been one of a variety of strategies the parties have used to extend a grip on the territory they wished to monopolise. The current violence in central Iraq may in part reflect a similar struggle for political and economic power.

A second point concerns the relations between the state, society and networks. Iraqi Kurdistan has proceeded rather further on the road towards a market economy, but its continuing dependence on centralised food handouts suggests that the liberalisation of the economy can at most be partial. Moreover, the power elites simultaneously try to monopolise civil society through party patronage, and to restructure the state apparatus through ties of kinship, especially in the higher echelons. These different networks have partly overlapping personnel, but are by no means wholly identical, with the party hierarchies. Thus, economic success in the Kurdish region was and is undoubtedly facilitated by affiliation or friendly contacts with one of the parties or its higher-ranking officials, but does not entirely depend on it: the old economic elites have perhaps lost their privileged status, but they have not wholly disappeared. In short, institutionalised patronage cuts across the familiar state – civil society opposition. Moreover, if the above argument holds, the emergence of clientelist networks is at least as important as the matter of state sovereignty. This renders somewhat theoretical the pervasive talk of Iraqi sovereignty under occupation.

A third point concerns the stereotype of Iraq's fragile inter-ethnic relations. Whatever contemporary ethnic or sectarian tensions there are, they are the result not of primordial sentiments, but of confrontational policies and antagonisms deliberately created or strengthened by political parties, by the Iraqi regime or even by neighbouring states;²⁶ moreover, they function in a radically transformed privatised economy. Nevertheless, the risk of violent inter-ethnic conflict is increasingly serious, especially in Kirkuk. The root cause of the rising tensions is not so much ethnic antagonism as such, but rather uncontrolled attempts to reverse the legacy of decades of ethnic cleansing, exacerbated by interference from neighbouring states. The Kurdish parties pursue contradictory policies: they have made

valiant efforts to contain violent confrontations but, at the same time, they have been trying to create facts on the ground by conducting media campaigns and giving financial rewards to Kurdish families trying to return to their former dwellings (probably as much a sign of continuing KDP–PUK rivalry as of purely ethnic policies).²⁷ The reverse tendency seems to loom in the Sunni Arab triangle, especially in places like Fallujah, where during the siege of March 2004 rebels appear to have deliberately drawn the fighting towards the Kurdish quarter of town; some Kurds were actually told to leave the city (to which they had been deported under Saddam). Similar reports of ethnic cleansing of Kurdish ‘traitors’ have emerged from nearby Samarra.²⁸ Large-scale pogroms or ethnic cleansing of Kurds from Arab-majority areas or vice versa could be a distinct possibility, if Kurdish relations with their Arab and other countrymen were to turn sour; but they are relatively unlikely. First, while the Kurdish parties at times hint at the possibility of secession, this seems to be a negotiation tactic rather than a seriously contemplated option. The actual likelihood of secession of a single Kurdish region is relatively small, given the region’s current division in two and the rivalries between the two Kurdish leaders in both the past and the present. Second, ethnic animosity in Iraq more often than not comes from above (and at times even abroad) and relatively rarely starts at grassroots level. Popular sentiments are at times certainly antagonistic, but they are not consistently strong or violent, and can probably be contained if the political will and effort are present among the leadership of the different parties involved.

A final word about the prospects for a new Iraqi social contract. The Kurds, with good reason, distrust the more radical forms of Arab nationalism, and its more recent reappearance in the guise of Sunni or Shi’ite Islamism. But Kurdish nationalist sentiments do not (yet) seem a very potent political factor (as opposed to social sentiment): at the time of writing, it seems unlikely that either Kurdish leader will provide any genuine support for the referendum movement. Given the relative unimportance of constitutional arrangements in Iraq’s recent past, it is not very likely that the drafting of a new constitution will in and of itself secure the loyalty of the Kurds, or, for that matter, of any Iraqi population group. It is perhaps more likely that a geographically fair division of oil revenues would contribute to the relative stability and peacefulness of the country. In oil-rich Iraq, as earlier in Iraqi Kurdistan, the dividends of peace are substantially bigger than the profits of war. In this sense, too, Iraq may be unlike other war or civil-war zones. Compare, for example, the continuing instability in the Great Lakes region of Africa, or Afghanistan, where the production or extraction of illegal goods requires little or no industrialised infrastructure. In the past Iraq’s oil income has often been a source of conflict and division but, when its distribution is even and institutionally secured, it may also be a source of stability and integration, regardless of whether it takes the shape of a nationalised oil industry or of a shareholder society, as Jabar (2004) has suggested. The increasingly violent insurgents seems to realise this, witness their deliberate targeting of the oil sector. It would be a major error, however,

to see the rehabilitation of the oil sector as a panacea for Iraq. As long as public security remains absent, unemployment remains high and genuine political participation remains restricted, there will be a permanent potential for social unrest. The apparent stability of institutionalised patronage relations should not blind us to the many who feel they have been left out, or have received less than their fair share. The post-conflict constellation of Iraqi Kurdistan should not be mistaken for a stable and harmonious liberal, or neoliberal, polity.

Notes

An earlier version of this paper was presented at the international workshop '(Post) Conflict and the Remaking of Place and Space: Economies, Institutions and Networks', Khartoum, 1–2 September 2004. I thank the workshop participants, in particular Hamit Bozarslan, for their comments and criticisms.

- 1 The subsequent re-emergence of Ansar in other parts of Iraq is not necessarily the return of the same unified and coherent group, but more likely the reconfiguring of a loose and wide coalition of radical Islamic individuals and groups with broadly comparable ideals and tactics. Moreover, as I will argue below, there is a significant overlap between religiously or nationalistically legitimated armed resistance and more strictly economically driven forms of organised crime.
- 2 Indeed, some Iraqi policy makers are at present looking at the Kurdish experience to learn from its mistakes. Thus, Ghassan Atiyyah (personal communication) informs me that the electoral working group studied the 1992 regional elections in order to avoid repeating its main shortcomings (such as leaving the leaders out of the electoral process, creating a polarising effect because of the high threshold, and different ways of manipulating the outcome) on a nation-wide scale.
- 3 For an analysis of the social and economic impact of the Kurdish region's long-term integration within Baathist Iraq, see Leezenberg (1997).
- 4 Likewise, Henry & Springborg (2001: ch 4) describe Saddam's Iraq as a 'bunker state' comparable to Algeria or Syria, ruled by a narrowly based power elite, which out of a lack of legitimacy governs through coercion rather than consent. But not only did the Baathist state in Iraq create a mass base by greatly expanding party membership, its use of violence was also driven by ideology as much as by any perceived lack of legitimacy.
- 5 Faleh Abdul Jabar, report summary, 'Formative forces in the development of the modern Iraqi state', available at http://www.usip.org/fellows/reports/2004/0415_jabar.html.
- 6 It is unclear how far the Kurdish region was different in this respect. For much of the 1990s the region saw a massive influx of foreign currency from relatives abroad (in a financial flow that was largely independent of the equally important foreign humanitarian aid), but no precise figures are available on the extent and development of this informal financial traffic.
- 7 Baram (1997) describes the regime's policies of the 1990s but ignores those of the 1980s. It is not entirely correct, either, to describe the resulting tribal and other clientelist relations as 'primordial', as does, for example, Faleh Abdul Jabar (cf his 'Formative forces in the development of the modern Iraqi state'). Talk of 'primordial' as opposed to 'modern' states proceeds from rather misleadingly unilinear modernisation-theoretical assumptions, and prejudices an adequate understanding of the actual mechanisms at work, which are highly contingent, novel and by no means 'traditional'.
- 8 Cf, among others, Stuart Hampshire's (2000) view of justice-as-conflict in ethics and Carl Schmitt's (1976) idea of the friend–enemy distinction as the criterion of the political. See also and especially Foucault (2002).
- 9 Here I will not discuss the question of whether such a provocative, but rather one-sided, conflict model of society fits Iraq in all its complexity; I merely use it as a heuristic tool. Neither should this position be taken as legitimising or trivialising the numerous, and at times horrendous, human rights violations and other acts of violence the region has witnessed in the past few decades.
- 10 For a table tracing the progressive reduction of state supplies, see Hafeed (1993: 40).
- 11 Turkey's accusation that this camp tolerated PKK activities is not entirely baseless, as UNHCR repeatedly objected to the open usage of PKK flags and other symbols in the camp. In the wake of the 1995 Turkish invasion the refugees were moved to government-held Makhmur, where they have remained ever since. At the time of writing these refugees are quite unwilling to be repatriated, as camp life is relatively prosperous and allows for education in Kurdish rather than Turkish (see, eg, IRIN-Asia, 12 May 2004).
- 12 In June 2001 the prime minister of the KDP-led regional government, Nechirvan Barzani, visited the Dutch ministry of Foreign Affairs for talks on these matters.

- 13 According to the Kurdistan Development Corporation, chaired by KDP veteran Siyamand Banna, annual agricultural production in Iraqi Kurdistan had risen to 736 000 tons of wheat and 375 000 tons of barley by 2002, compared with 142 000 and 44 000 tons, respectively, in 1989. KDC News, 19 March 2004, at www.kurdistancorporation.com. However, these figures may be overly optimistic in the light of the continuing undermining of agriculture by the Oil-for-food distribution of subsidised foodstuffs.
- 14 Present-day Kurdish business elites are oriented towards, and have a foothold and representatives in, the UK even more than the USA.
- 15 Nick Birch, 'Tourism thrives in Kurdish north', *Washington Times*, 8 August 2004, at <http://www.washtimes.com/world/20040807-112348-1747r.htm>.
- 16 For a more detailed overview of the (partly unintended) consequences of the international humanitarian aid effort, see Leezenberg (2000).
- 17 Significantly, the mid-1990s also seem to be the period when in government-held Iraq social anarchy reached a high point, and organised crime was at its strongest. Personal communication, local observers.
- 18 All this renders largely theoretical the widespread talk in the Western media of Kurdish secession and the possibly violent reactions of the rest of the population and especially neighbouring states. The new party-backed elites in the Kurdish north are less interested in establishing an independent landlocked country than in maintaining their existing privileges.
- 19 Quoted by Jim Muir, 'Kurds grit teeth for US strike', BBC World Service, at http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/world/middle_east/2074787.stm.
- 20 I have criticized the assumption that patronage is by definition informal in Leezenberg (forthcoming).
- 21 Interview with local opposition intellectual. Another local informant, a middle-ranking PUK official, unabashedly acknowledged that the cessation of hostilities between his party and the Islamic movement was in part secured by monthly payments to the Islamists.
- 22 Cf Oxford Research International, *National Survey of Iraq*, February 2004, at http://news.bbc.co.uk/nol/shared/bsp/hi/pdfs/15_03_04_iraqsurvey.pdf.
- 23 WKI news summary, 8 October 2004. According to other sources, however, the movement started out as a PUK initiative intended to put pressure on the KDP, and subsequently gave both parties increased room for manoeuvre on the national stage.
- 24 For an overview of refugee trafficking centring around Turkey, see Akinbingöl (2003: esp chs 6–8).
- 25 Again the comparison with other experiences is instructive. Beatrice Hibou (1999) argues that neoliberal reforms have failed in Africa because they ignored the existence of an informal 'shadow state' as an economic actor. In Iraqi Kurdistan the shadow state has in a sense merged with, or been integrated into, a continuing or rehabilitated state apparatus.
- 26 Thus, over the past decade, both Turkey and Iran have at different times supported various different actors in Iraqi Kurdistan, such as the KDP, the PUK, various Turkmen groups, the staunchly Sunni Islamic Movement of Iraqi Kurdistan and some of its more radical offshoots (most famously Jund/Ansar al-Islam), and Moqtada al-Sadr's Shi'ite movement. As long as there is no strong and stable government in Baghdad, and in Iraq as a whole, there are few grounds for hope that neighbouring countries will stop interfering in the country.
- 27 Nawzad Hady, governor of Arbil, confirmed that the Kurdish authorities actually paid families \$3500 to return to Kirkuk. J Banbury, 'Rage and danger in Kurdistan', *The Salon*, 22 July 2004. See also the extensive Human Rights Watch report, *Claims in Conflict: Reversing Ethnic Cleansing in Northern Iraq*, at <http://hrw.org/reports/2004/iraq0804/>.
- 28 For events in Fallujah, see M Howard, 'Kurds flee Fallujah in fear', *Washington Post*, 7 May 2004, at <http://washingtonpost.com/world/20040506-110737-5615r.htm>. For Samarra, see, for example, George Packer, 'The next Iraqi war', *The New Yorker*, 4 October 2004, at http://newyorker.com/fact/content/?041004fa_fact.

References

- Akinbingöl, ÖF (2003) *Knooppunt Istanbul: Mensensmokkel via Turkije* (Amsterdam: Meulenhoff Documentair).
- Baram, A (1997) Neo-tribalism in Iraq, *International Journal of Middle East Studies*, 29, pp 1–31.
- Bozarslan, H (1996) Le Kurdistan: économie de guerre, l'économie dans la guerre, in: F Jean & J-C Rufin (eds), *Économie des guerres civiles* (Paris: Hachette).
- Castells, M (1996) *The Information Age I: The Rise of the Network Society* (Oxford: Blackwell).
- Chaudhry, KA (1991) On the way to market: economic liberalization and Iraq's invasion of Kuwait, *Middle East Report*, May–June 1991, pp 14–23.
- Chaudhry, KA (2002) Consuming interests: market failure and the social foundations of Iraqi étatisme, in: K Mahdi (ed), *Iraq's Economic Predicament*, pp 233–266 (London: Ithaca Press).

- Foucault, M (2002) *Society Must be Defended* (New York: Picador).
- Hafeed, S (1993) The embargo on Iraqi Kurdistan, in: F Hussein, M Leezenberg & P Muller (eds), *The Reconstruction and Economic Development of Iraqi Kurdistan: Challenges and Perspectives. Proceedings of the International Conference on the Reconstruction and Development of Iraqi Kurdistan, Zeist, The Netherlands, September 4–6, 1992* (Amsterdam: Stichting Nederland-Koerdistan).
- Hampshire, S (2000) *Justice is Conflict* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press).
- Henry, CM & Springborg, R (2001) *Globalization and the Politics of Development in the Middle East* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press).
- Hibou, B (1999) 'The "Social Capital" of the State as an Agent of Deception, or the Ruses of Economic Intelligence', pp 63–113, in: J-F Bayart, S Ellis & B Hibou, *Criminalization of the State in Africa* (Indianapolis: Indiana University Press).
- Jabar, FA (2004) *Postconflict Iraq: A Race for Stability, Reconstruction, and Legitimacy*, Special Report 120, United States Institute of Peace, available online at: <http://www.usip.org/pubs/specialreports/sr120.html>.
- Leezenberg, M (1997) Irakisch-Kurdistan seit dem zweiten Golfkrieg, in: C Borck *et al* (eds), *Ethnizität, Nationalismus, Religion und Politik in Kurdistan*, pp 45–78 (Münster: LIT Verlag).
- Leezenberg, M (2000) Humanitarian aid in Iraqi Kurdistan, *Cahiers d'études sur la Méditerranée orientale et le monde turco-iranien (CEMOTI)*, 29, pp 31–49.
- Leezenberg, M (forthcoming) Urbanization, privatization, and patronage: the political economy of Iraqi Kurdistan, in: FA Jabar & H Dawod (eds), *Tribes and the State: The Case of the Kurds* (London: Saqi Books).
- Perthes, V (2002) *Geheime Gärten: Die neue arabische Welt* (Berlin: Siedler).
- Rubin, R (2003) *The Fragmentation of Afghanistan* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press).
- Schmitt, C (1976) *The Concept of the Political* (Rutgers, NJ: Rutgers University Press).
- Tilly, C (1986) War making and state making as organized crime, in: P Evans *et al* (eds), *Bringing the State Back In*, pp 169–191 (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press).

Copyright of Third World Quarterly is the property of Third World Quarterly. The copyright in an individual article may be maintained by the author in certain cases. Content may not be copied or emailed to multiple sites or posted to a listserv without the copyright holder's express written permission. However, users may print, download, or email articles for individual use.