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Willing to Face Death: A History of Kurdish Military Forces — the Peshmerga — from the Ottoman Empire to Present-Day Iraq

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COLLEGE OF SOCIAL SCIENCES

Willing to Face Death:
A History of Kurdish Military Forces
– the *Peshmerga* –
from the Ottoman Empire to Present-Day Iraq

By

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On a personal note, I would like to dedicate this thesis to my parents, George and Marianne Lortz. Thank you for your support. You have shown a lot of patience in watching me decide what I finally want to do with myself. I know it sounds cliché, but thank you and I love you both.

To my brother, my grandparents, and all my other family and friends, thank you for your support and love as well.

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TABLE OF CONTENTS

ABSTRACT	vi	
FOREWORD	viii	
1. INTRODUCTION:		
The Kurdish Warrior Tradition and the Importance of the <i>Peshmerga</i>	1	
Early Kurdish Warriors	2	
2. THE ROOTS OF THE <i>PESHMERGA</i> (1890-1958)		5
The Hamidiya Cavalry	5	
Kurdish Forces in WWI	8	
Shaykh Mahmud Barzanji Revolt	10	
Shaykh Said Revolt	12	
Khoybun (The Ararat Revolt)	16	
Rise of Barzani Prominence	18	
Emergence of Barzani's Forces and the Barzani Revolt (1943-1945)	21	
The Mahabad Republic	26	
Post-Mahabad Journeys and Conflicts	31	
<i>Peshmerga</i> in the USSR (1947-1958)	35	
3. THE <i>PESHMERGA</i> IN MODERN IRAQ (1958-2003)		37
Return to Iraq/ Prelude to War (1958-1961)	37	
The Kurdish-Iraqi War (1961-1970)	39	
<i>Peshmerga</i> and the Barzani-Talabani/Ahmed Split	45	
The Second Kurdish-Iraqi War (1974-1975)	48	
Creation of the PUK (1975-1979)	52	
The Iran-Iraq War (1980-1988)	54	
1989-1990	57	
<i>Peshmerga</i> During Operation Desert Storm (1990-1991)	58	
The 1991 Uprisings	59	
1991-1995	61	
The Kurdish Civil War (1995-1998)	63	
1998-2003	65	
<i>Peshmerga</i> During Operation Iraqi Freedom	66	
EPILOGUE	69	

CONCLUSION	73
APPENDIX A: WEAPONS OF THE KURDISH FORCES	76
APPENDIX B: MAPS	79
REFERENCES	88
BIOGRAPHICAL SKETCH	99

ABSTRACT

This thesis discusses an area of key interest in modern-day Iraq – the Kurdish military, or *peshmerga*. Translated as “those who face death”, the *peshmerga* have become a staple of Kurdish culture in the last 100 years. Officially organized by Mustafa Barzani in 1943, the *peshmerga* have come to represent the Kurdish nationalist movement, specifically in Iraq. Unfortunately, there have been few detailed works at length on the *peshmerga* and their link to the Kurdish struggle. Throughout this paper this link is shown in conjunction with the development and organization of Kurdish military forces. This thesis focuses on the *peshmerga* from the 19th century to 2003.

As mentioned, the *peshmerga* began as an organized force in 1943. Prior to this date, Kurdish fighters had participated in many regional uprisings against the governments of Iraq, Iran, and Turkey. Many of these rebellions were tribal or religiously organized and had little to do with creating an autonomous or independent Kurdish state. After his own regional rebellion in the late 1930s, Mustafa Barzani and his brother, Shaykh Ahmad Barzani, were sentenced to exile by the Iraqi government. Attempting to marginalize Barzani rebelliousness, the Iraqi regime moved the Barzanis to various Iraqi cities. During their exile, the Barzanis, especially Mustafa Barzani, were exposed to the nationalist ideas of urban Kurdish intellectuals. After his return in 1943, Mustafa Barzani realized a push against the Iraqi government would have a better chance of succeeding if coupled with a military force guided by strict rules and regulations.

After their creation, the *peshmerga* played key roles in both the Kurdish Republic of 1947 in Mahabad, Iran and the Kurdish-Iraqi War of the 1960s. Between these two eras, however, was a 12-year exile for many of the *peshmerga*, including Mustafa Barzani, in the Soviet Union. This paper uses 1958, the year of *peshmerga* return, as a way to divide the developmental years of the *peshmerga* from its role as a cohesive military force in modern-day Iraq.

Although other political bodies emerged in the 1960s and 1970s, Barzani and his *peshmerga* remained the internal and international face of Kurdish nationalism. After his death in 1979, the *peshmerga* continued to fight for Kurdish nationalism, albeit under the banner of Barzani’s Kurdish Democratic Party (KDP) and the newer Party for a United Kurdistan (PUK),

led by former Barzani follower Jalal Talabani. Throughout the 1980s and 1990s, *peshmerga* for both parties were forced to choose between alliances with each other, with regional powers, or with world powers such as the United States. Treaties, agreements, and alliances were made and broken as many of the outside governments used the Kurdish military groups as means to their own ends.

In 2003 the *peshmerga* were able to play a key role in the overthrow of the Saddam Hussayn regime. Through their cooperation with U.S. military forces, years of Kurdish struggle were rewarded and they were included in the new inclusive Iraqi government. Although this thesis ends with the conclusion of Operation Iraqi Freedom in 2003, a brief epilogue discusses the future of the *peshmerga* and the role it and its leaders are having in the new Iraqi government.

FOREWORD

In researching Kurdish history, specifically in regards to the *peshmerga*, a researcher is likely to find numerous spellings of the same location, person, event, etc. To standardize this paper, many of these subjects are spelt as they appear in David McDowall's A Modern History of the Kurds, regardless of the spelling in the source of the information. Only within official titles appearing in the bibliography might the spellings differ (ex. Masud Barzani is the same as Massoud Barzani, author of Mustafa Barzani and the Kurdish Liberation Movement (1931-1961)). If a subject does not appear in McDowall's work, it is spelt as it appears in the text of the source.

Also, the mention of Kurdistan as a region is not to imply any political opinion, rather to define the areas of Kurdish predominance in the nations of Iran, Iraq, and Turkey.

CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION:

The Kurdish Warrior Tradition and the Importance of the *Peshmerga*

During the last 15 years, the Kurds of northern Iraq have played a large role in shaping U.S. policy in the Middle East. With a population of nearly 4.2 million, the Kurds have become a key part of the new post-2003 Iraqi government. The Kurdish people of northern Iraq are nearly one quarter of the approximately 25 million Kurds spread between Iraq, Iran, Turkey, Syria, Armenia, and Azerbaijan.¹ Living mostly in or around the Zagros Mountains², the Kurds are the largest ethnic group in the world without their own recognized “homeland”.

The 20th century has been one of struggle both politically and militarily for the Iraqi Kurds. Although previous Iraqi regimes attempted to marginalize the Iraqi Kurdish population, their recent success and influence is due largely to the determination and patriotism of the *peshmerga*. Literally defined as “one who faces death,”³ the *peshmerga* are the soldiers of Iraqi Kurdistan.⁴ This paper will discuss the history of the *peshmerga* and their units from the origins of Kurdish military organization and tactics during the late Ottoman Empire to their contribution to the U.S.’s removal of the Iraqi government in 2003.

Throughout the 113-year period (1890-2003) covered by this paper, Kurdish military organization evolved from a strictly tribal pseudo-military border guard to a well-trained, disciplined guerrilla force. Among the stimuli for this change was the growth of the Kurdish nationalist movement. By the mid-20th century tribal affiliation ceased to be the dominating rationale for the Kurdish armed struggle. Led by individuals such as Shaykh Mahmoud Barzanji of Sulaymaniya, Shaykh Said of Palu, and Mulla Mustafa Barzani of Barzan, the cause of the common Kurd in battle was no longer tribal survival but autonomy or independence for Kurdistan. Many writers, such as David McDowall and Edgar O’Ballance, have discussed the political rise of Kurdish nationalism. Surprisingly, few if any writers have elaborated on the importance of a military structure in supporting the voices of Kurdish self-governance. Often the *peshmerga* is mentioned in passing, minimalizing its significance to the reader. The history of

¹ McDowall, pgs 3-5.

² See Appendix B: Maps maps 1 and 2 for a depiction of Kurdish locations and a breakdown of the Kurdish population throughout Turkey, Iran, and Iraq.

³ Chyet, pgs 452, 453.

⁴ See Appendix B: Maps map 3 for a depiction of Greater Kurdistan claimed by Kurdish nationalists.

the *peshmerga* is essential, however, to discovering fully the history of Kurdish nationalism, especially in Iraq. If not for the fighting spirit of the *peshmerga*, Kurdish hopes for recognition would have been dashed on numerous occasions. Understanding the historical impact of the *peshmerga* is also valuable in analyzing the cultural affinity the Kurds have towards their soldiers and why they are so hesitant to disband them in the new Iraqi power structure.

In his expansive history of the Kurds in the 20th century, McDowall divides the Kurdish dilemma of the last century into two “inter-related” situations. The first of these is the Kurdish struggle against the governments who would control the lands they inhabit; the second being the difficulty in developing a unified Kurdish community amongst what was once hundreds of tribes.⁵ *Peshmerga* forces would become intertwined in both of these conflicts. After receiving training in various early revolts and organization under Kurdish leader Mulla Mustafa Barzani, it is the *peshmerga* that will often confront armies of nations attempting to achieve suzerainty over the Kurds. Throughout the latter half of the 20th century, however, Kurdish internal conflict would begin to diminish the overall combat strength of the *peshmerga* as various Kurdish political parties fought to be the dominant voice in Kurdistan. The role of the *peshmerga* would become an essential piece in defining what the Kurdish struggle has been and what it will continue to be. As one of the first research projects focused only on the *peshmerga*, this paper will reflect McDowall’s two themes while showing the continued importance of the warrior to the survival of Kurdish culture.

Early Kurdish Warriors

The ideal of the warrior has been engrained in Kurdish culture since long before the 20th century and the definition of the *peshmerga*. According to Mehrdad Izady, the ancient Babylonians (circa 650 BC) labeled the inhabitants of the Kurdish mountains Qutil, a word possibly derived from the Semetic Akkadim word “qard” and the Indo-European Persian word “gurd”, both of which can be defined as hero or warrior. This reputation was further enhanced by continued pre-Biblical struggles between the mountain inhabitants and the peoples of the Mesopotamian lowlands. Included in these ancient records is the first account of guerrilla warfare in the region.

⁵ McDowall, pg 1.

During the modern era (AD), the Kurdish penchant for combat continued, often accompanying desires for autonomy. Ardashir I, founder of the Persian Sasanian Empire, engaged the Kurds from AD 224-226 in an attempt to seize political control. Whereas Ardashir I could only achieve partial control, his heir, Ardashir II, removed the last vestiges of Kurdish semi-independence. Ardashir, in his battle chronicles, labeled the Kurdish warriors *jânspar*, a Persian term meaning “self-sacrificer” to a particular cause, not far removed from the meaning of *peshmerga*.⁶

Perhaps the most famous warrior of Kurdish descent was Saladin. Born in Takrit⁷, Saladin defeated the Christian armies during the Crusades and established the Ayyubid dynasty that lasted from 1169 to the end of the 15th century. Saladin’s ability in battle earned him the title of “Prince of Chivalry” and the respect of generations of European leaders.⁸ Saladin may not have thought of himself as Kurdish however, instead he saw himself and his followers as soldiers of Islam.

Centuries later, the establishment of both the Ottoman and Safavid Empires forced many Kurdish tribes to choose allegiances and become impromptu border guards. Although the Safavids attempted to replace Kurdish tribal forces with a standing army of slaves, the Ottoman Empire allowed for tribal semi-autonomy in exchange for occasional cavalry troops to defend the empire. Kurdish soldiers were not only used as part-time cavalry but also became scouts and raiders for the Ottoman Empire as well.⁹ The first idea of a pan-Kurdish government also emerged during the late 16th century, although it failed to gain any influence, especially as Perso-Ottoman hostilities decreased.¹⁰

The inability of the Ottoman and Safavid Empires to govern their Kurdish areas allowed several Kurdish ruling families to grow in prominence. Among these was the Zand dynasty (1750-1794). The Zands are notable as one of the few Kurdish ruling bodies to allow women in their military. Zand women often fought alongside their husbands against invading Afghan forces. Possibly due to attempts at “modernization” and the need to “assimilate the values of the

⁶ Izady, pgs 31-40.

⁷ McDowall, pg 23.

⁸ Izady, pg 46.

⁹ McDowall, pgs 25, 26, 29.

¹⁰ Izady, pg 53.

more powerful ethnic neighbors”¹¹, this practice was discontinued until midway through the 20th century.¹²

As the power of the Ottoman Empire diminished in the 19th century in the wake of growing European and Russian expansion, Kurdish tribes found themselves surrounded by little central authority. In this ‘power vacuum’ arose tribal leaders such as Badr Khan and Mir Muhammad of Rawanduz. During the 1820s and 1830s, Mir Muhammad and his tribal forces seized numerous towns throughout Ottoman-controlled Kurdistan and challenged the empire’s rule. Also emerging in the 1830s, Badr Khan rose to power after the Ottoman army granted him military rank, giving him formal authority over his tribal forces. Badr Khan eventually amassed a force of 70,000 tribal warriors and rose against Ottoman rule. Although he declared himself and his followers independent and minted his own coinage, Badr Khan’s hopes for autonomy were dashed upon his defeat in 1846.¹³

The last prominent head of Kurdish armed forces in the 19th century was not a tribal leader, but a religious shaykh. In 1880, Shaykh Ubayd Allah of Nihri gathered 20,000 fighters on the Ottoman-Persian border in an attempt to achieve an “independent principality.” Lacking loyalty and organization, many of the shaykh’s forces left the ranks after pillaging and acquiring riches from the conquered areas. Shaykh Ubayd Allah’s remaining fighters fled or were captured by Ottoman or Persian military forces prior to the shaykh’s exile in 1882. Whereas the Armenians and other Christian minority groups benefited from European or Russian interest and protection within the Ottoman Empire¹⁴, the lack of outside support and inability to maintain a trained organized force diminished early Kurdish aspirations of autonomy. Over the next century, the military ability and nationalistic ideal among Iraqi Kurds would increase, leading to the creation of loyal units and enabling Iraqi Kurdish leadership to influence the politics of the region.

¹¹ Ibid, pg 194, 196.

¹² McEnroe, Paul. Women Play Key Role in Peshmerga. Star Tribune, 24 March 2003

¹³ McDowall, pgs 42-47.

¹⁴ Ibid, pgs 53-58.

CHAPTER 2: The Roots of the *Peshmerga* (1890-1958)

The Hamidiya Cavalry

The roots of the modern-day *peshmerga*, especially in regards to training, can be found in the early attempts of the Ottoman Empire to create an organized Turkish-Kurdish military force. In 1891, Ottoman Sultan Abd al Hamid II (1876-1909) created the Hamidiya Cavalry, merging Turkish leadership with Kurdish tribal fighters. This force had two primary purposes: to defend the Cossack Region from a possible Russian threat¹⁵ and secondly, to reduce the potential of Kurdish-Armenian cooperation¹⁶. Dividing two of the largest minority groups in the region ensured the Ottoman Empire control of Eastern Anatolia and countered recent losses of its western lands to the expanding European powers. The Hamidiya Cavalry may also have been instituted to create a feeling of “Pan-Islam”, especially in light of a perceived possible British-Russian-Armenian Christian alliance.¹⁷

Although attempts were made to integrate select Kurdish warriors in the Ottoman military prior to the Hamidiya Cavalry, most, if not all, Kurdish cavalry and riflemen were loyal only to their local tribes or regional shaykhs. To incorporate the fighting ability of the Kurds into the Ottoman army, Hamid II’s government employed many of the stronger tribes in Eastern Anatolia.¹⁸ According to Safrastian, powerful tribes, such as the Mirans, the Tayans, the Batwans, the Duderis, the Kachans and the Shernakhs were to supply nearly 40 regiments. Smaller tribes, such as the Heiderans, the Jibrans, the Jallals and the Mugurs were only to contribute 20 units.¹⁹

Ottoman leaders, after selecting which tribes were to participate in the Hamidiya Cavalry, summoned the respective chiefs to Constantinople and endowed them with military rank.²⁰ These chiefs and their entourages, armed usually with *yatagans*²¹, *kandjar* rifles, and Russian Winchester cavalry rifles, were instructed to recruit troops and form units. After recruiting, the

¹⁵ McDowall, pg 59.

¹⁶ Safrastian, pg 66.

¹⁷ Olson, pg 8.

¹⁸ McDowall, pg 59.

¹⁹ Safrastian, pg 105.

²⁰ The Armenian Massacres. New York Times, 16 Dec 1894.

²¹ See Appendix A: Weapons of the *Peshmerga*.

tribal chiefs and proceeding groups of Kurdish leaders were sent to the Hamidiya Suvari Mektabi, a special military school in Istanbul.²² Although Greene states that these units were to be cavalry units entirely, it is unclear as to how accurate his accounts were and whether or not certain Kurdish tribes were organized as infantry units.²³

In order to differentiate themselves from other cavalry troops under the Sultan's command, the Hamidiya Cavalry were issued distinctive uniforms consisting of large black wool caps with brass badges on the front.²⁴ This headgear was seen during their "field" operations, whereas some elements of the Cavalry were witnessed wearing Cossack-style uniforms²⁵ and uniforms worthy of being paraded before the Sultan prior to the 1897 war with Greece²⁶. According to Italian diplomatic correspondence, "some wore a uniform similar to that of the Cirassians, others like that of the Cossacks, and finally others, instead of the kalpak worn by the first group, were wearing the keffeyia like Arab horsemen"²⁷.

The rank structure of the Hamidiya Cavalry reflected Turkish distrust in the Kurdish leadership. In order to limit Kurdish advancement and control, the planned structure of the officer corps was a commanding Turkish cavalry general responsible for all cavalry forces, a Kurdish brigadier general commanding up to four Hamidiya Cavalry regiments, four colonels per regiment (two Kurds and two "*prescelti*" – a shadowing Turkish officer of equivalent rank used to ensure conformity), four lieutenants (two Kurds and two *prescelti*), two majors (one Kurd and one *prescelti*), and two adjutant-majors (one Kurd and one *prescelti*).²⁸ Overall, the Hamidiya Cavalry was comprised of 48 to 76 regiments, each having approximately 400 to 600 men. In total, there were approximately 50,000 troops in the unit.²⁹

The Hamidiya Cavalry was in no way a cross-tribal force, despite their military appearance, organization, and potential. Only when smaller tribes were unable to fully man their unit requirements were other tribal fighters integrated.³⁰ As tribal/regimental commanders

²² Olson, pg 9.

²³ Greene, Frederick Davis. Armenian Massacres and Turkish Tyranny. Pg 52.

²⁴ The Armenian Massacres. New York Times, 16 Dec 1894.

²⁵ McDowall, pg 59.

²⁶ Safrastian, pg 67.

²⁷ Russo, Maurizio, Diane Belle, transl. The Formation of the Kurdish Hamidiye Regiments as Reflected in Italian Diplomatic Documents. Pg 61.

²⁸ *Ibid*, pg 67.

²⁹ Vanly, The Kurds in the Soviet Union. Kreyenbroek, Philip G. & Stefan Sperl (Eds.). The Kurds: A Contemporary Overview. Pg 197.

³⁰ McDowall, pg 59.

frequently took advantage of their newfound power and state affiliation, large tribes, such as the Jibrān tribe, which fielded four regiments, found it easy to dominate, intimidate, and terrorize smaller non-Hamidiya tribes. These commanders often used Hamidiya troops and equipment to settle tribal differences. Orders also came from the state as tribes in the Hamidiya Cavalry were called upon to suppress “recalcitrant tribes”.³¹

The “benefits” of being included in the Hamidiya meant receiving not only weapons and training, but a certain level of prestige. Hamidiya officers and soldiers quickly recognized they could only be tried through a military court martial³² and not through civil administration³³. Realizing their immunity, Cavalry leaders quickly turned their tribes into “legalized robber brigades”. Hamidiya soldiers would often steal grain, reap fields not of their possession, drive off herds³⁴, and openly steal from shopkeepers.

The Hamidiya Cavalry was also used by the Ottoman Empire to suppress Armenian revolts in Eastern Anatolia. The Sultan’s forces, including the Hamidiya Cavalry, made no distinction between pro- or anti-government Armenians as the European powers increased their desire for Armenian Christian concessions. Massacres occurred in numerous Armenian areas, with casualties reaching the thousands in several towns.³⁵ Hamidiya tactics during these raids were primarily cavalry in nature although unorganized Kurdish “brigands” conducted most dismounted attacks.³⁶ In total, more than 200,000 Armenians were killed between 1894 and 1896.³⁷

After the overthrow of Sultan Abd al Hamid in 1908, the Hamidiya Cavalry was disbanded as an organized force. Select few units were kept in government service however, renamed “Tribal Regiments”, and deployed to Yemen and Albania. Sent to subdue trouble on the fringes of the Ottoman Empire, the performance of these former Hamidiya units was poor at best. According to McDowall, they not only sustained heavy losses, but also acquired a “reputation for savagery”.³⁸

³¹ Olson, pg 9.

³² Driver, G.R. Studies in Kurdish History. Bulletin of the School of Oriental Studies, Vol. 2, No. 3, 1922. pg 500.

³³ McDowall, pg 60.

³⁴ The Armenian Massacres. New York Times, 16 Dec 1894.

³⁵ McDowall, pgs 61, 62.

³⁶ Greene, Armenian Massacres and Turkish Tyranny. Pgs 52, 419, etc.

³⁷ Mazian, pg 14.

³⁸ McDowall, pg 63.

The Hamidiya Cavalry is described as a military disappointment and a failure because of its contribution to tribal feuds³⁹ and “one of the darkest stains in Kurdish history”⁴⁰ because of its role in the Armenian massacres. Despite these charges, it remains integral to the history of the *peshmerga*. Many Kurds received their first training in non-tribal warfare from the Hamidiya Cavalry, learning key military strategy, and acquiring “knowledge of military technology and equipment and the capabilities to use it”.⁴¹ Many of the same officers that led Hamidiya Cavalry troops would play similar roles in future Kurdish uprisings and influence future Kurdish military organization.⁴²

Kurdish Forces in WWI

As the Ottoman Empire struggled to stay together during World War I, it once again called on the Kurds, with their newly-acquired military experience, to supplement the Turkish army. According to Safrastian, most military age Kurds not already in the light cavalry regiments were drafted into the Turkish army and encouraged to fight with their Muslim Turkish brethren against the Christians and Armenians.⁴³

Because of the anti-Christian and anti-Armenian propaganda, the Turkish army fielded enough Kurds to completely man numerous units. Among the all-Kurdish units were the Eleventh Army, headquartered in Elazig, and the Twelfth Army, headquartered in Mosul. Kurds also made up a majority of the Ninth and Tenth Armies and supplied enough troops for many frontier units and 135 squadrons of reserve cavalry.⁴⁴ These forces, with their experience and knowledge of the terrain, were essential in fighting the Russian threat to the Eastern Ottoman Empire.

The end of World War I brought forth a new era in the potential for an organized Kurdish military. Due to the Sykes-Picot Agreement of May 1916⁴⁵, Kurdistan was no longer the unofficial buffer between the Ottoman and Persian Empires, but a region divided between several new nations (Iraq, Syria, Turkey, and Persia). With a majority of Kurds split between

³⁹ McDowall, pg 62.

⁴⁰ Driver, pg 500.

⁴¹ Olson, pg 15.

⁴² Vanly, pg 197.

⁴³ Safrastian, pg 75.

⁴⁴ Olson, pg 18.

⁴⁵ McDowall, pg 115.

British-controlled Iraq (Southern Kurdistan) and the recently dismantled nation of Turkey (Northern Kurdistan) it became more difficult to create a pan-Kurdish army. Despite their physical division, the growing number of Kurdish intelligentsia attempted to take advantage of the regional disarray and lobby for a Kurdish nation-state.⁴⁶

Initially, Kurdish ideas of independence went well as Britain, the reigning Allied superpower in the region, agreed to sponsor an independent nation in Southern Kurdistan in 1918. Accordingly, British support would be limited to political and administrative advice only. The Kurdish people would be responsible for all else, including their own government, judiciary, revenue, and military. Once established, the Kurdish military was to be comprised in part from local Kurdish levies trained by British Major Denials as well as the cavalry forces of Shaykh Mahmud Barzinji, head of the Qadiri Sufi Order and a landed aristocrat. According to Eskander, Shaykh Mahmud was “by far the most influential Kurdish personality in southern Kurdistan during and after the war”.⁴⁷

Thoughts of autonomy and a possible Kurdish military would soon be eliminated however. Neither the British nor the growing Kemalist Turkish government wished to see an independent Kurdistan, especially one able to defend itself.⁴⁸ For the British, the idea of a recognized nation in Southern Kurdistan was deemed impractical due to the inability of the Kurds to govern themselves. The British were also concerned with the prospect of oil in the Kirkuk, Kifri, and Arbil regions. Hence the British need to dismantle the Kurdish Republic, and assume command of the Kurdish Levies. By May 1919, months into the “new” British policy, Kurdish officers amongst the Levies decreased from 36 under Kurdish self-government to nine. British officers quickly took charge of units and conscripts from the Kurdish region were “forced into service under the British government”.⁴⁹

The potential for a Kurdish military in Northern Kurdistan was quite different from that in the south due to the rise of Mustafa Kemal and Turkish nationalism. Numerous Kurdish forces, both former Hamidiya and non-Hamidiya tribes, were once again united under Ottoman/pan-Islamic propaganda. These forces frequently participated in battles to liberate Turkey from the so-called “foreign invaders”, namely the Greeks and Armenians. Led by

⁴⁶ Izady, pg 59.

⁴⁷ Eskander, pgs 141-143.

⁴⁸ Eskander, pg 145/ McDowall, pg 126.

⁴⁹ Eskander, pg 157.

Miralay (Colonel) Halid Beg Cibran, former commander of the Second Hamidiya Regiment, Kurdish troops expelled numerous Russians and Armenians from Eastern Anatolia.

Under Kemal's initial plans, Turkey was to become a land of Turkish rule with the Kurds integrated within the society.⁵⁰ By the end of the 1920s, political avenues of independence and the ability to legally create their own military were all but closed for the Kurdish people both in northern and southern Kurdistan. Both the Turks and the British had used the Kurds for their own regional purposes and given the Kurds little in return. For the common Kurd, fairness and support was seen only at the local level, where shaykhs became not only the predominant religious authorities, but political and military leaders as well. According to Van Bruinessen, the inter-tribal influence of the shaykhs developed them into "astute political operators, who succeeded in imposing their authority on even the largest tribal chieftains of their regions".⁵¹

The increased power of the shaykhs also led to the assumption of regional military commands, as shaykhs and their followers saw no choice but to take up arms in the struggle for regional recognition. Two shaykhs in particular, Shaykh Said of Palu in Northern Kurdistan and Shaykh Mahmud Barzanji in Southern Kurdistan, would lead their followers – the future *peshmerga* – in military struggles and attempt to influence the politics of the predominant powers.

Shaykh Mahmud Barzanji Revolt

Although both the Turks and the British used Kurdish tribes to instigate cross-border conflicts⁵², local shaykhs recruited Kurds to revolt against the regional powers. The first of these Kurdish call-to-arms occurred in British controlled Southern Kurdistan in May 1919. Shortly before being appointed governor of Sulaymaniya, Shaykh Mahmud Barzanji ordered the arrest of all British political and military officials in the region.⁵³ After seizing control of the region, Barzanji raised a military force from his Iranian tribal followers and proclaimed himself "Ruler of all of Kurdistan".

⁵⁰ McDowall, pg 191.

⁵¹ Van Bruinessen, Martin. The Kurds and Islam. Working Paper 13, Islamic Area Studies Project, 1999. Pg 15.

⁵² McDowall, pg 140.

⁵³ Eskander, pg 152.

Tribal fighters from both Iran and Iraq quickly allied themselves with Shaykh Mahmud as he became more successful in opposing British rule. According to McDowall, the Shaykh's forces "were largely Barzinja tenantry and tribesmen, the Hamavand under Karim Fattah Beg, and disaffected sections of the Jaf, Jabbari, Shaykh Bizayni and Shuan tribes". The popularity and numbers of Shaykh Mahmud's troops only increased after their ambush of a British military column.⁵⁴

Among Mahmud's many supporters and troop leaders was 16-year-old Mustafa Barzani, the future leader of the Kurdish nationalist cause and commander of *peshmerga* forces in Kurdish Iraq.⁵⁵ Barzani and his men, following the orders of Barzani tribal shaykh Ahmad Barzani, traversed the Piyaw Valley on their way to join Shaykh Mahmud Barzanji. Despite being ambushed numerous times along the way, Barzani and his men reached Shaykh Mahmud's location, albeit too late to aid in the revolt.⁵⁶

The Barzani fighters were only a part of the Shaykh's 500-person force. As the British became aware of the shaykh's growing political and military power, they were forced to respond militarily. Two British brigades were deployed to defeat Shaykh Mahmud's fighters⁵⁷ at Darbandi Bazyan near Sulaymaniya in June 1919.⁵⁸ Shaykh Mahmud was eventually arrested and exiled to India in 1921.⁵⁹

At the root of the rebellion, Shaykh Mahmud's leadership appealed to both Kurdish nationalist and religious feelings. Although he knew he could not directly defeat the British, Shaykh Mahmud hoped to seek recognition of Kurdish nationalism⁶⁰ by advocating a 'free united Kurdistan'. Using his authority as a religious leader, Shaykh Mahmud called for a *jihad* against the British in 1919⁶¹ and thus acquired the support of many Kurds indifferent to the nationalist struggle. Although the intensity of their struggle was motivated by religion, Kurdish peasantry seized the idea of "national and political liberty for all" and strove for "an improvement in their social standing".⁶²

⁵⁴ McDowall, pgs 157, 158.

⁵⁵ Atroushi, Alex (KDP Webmaster). Mustafa Barzani. <http://www.xs4all.nl/~tank/kurdish/htdocs/lib/barzani.html>. Acquired 19 July 2005.

⁵⁶ Barzani, pg 21.

⁵⁷ McDowall, pg 157.

⁵⁸ Ghassemlou, pg 63.

⁵⁹ Olson, pg 61.

⁶⁰ Eskander, pg 152.

⁶¹ McDowall, pg 158.

⁶² Ghassemlou, pg 63.

Despite opposition by other regional tribes, possibly fearful of the shaykh's growing power, Shaykh Mahmud's fighters continued to oppose British rule after the shaykh's arrest.⁶³ Although no longer organized under one leader, this inter-tribal force was "actively anti-British"⁶⁴, engaging in hit-and-run attacks, killing British military officers, and participating in local rebellions.⁶⁵ The fighters continued to be motivated by Shaykh Mahmud's ability to "defy British interference".

The success of the Kurdish fighters' anti-British revolts forced the British to recognize Kurdish autonomy in 1923.⁶⁶ Returning to the region in 1922, Shaykh Mahmud continued to promote raids against British forces.⁶⁷ Once these uprisings were subdued, the British government signed Iraq over to King Faysal and a new Arab-led government.⁶⁸ After having to retreat into the mountains, the defeated Shaykh Mahmud signed a peace accord with the Iraqi government and settled in the new Iraq.⁶⁹

Shaykh Said Revolt

As Shaykh Mahmud battled for Kurdish autonomy and independence in Southern Kurdistan, similar uprisings were occurring throughout Northern Kurdistan against the fledgling Turkish government. Of these revolts the primarily tribal Kuchgiri rebellion of 1920 was perhaps the most notable as Kurdish fighters struggled for autonomy and were able to seize numerous Turkish arms and supplies.⁷⁰ The defeat of these uprisings inspired the Turkish government to deal with the "Kurdish problem" by enacting laws limiting both Kurdish identity and the governing ability of shaykhs.⁷¹ As the Turkish nationalist position became firmer, attacks on the democratic rights of the Kurds increased.⁷²

⁶³ McDowall, pg 158.

⁶⁴ Eskander, pg 153.

⁶⁵ Eskander, pg 154/ McDowall, pg 160.

⁶⁶ McDowall, pgs 159, 169.

⁶⁷ Revolt in Mosul is Reported. New York Times, 2 January 1923/ Harrison, Marguerite E. Turbulent Kurds Stage Another Uprising. New York Times, 15 March 1925/ Kurds Killed Ten of British Column. New York Times, 26 May 1925.

⁶⁸ McDowall, pg 172.

⁶⁹ Ghassemlou, pg 66.

⁷⁰ Olson, pg 32.

⁷¹ O'Ballance, pg 15.

⁷² Ghassemlou, pg 50.

Forced underground, Kurdish nationalist leaders formed the political group Azadi (Freedom) in Dersim, Turkey in 1921.⁷³ Unlike earlier Kurdish nationalist groups, the core of Azadi was comprised of experienced military men, not the urban Kurdish intelligentsia.⁷⁴ According to Olson, Azadi's fighting forces included numerous tribal fighters and several former Hamidiya regimental leaders, all equipped with rifles and other weapons previously owned by the Turks.⁷⁵

The strength and expansion of Azadi would lead to its downfall. During a Turkish military expedition in September 1924 several Azadi leaders mutinied, fleeing into the mountains with numerous weapons and hundreds of lower-ranking Kurdish soldiers.⁷⁶ Over 500 officers and soldiers – three companies of one battalion and one company of another – left the Turkish ranks to join the Kurdish army.⁷⁷

In response to the rebellion, the Turkish government, realizing the strength of Azadi, quickly arrested many of the organization's leaders, both munitineers and conspirators.⁷⁸ With their leadership depleted, a power vacuum formed in the political-military structure of Azadi. Out of the remnants of Azadi emerged Shaykh Said of Palu, a Naqshbandi shaykh related by marriage to Khalid Beg, Turkish Army colonel and Azadi founder.⁷⁹ The remaining Azadi infrastructure supported the Shaykh's leadership, believing a shaykh could generate more support than an army officer.

Once convinced to join the rebellion⁸⁰, Shaykh Said immediately began mobilizing participants and establishing a chain of command. According to Van Bruinessen, Shaykh Said "knew what he wanted, had the capacity to convince others, and had a great reputation for piety, which was useful when his other arguments were insufficient".⁸¹

As a new leader, Shaykh Said, like Shaykh Mahmud years earlier, appealed to the Kurdish sense of Islamic unity. Besides the usual fighting retinue of a Kurdish shaykh, Shaykh Said was able to increase his ranks during his tour of Eastern Anatolia in January 1925.⁸² New

⁷³ McDowall, pg 192.

⁷⁴ Van Bruinessen, *Agha Shaikh and the State*, pg 280.

⁷⁵ Olson, pg 43.

⁷⁶ Van Bruinessen, pg 284.

⁷⁷ Olson, pg 50.

⁷⁸ Ibid, pg 92.

⁷⁹ Van Bruinessen, pg 280.

⁸⁰ Olson, pg 94.

⁸¹ Van Bruinessen, pg 280.

⁸² Olson, pg 95.

recruits answered the call to arms as Said issued *fatwas*, gave speeches denouncing the secular Kemalist policies, and wrote letters inviting numerous tribes to join in a *jihad* against the government.⁸³ Said also met personally with tribal leaders and their representatives, including Barzan tribal representative Mustafa Barzani.⁸⁴ Although some tribes refused to follow Said, he was received positively in many towns. The Shaykh's rise to power enabled him to proclaim himself 'emir al-mujahidin' (commander of the faithful and fighters of the holy war) in January 1925. Overall, 15 to 20,000 Kurds mobilized in support of Shaykh Said and Azadi. Many of these fighters were equipped with horses, rifles, or sabers⁸⁵ acquired from the numerous munition depots across the countryside.⁸⁶ Other Kurdish firepower was either personally owned prior to the rebellion or taken from the Armenians, despite Turkish attempts at Kurdish disarmament.

With sufficient firepower recruited from the tribes, a plan of attack was set in place. In creating a battle plan, Said and the other prominent remaining Azadi leadership established five major fronts to be commanded by regional shaykhs.⁸⁷ These shaykh leaders were assisted by former Hamidiya Cavalry officers who provided military structure to the rebellion.⁸⁸ After organization, unit responsibility was divided among nine areas. The overall headquarters of Said's military force was located in Egri Dagh and protected by a force of 2,000 men.⁸⁹ During the onset of the revolt, Said's fighters, facing nearly 25,000 Turkish troops⁹⁰, gained control of a vilayet near Diyarbakir.⁹¹ Besides seizing Turkish land and acquiring additional munitions, early victories instilled confidence in the rebellion and garnered further Kurdish support.⁹²

Throughout the conflict, Said's fighters used both conventional military tactics, including multi-front assaults and attempts at urban seizure, and unconventional warfare, including guerrilla tactics.⁹³ An example of the conventional military organization was evident in the assault on Diyarbakir, where reports saw "three columns of 5,000 strong, under the personal

⁸³ Olson, pg 95/ Van Bruinessen, pg 285.

⁸⁴ Atroushi, Alex. Mustafa Barzani. Pg 1. etc.

⁸⁵ Olson, pgs 95, 102.

⁸⁶ Safrastian, pg 82.

⁸⁷ Van Bruinessen, pgs 286, 292.

⁸⁸ Vanly, The Kurds A Contemporary Overview, pg 197.

⁸⁹ Bedr Khan, Sureya. The Case of Kurdistan Against Turkey. Pgs 49, 50.

⁹⁰ Olson, pg 107.

⁹¹ Turkish Kurdistan Rises in Revolt. New York Times, 25 Feb 1925.

⁹² Olson, pg 108.

⁹³ Olson, pg 110/ Nazaroff, Alexander I. Old Turks War on New, Aiding Kurdish Revolt. New York Times, 19 Apr 1925.

command of Shaykh Said". The establishment of conventional higher levels of Kurdish military command may also be assumed as documents written by foreigners were addressed to a 'Kurdish War Office'. These documents, found by Turkish forces⁹⁴, may have been propaganda however, designed to create the illusion of international support for the Kurdish rebellion.

Despite the valiant efforts of Said's fighters, the Kemalist government was able to quickly amass forces to suppress the rebellion by early April 1925⁹⁵ and capture Shaykh Said as he attempted to flee to Iran on 27 April 1925.⁹⁶ After his capture, Shaykh Said was promptly tried for his actions against the Turkish government. Said, along with a number of his followers, was hung on 29 June 1925.⁹⁷ Like the Iraqi Kurds under Shaykh Mahmud, Shaykh Said's surviving followers did not stop their attacks after the removal of their leader. Throughout 1925 and 26 their assaults continued as they conducted guerrilla operations against Turkish military units.⁹⁸ After their capture, these remaining fighters proclaimed themselves to be 'the unvanquished clan of the nation'.⁹⁹ Whether or not these ideas of nationalism were expressed by all the remaining followers cannot be determined, although, according to Van Bruinessen, "neither the guerrilla troops, nor the leaders of the Ararat revolt that followed, used religious phraseology".¹⁰⁰

Because of growing Kurdish awareness, nationalism, despite its early urban, intellectual, and political-only roots, had become a military cause in and of itself, separate from religious motivations. Although recruitment remained based on tribal or shaykh allegiances, the Kurdish nationalist struggle became a legitimate call to arms. By fighting for "Kurdistan," Kurdish fighters, the future *peshmerga*, separated themselves from the *mujihadeen*, their regional religious warrior brethren.

⁹⁴ 5,000 Kurds Attack Turks at Diarbekir. New York Times, 11 Mar 1925.

⁹⁵ Nazaroff, 19 Apr 1925.

⁹⁶ Van Bruinessen, pg 290.

⁹⁷ Olson, pg 127.

⁹⁸ Van Bruinessen, pg 291.

⁹⁹ Eight Kurds Put To Death. New York Times, 30 December 1926.

¹⁰⁰ Van Bruinessen, pg 299.

Khoybun (The Ararat Revolt)

Despite the failure of Shaykh Said and Azadi, Kurdish intellectuals and nationalist leaders continued to plan for an independent Kurdistan.¹⁰¹ Many of these nationalists met in October 1927 and not only proclaimed the independence of Kurdistan, but also formed Khoybun (Independence), a “supreme national organ . . . with full and exclusive national and international powers”.¹⁰² This new organization’s leadership believed the key to success in the struggle for an independent Kurdistan lay not in tribal allegiances, but in a “properly conceived, planned and organized” military enterprise.¹⁰³

In displaying the need for a proper military structure, Khoybun nominated Ihsan Nuri Pasha Commander-In-Chief of the Kurdish National Army.¹⁰⁴ Nuri Pasha, besides being a former Kurdish member of the “Young Turk Movement”¹⁰⁵, showed his allegiance to the Kurdish cause when he led the mutiny within the Turkish military prior to the Shaykh Said Revolt.¹⁰⁶

After establishing leadership, Khoybun sought the aid of many influential European forces to help supply the Kurdish nationalist military endeavor.¹⁰⁷ Despite their displeasure with the Kemalist regime, however, neither the British nor the French gave much support to Khoybun.¹⁰⁸ According to Safrastian, the European powers, once supportive of Kurdish independence, were swayed by Turkish media and press reports.¹⁰⁹ With little aid from Europe, Khoybun eventually settled for the support of the Armenian Dashnak Party,¹¹⁰ the Shah of Persia¹¹¹, and fellow Kurds such as Shaykh Ahmad Barzani, leader of the Iraqi Kurdistan Barzani tribe¹¹². Syrian Kurds also came to the aid of Khoybun, cutting railroads, pillaging Turkish villages, and conducting guerrilla assaults.¹¹³

¹⁰¹ McDowall, pg 202.

¹⁰² Safrastian, pgs 84, 85.

¹⁰³ McDowall, pg 203.

¹⁰⁴ Safrastian, pg 84.

¹⁰⁵ Izady, pg 62.

¹⁰⁶ Van Bruinessen, pg 284.

¹⁰⁷ Ghassemlou, pg 54.

¹⁰⁸ McDowall, pg 203.

¹⁰⁹ Safrastian, pg 85.

¹¹⁰ McDowall, pg 203.

¹¹¹ O’Ballance, pg 16.

¹¹² Izady, pg 62.

¹¹³ Malcontent Kurds Provoke New Crisis. NY Times, 2 Dec 1928.

By 1928, Nuri Pasha had assembled a small group of soldiers armed with modern weapons and trained in infantry tactics. This force initiated the Khoybun revolt, marching towards Mount Ararat.¹¹⁴ Nuri and his men not only achieved success in reaching Mount Ararat, but they were able to secure the towns of Bitlis, Van, and most of the countryside around Lake Van¹¹⁵, establishing a notable area of Kurdish resistance¹¹⁶.

Along with their weapons, organization, and ability, Kurdish strength was enhanced by the positioning of the rebellion. Although Turkish forces attempted to suppress the revolt as early as 1927, their success was tempered by a lack of Persian cooperation, as Mount Ararat lay in the Turkish-Persian border.¹¹⁷ By 1930, however, Turkish forces began to take the upper hand. Beginning in May, the Turkish army went on the offensive, surrounding Mount Ararat with over 10,000 troops by late June.¹¹⁸ Troop numbers on both sides continued to grow as Kurdish tribes were recruited to join the cause¹¹⁹ and approximately 60,000 more soldiers were called up by the Turkish government¹²⁰.

Besides facing an increasing numerical disadvantage, the Khoybun resistance slowly saw its regional support disappear. Pressured by the Turkish government, French administrators in Syria and British administrators in Iraq restrained much of the southern support for Khoybun.¹²¹ Prior to Turkish insistence, Barzani military aid from Southern Kurdistan included 500 horsemen from the Mosul district brought by the “Sheik of Barzan”. Other Kurdish tribal chiefs such as Hatcho and Simqu, both from Syria, came to the aid of Khoybun in 1930.¹²²

The biggest blow to Khoybun’s Ararat revolt, however, came from Persia. Although initially supportive of Kurdish resistance, the Persian government did not resist Turkish military advances into Persia to surround Mount Ararat.¹²³ Persian frontier guardsmen also began to close the Persian-Turkish border to non-essential travelers, including Kurdish tribes attempting

¹¹⁴ McDowall, pg 204.

¹¹⁵ Izady, pg 62.

¹¹⁶ O’Ballance, pg 16

¹¹⁷ McDowall, pg 204.

¹¹⁸ Turks Fighting Kurds. New York Times, 21 Jun 1930.

¹¹⁹ Kurds Urge A Revolt. New York Times, 5 Jul 1930.

¹²⁰ New York Times, 6 Jul 1930.

¹²¹ Izady, pg 62.

¹²² Revolt of Kurds Covers Wide Area. New York Times, 31 Aug 1930.

¹²³ Turks Invade Persia, Wiping Out Kurd Rebels; Report Nothing Left for Diplomats to Settle. New York Times 20 Jul 1930.

to reinforce the revolt.¹²⁴ Persia would eventually completely submit to Turkish operational demands, trading the land surrounding Mount Ararat for Turkish land near Qutur and Barzirgan.¹²⁵

The organized revolt on Mount Ararat was defeated by the fall of 1930, although the Turks waited until the following spring to attack any remaining tribal dissenters.¹²⁶ Similar to the outcome of previous Kurdish uprisings, the Turkish government was merciless to the rebels and anyone suspected of aiding them, destroying villages and killing thousands of Kurds.¹²⁷

Despite the defeat, Khoybun and the Ararat revolt are important to the history of the *peshmerga* for three reasons. First, never before had a military force been constructed specifically for the Kurdish nationalist ideal. The influence of the tribal shaykh as military commander was increasingly reduced as nationalism became a more important reason for Kurdish military actions. Second, the Khoybun revolt showed a growing relationship between the Barzani tribe and Kurdish nationalism. Although Mulla Mustafa Barzani had been involved in Shaykh Mahmud's revolt and had met with Shaykh Said, the military support granted to the Khoybun cause from the Barzani tribe (as led by Shaykh Ahmad and commanded by Mulla Mustafa) was unprecedented. This level of support would continue to grow as future *peshmerga*, specifically from the Barzani area, would again be called on to defend attempted Kurdish nation-states. Finally, the Khoybun revolt began a pattern of international cooperation against Kurdish nationalism. Exchanges of land between neighboring countries would be seen again as regional powers temporarily put aside their differences in an attempt to suppress Kurdish military ability.

Rise of Barzani Prominence

Before exploring further the early history of the *peshmerga* and its role in Kurdish revolts, the influence of the Barzani tribe and their shaykhs must be discussed. Not only would the leaders of this tribe (Shaykh Ahmad and Mulla Mustafa) play a large role in early Kurdish

¹²⁴ Turk Soldiers Kill Five Kurdish Chiefs. New York Times, 8 Jul 1930.

¹²⁵ Persia Yields to Turkey. New York Times, 3 Dec 1930.

¹²⁶ Turks Hold Revolt of Kurds Crushed. New York Times, 18 Oct 1930/ Persian Troops Rout Kurds. New York Times 4 Apr 1931/ Kurds Renew Border Raids. New York Times, 8 Apr 1931.

¹²⁷ The Turco-Kurdish Campaign. Bekir, N.M. (M.D.), Editorial Commentary, New York Times 22 Oct 1930/ McDowall, pg 206.

nationalist conflicts, but it is their fighters who defined what would become the *peshmerga* – those who face death.

The influence of the shaykhs in the village of Barzan was first noted in the early 19th century with the emergence of Taj ad Din, the first Barzani shaykh.¹²⁸ Located in the northernmost part of Iraqi Kurdistan¹²⁹, “in the mountain vastness northeast of Arbil in Iraq, on the Greater Zab and in the highlands above it”¹³⁰, Barzan is described as a small village with “no outstanding features except for the solid stone houses of the shaykhs”. However nondescript their residence, Barzani villagers had a long-standing reputation as great fighters. This reputation applied particularly to those who followed the resident shaykh. According to Eagleton, the idea of the Barzani people as capable fighters, combined with aid from members of outside tribes, allowed the Barzanis to defend themselves despite being outnumbered by neighboring enemies.

After the execution of Shaykh Abd al Salam in 1914 by Turkish authorities, his 18-year-old brother, Ahmad Barzani took charge of the tribe. Ahmad, described as “young and unstable”¹³¹, continued to rule as his brother had, seizing both religious and political power and becoming shaykh of the region.¹³²

Shaykh Ahmad’s growing religious authority would eventually lead to conflict. According to Izady, Ahmad instituted a new religion in 1927, attempting to combine Christianity, Judaism, and Islam for the sake of unifying the “religiously fragmented” Kurdish populace.¹³³ Convinced of Ahmad’s divineness, Mulla Abd al Rahman proclaimed the shaykh to be “God” and declared himself a prophet. Although Abd al Rahman was killed by Shaykh Ahmad’s brother Muhammad Sadiq, the ideas of Ahmad’s divineness spread.

Shaykh Ahmad’s eccentricities would become the target of rival tribes by 1931. As the numerous tribal strikes and counterstrikes involving the Barzanis began to plague the countryside, the new Iraqi government, having recently agreed to independence with Britain, attempted to destroy the contentious Barzani tribe.¹³⁴ According to Masud Barzani, the Iraqi intent to subjugate the Barzanis was “without foundation because there was already a civilian

¹²⁸ Eagleton, pg 47.

¹²⁹ Barzani, Massoud. Mustafa Barzani and the Kurdish Liberation Movement (1931-1961). Pg 17.

¹³⁰ Eagleton, pg 47.

¹³¹ Ibid, pg 48.

¹³² Barzani, pg 20.

¹³³ Izady, pg 64.

¹³⁴ McDowall, pgs 172-179.

administration in the Barzan region, and Shaykh Ahmad was not in opposition to it”. Masud Barzani further asserts that the Iraqi goal was to “vanquish Barzan because of its firm patriotic stand”.

Conflict between the Barzanis and the Iraqi forces began in late 1931 and continued through 1932. Commanding Barzani fighters was Shaykh Ahmad’s younger brother, Mulla Mustafa Barzani. Mustafa would rise to prominence against the Iraqi forces (who were supplemented by British commanders and the British Royal Air Force). Despite his young age, the 28-year-old Mustafa Barzani displayed “exceptional defensive and offensive military superiority” and his “outstanding abilities raised the morale of his fighters and their trust in his leadership”.

Iraqi numerical superiority and British air power overcame Kurdish bravery, however. By June 1932 Shaykh Ahmad Barzani, his brothers, and a small contingent of men were forced to seek asylum in Turkey. Although Ahmad was separated from his followers and sent to Ankara¹³⁵, Mulla Mustafa and Muhammad Sadiq continued to fight Iraqi forces for another year before surrendering. After swearing an oath to King Faysal of Iraq¹³⁶, the Barzanis (sans Shaykh Ahmad) were allowed to return to Barzan in spring 1933, where they found their “devoutly loyal” forces had kept their organization and weapons.

Eventually Mulla Mustafa was reunited with Shaykh Ahmad Barzani as the Iraqi government arrested the brothers and exiled them to Mosul in 1933. The two Barzanis were transferred to various cities in Iraq throughout the 1930s and early 1940s. During this time their stops included Mosul, Baghdad, Nasiriya, Kifri, and Altin Koprü before finally ending in Sulaymaniya. Meanwhile, back in Barzan, the remaining Barzani tribal fighters were faced with constant pressures of arrest or death.¹³⁷

Although initially a tribal dispute, the involvement of the Iraqi government inadvertently led to the growth of Shaykh Ahmad and Mulla Mustafa Barzani as prominent Kurdish leaders. Throughout these early conflicts, the Barzanis consistently displayed their leadership and military prowess, providing steady opposition against the fledgling Iraqi military. Furthermore, exile in the major cities exposed the Barzanis to the ideas of urban Kurdish nationalism¹³⁸,

¹³⁵ Barzani, pgs 27, 30, 36.

¹³⁶ McDowall, pg 180.

¹³⁷ Barzani, pgs 37, 41, 43.

¹³⁸ Barzani, pg 49.

movements they had only been a part of militarily. This exposure was especially important for Mulla Mustafa Barzani as he increasingly recognized the need for an organized military force to coincide with Kurdish nationalism, realizing tribal dissidence could never defeat the Iraqi government. As Barzani military strength, with its disdain for the Iraqis and desire for autonomy,¹³⁹ merged with the growing nationalist-oriented Kurdish intelligentsia, Barzani influence in Iraqi Kurdistan became greater.

Emergence of Barzani's Forces and the Barzani Revolt (1943-1945)

As World War II began to occupy the attention of the world's nations, the Barzanis and their tribe were still internally separated and remained at odds with the Iraqi government. The British occupation of Iraq in 1941 and their seizure of Baghdad, presumably to ensure Iraqi compliance with the Allied cause¹⁴⁰, would indirectly lead to a reunion between Mustafa Barzani and his people and again pose a challenge to Iraqi authority.

Two years after the British occupation, in 1943, with inflation gripping Iraq¹⁴¹ and the British showing little concern about the Kurdish issue¹⁴², the Barzani family found themselves unable to subsist on their meager government stipend. Still in exile in Sulaymaniya, the Barzani financial situation became so dire the family resorted to selling their rifles and their gold jewelry just to survive. The indignation of having to part with their family fortune and their methods of self-defense led Mustafa Barzani to plot his return to Barzan.¹⁴³ The impetus for Barzani's return was strictly economic¹⁴⁴, not nationalist nor caused by a desire to counter any anti-British sentiment in Kurdistan¹⁴⁵, although Barzani did have contacts within Kurdish nationalist circles in Sulaymaniya¹⁴⁶ who may have aided him in his escape.

After receiving permission from Shaykh Ahmad Barzani, Mulla Mustafa, along with two close associates, fled Sulaymaniya and crossed into Iran. Once in the Iranian town of Shino,

¹³⁹ McDowall, pg 290.

¹⁴⁰ O'Ballance, pg 21.

¹⁴¹ Roosevelt, Archie. For Lust of Knowing: Memoirs of an Intelligence Officer. Pg 256.

¹⁴² Barzani, pg 43.

¹⁴³ Roosevelt, pg 256.

¹⁴⁴ McDowall, 290.

¹⁴⁵ Barzani, pg 43.

¹⁴⁶ McDowall, pg 290.

Barzani reunited with resettled members of the Barzani tribe and made his way to Barzan.¹⁴⁷ Upon his return, Mulla Mustafa became “the immediate object of attention from his own followers, the chiefs of neighboring tribes, Iraqi government officials who wished to reintern him, and members of the Kurdish nationalist movement”.¹⁴⁸ This latter group included Mir Hajj Ahmad and Mustafa Krushnaw, Kurdish officers in the Iraqi army and members of Hiwa, an underground Kurdish nationalist movement¹⁴⁹. Upon his return to Barzan, Mulla Mustafa recruited a force to challenge regional Iraqi authority. Numbering nearly 750 in only two weeks, Barzani fighters began small operations such as raiding police stations¹⁵⁰ and frontier posts¹⁵¹.

These early raids demonstrated the growing military organization of Barzani’s forces. Although still mostly tribal, enrollment in Barzani’s force grew to nearly 2,000 within months¹⁵² as local Kurds, including those deserting the Iraqi army¹⁵³, joined the ranks. In order to organize this growing force, Barzani created combat groups of 15-30 men; appointed Muhammad Amin Mirkhan, Mamand Maseeh, and Saleh Kaniya Lanji commanders; and instilled strict rules of soldierly conduct. These rules included the need for fighters to obey and carry out orders, the need for commanders to stand with their fighters as equals and treat them like brothers, instructions on how to treat civilians and prisoners, and how to disperse the spoils of war. Barzani adhered strictly to his own instructions, refusing privileges of command and sharing duties such as mounting guard.¹⁵⁴

Throughout 1943 Barzani and his fighters seized police stations and re-supplied themselves with Iraqi arms and ammunition. Barzani used these early skirmishes as well as future battles to identify who among his men was best suited for leadership positions, who was best in handling logistics, and who might fill other management positions.¹⁵⁵ Once levels of command were created, Barzani established his headquarters in Bistri, a village halfway between his Rawanduz and Barzan forces. Barzani’s decisions to increase command and control, combined with intense feelings of loyalty and camaraderie among the Barzani fighters, led to

¹⁴⁷ Barzani, pg 43.

¹⁴⁸ Eagleton, pg 51.

¹⁴⁹ McDowall, pgs 292-293.

¹⁵⁰ Barzani, pg 44.

¹⁵¹ O’Ballance, pg 24.

¹⁵² Barzani, pg 44.

¹⁵³ O’Ballance, pg 24.

¹⁵⁴ Barzani, pg 55.

¹⁵⁵ Ibid, Appendix I.

victories in the Battle of Gora Tu and the Battle of Mazna. During these battles, Barzani forces were able to defeat trained, organized, and well-supplied Iraqi army units.¹⁵⁶

As a result of his growing regional control, increased loyalty, and emerging military power, Barzani petitioned the Iraqi government for autonomy as well as the release of Kurdish prisoners, including Shaykh Ahmad Barzani. Although the autonomy request was denied, the Iraqi government did negotiate with Barzani throughout the early 1940s.¹⁵⁷ These negotiations not only led to the release of Shaykh Ahmad in early 1944¹⁵⁸, but also brought the word “*jash*” into common Kurdish usage. Barzani used the term, meaning “donkey” in Kurdish, as a way to openly criticize Kurds who collaborated with the Iraqi government, pejoratively labeling them the “*jash* police”.¹⁵⁹ Due to Iraqi recognition and Barzani’s wide influence and power, Kurdish patriots began to rally around Barzani, showing him their respect and turning him into the “national beacon of the Kurdish liberation movement”.¹⁶⁰

Diplomacy between Mustafa Barzani and the Iraqi government began on a positive note, partially due to several Kurdish sympathizers within the Iraqi government. After the resignation of the Iraqi cabinet in 1944, a new ruling body took over, one far less willing to give into Kurdish aspirations.¹⁶¹ As a result, previous concessions were ignored and pro-Kurdish diplomats were dismissed¹⁶², opening a new round of Iraqi-Kurdish hostilities.

With his position only strengthened by the previous administration, Mustafa Barzani continued his demands¹⁶³ while simultaneously preparing his forces for further military actions. Knowing a conflict was imminent, Barzani divided his forces into three fronts: a Margavar-Rawanduz front, commanded by former Iraqi official Mustafa Khoshnaw; an Imadia front, led by Izzat Abd al-Aziz; and an Aqra front, led by Sheikh Sulayman Barzani. All elements would be accountable to Mustafa Barzani, the self-proclaimed “Commander-In-Chief of the Revolutionary Forces”.¹⁶⁴

¹⁵⁶ Ibid, pgs 59-61.

¹⁵⁷ McDowall, pg 293.

¹⁵⁸ Eagleton, pg 53.

¹⁵⁹ Barzani, pg 65.

¹⁶⁰ Ibid, pg 44.

¹⁶¹ Eagleton, pg 52.

¹⁶² Barzani, pg 70.

¹⁶³ McDowall, pg 292.

¹⁶⁴ Barzani, pg 77.

Knowing tribal discord and disorganization of the Kurdish populace could hinder his forces, Barzani, with the approval of Shaykh Ahmad Barzani, formed the Rizgari Kurd (the Kurdish Freedom Party) in early 1945.¹⁶⁵ Consisting primarily of Kurdish officers, government officials, and professionals¹⁶⁶, Rizgari Kurd intended to unify the Kurds, establish autonomy or independence within Iraq¹⁶⁷, and continue to create armed units to defend Kurdistan¹⁶⁸.

Despite Barzani's order to his military to "not initiate fighting"¹⁶⁹, conflict erupted in August 1945 in the town of Margavar¹⁷⁰. This violence led to the death of prominent Kurd Wali Beg and several Iraqi police officers.¹⁷¹ As a result of Beg's demise, the Kurdish populace, without any military authorization, overran the police stations in Margavar and Barzan.¹⁷² Barzani quickly returned from arbitrating a local tribal dispute and took command of the revolt.¹⁷³ Against British advice¹⁷⁴, the Iraqi government attempted to pacify the region, declaring martial law, threatening military action, and demanding Barzani's surrender¹⁷⁵. With diplomacy no longer an option, the Iraqis deployed numerous army units to the region to subdue the growing rebellion.¹⁷⁶

In preparation for the conflict, Mustafa Barzani met with Shaykh Ahmad Barzani to decide who should command the forces against the looming Iraqi threat. The Barzanis decided that Mustafa Barzani himself should lead the Aqra force; Mohammad Siddique Barzani, brother of Shaykh Ahmad and Mulla Mustafa, would lead the Margavar-Rawanduz front; Haji Taha Imadi would lead the Balenda-Imadia front; and As'ad Khosavi was given the responsibility of both surrounding the Bilah garrison and supplying the forces of the Aqra front.

With command in place, the Barzani forces were able to dominate the early battles. The Iraqi army, attempting to seize the eastern slopes of Mount Qalandar, was driven back to the Gali

¹⁶⁵ Barzani, pg 73 / McDowall, pg 294.

¹⁶⁶ O'Ballance, pg 26.

¹⁶⁷ McDowall, pg 294.

¹⁶⁸ Barzani, pg 73.

¹⁶⁹ Ibid, pg 78.

¹⁷⁰ O'Ballance, pg 27 / Barzani, pg 82.

¹⁷¹ Eagleton, pg 53 / Barzani, pg 82.

¹⁷² Barzani, pg 83.

¹⁷³ Eagleton, pg 53.

¹⁷⁴ Roosevelt, pg 260.

¹⁷⁵ Barzani, pg 85.

¹⁷⁶ Roosevelt, pg 260.

Ali Beg Gorge. Although victorious, the Barzani forces did sustain numerous losses, including a serious injury to Commander Mohammad Siddique Barzani.¹⁷⁷

On 4 September 1945 the Iraqi assault continued, as army units from Aqra and Rawanduz and a police unit from Amadia were deployed towards Barzan.¹⁷⁸ A few days later in the Battle of Maidan Morik, Barzani fighters once again held their own against Iraqi mechanized and artillery batteries. As the battles degenerated to hand-to-hand combat, the Iraqi army, presumably losing command and control, was forced to retreat temporarily from the region.¹⁷⁹ Whereas the underestimated abilities of Barzani's military severely dampened the morale of Iraqi ground forces¹⁸⁰, Iraqi air raids continued unabated¹⁸¹.

Despite the early victories, by the end of September 1945 the Iraqi government turned the tide of the conflict, convincing regional tribes to oppose the Barzanis and aid in suppressing the revolt.¹⁸² These tribal fighters, including members of the Zibrari, Berwari, and Doski tribes, and "elements of the 'Muhajarin' ... loyal to several of the sons of Sayyid Taha of Shemdinan (and led by Abd al Karim Qasim)"¹⁸³ attacked Barzani and his men, uprooting them from their "defensive strongholds"¹⁸⁴ and preventing them from further attacking Iraqi troops in the region. These "treasonous" assaults, combined with the Iraqi occupation of Barzan on 7 October, forced Barzani to order his forces to retreat from the region and cross into Iranian Kurdistan. Once there, the Barzani family and their supporters settled in various towns in the Mahabad area¹⁸⁵, joining the Kurdish autonomous movement in the region and setting the stage for the official creation of the *peshmerga*.

The early 1940s are extremely important in the history of the *peshmerga*. Although still without an official title, the core of the *peshmerga* was definitely created when Mustafa Barzani returned to Barzan in 1943.¹⁸⁶ By taking advantage of World War II and the British occupation of Iraq, Barzani was given the time to mold a military force that superseded tribal affiliation, an idea that the Ottoman Empire, with its Hamidiya Cavalry, had failed in creating. Without

¹⁷⁷ Barzani, pgs 87, 89.

¹⁷⁸ Roosevelt, pg 260.

¹⁷⁹ Barzani, pg 89.

¹⁸⁰ Roosevelt, pg 260.

¹⁸¹ Eagleton, pg 53.

¹⁸² Roosevelt, pg 260.

¹⁸³ Eagleton, pg 54.

¹⁸⁴ Roosevelt, pg 260.

¹⁸⁵ Barzani, pgs 94, 95.

¹⁸⁶ Ibid, pg 55.

Barzani's leadership and organizational and tactical ideas, it is doubtful his forces would have been able to achieve the results they did or, more importantly, conduct the tactical retreat that kept most of the command structure together in Iranian Kurdistan.¹⁸⁷ It is unclear however, how much of the military loyalty given to the Barzanis was due to their tribal standing and how much was because of their struggle against the Iraqi government.

Even the nationalist leanings of the revolt are not wholly clear. McDowall dismisses the notion of Mustafa Barzani as an ardent nationalist at this point and claims that the Barzani revolts were initiated only to increase the tribe's regional power.¹⁸⁸ Barzani's creation of the Rizgari Kurd, however, reinforces the idea of Barzani as nationalist leader, albeit with a tribal-based force. Combined with the emerging Kurdish administration in the Iranian town of Mahabad, Barzani's influence and the prominence of his troops would continue to change the politics of the region.

The Mahabad Republic

The Mahabad Republic stands as the high point of the Kurdish nationalist movement. This short period of national identity marked the official creation of the *peshmerga* and cemented the role of Mustafa Barzani as a military hero of the Kurdish people. During the short life of this nation-state, the idea of a Kurdish homeland finally came into being. Unfortunately for the Kurds, the Republic lasted only 12 months, from December 1945 to December 1946.¹⁸⁹

In the opening years of World War II, as the British re-occupied Iraq, the Soviet Union seized northwestern Iran to ensure the "uninterrupted flow of vital supplies to the Soviet Union"¹⁹⁰. Central control of Iran, similar to the occupation of Iraq, included a diminished ability to undermine the growing Kurdish nationalist movement.¹⁹¹ Seeing a window of opportunity, the newly-formed *Komala-i Jiyani Kurdistan* (The Committee for the Revival of Kurdistan - Komala), a predominantly middle class democratic nationalist party, began to

¹⁸⁷ Barzani, pg 95.

¹⁸⁸ McDowall, pg 293.

¹⁸⁹ See Appendix B: Maps map 4 for a depiction of Boundaries of the Kurdish Mahabad Republic.

¹⁹⁰ Jwaideh, Wadie. The Kurdish Nationalist Movement: Its Origins and Development. Pg 713.

¹⁹¹ Ibid, pg 713.

negotiate with the occupying Soviets with the idea of creating a Soviet-sponsored Kurdish republic, independent of Iranian control.¹⁹²

Leading the nascent Kurdish republic and fully endorsed by the Soviets was Qazi Muhammad, the religious and titular leader of Mahabad. Muhammad, who had become democratic Komala's sole leader – a position the communist Soviet leaders were comfortable with – was pressured by the Soviets to leave Komala and create a more centralized party.¹⁹³ In September 1945, for example, the Kurdish leadership, including Muhammad, was taken to Soviet Azarbaijan where the Soviets agreed to supply the Kurds with money, military training, and arms, including tanks, cannons, machine guns, and rifles, thereby ensuring autonomy from Iran.¹⁹⁴ In exchange for the support the Kurds had to abandon Komala, which Soviet Azarbaijan President Bagherov labeled “an instrument of British imperialism”¹⁹⁵ and create the “Democratic Party of Kurdistan – Iran” (KDP-I). Bagherov also warned the Mahabad leaders not to trust Mulla Mustafa Barzani, whom Bagherov called “a British spy”.¹⁹⁶

Dismissal of Mustafa Barzani was not easily accomplished however. Knowing tribal opposition to a less-than-democratic ideal could derail his position as leader¹⁹⁷, Qazi Muhammad, upon his return from Soviet Azarbaijan, met with Barzani in an attempt to attach Barzani's prestige and his troops to the KDP-I cause.¹⁹⁸ Barzani agreed to support Muhammad and the KDP-I in exchange for billeting and supplies for his family and forces, 3,000 of which would be stationed in Mahabad¹⁹⁹. Barzani may have met previously with Soviet representatives through his Iranian Kurdistan contacts²⁰⁰ so as to “dispel their well-known suspicions regarding his previous associations and orientations”²⁰¹. In order to procure their trust, Barzani agreed to cooperate with Muhammad and to avoid the “public eye” due to the potential unwanted pressure on the Soviet Union by the governments of Iraq and Great Britain.²⁰²

¹⁹² Roosevelt, *Middle East Journal*, pg 252.

¹⁹³ McDowall, pg 240.

¹⁹⁴ Eagleton, pg 44.

¹⁹⁵ Roosevelt, *MEJ*, pg 254.

¹⁹⁶ Eagleton, pgs 45, 46.

¹⁹⁷ Roosevelt, *MEJ*, pg 255.

¹⁹⁸ Roosevelt, *For Lust of Knowing*, pg 268.

¹⁹⁹ Eagleton, pg 56.

²⁰⁰ Barzani, pg 99.

²⁰¹ Eagleton, pg 56.

²⁰² Barzani, pg 99.

With Barzani's cooperation guaranteed, Muhammad, along with 60 tribal leaders²⁰³, including Barzani, established a KDP-I party platform, created a Kurdish People's Government, and raised the official Kurdish national flag. As the people of Iranian Azarbaijan moved towards their own neighboring Soviet-sponsored state, Qazi Muhammad was elected the first Kurdish president and on 22 January 1946 the Mahabad Republic was born.

Subordinate to the new Kurdish president was a government consisting of a Prime Minister, a 13-person parliament, and various ministers, including Minister of War Mohammad Hosein Khan Seif Qazi, Qazi Muhammad's cousin and former honorary captain of the Iranian gendarmerie. Seif Qazi was responsible for an emerging Kurdish army that included Amr Khan Shikak, Hama Rashid, Khan Banei, Zero Beg Herki, and Mulla Mustafa Barzani, all of whom received the rank of marshal. Each of these "marshals" was outfitted with Soviet-style uniforms, "complete with high boots, stiff shoulder-straps, and red-banded garrison caps".²⁰⁴ The forces under these commanders were further advised and organized by Soviet military officer Captain Salahuddin Kazimov. The Soviets continued their influence, sending at least 60 Kurds to Soviet Azarbaijan for additional military training.²⁰⁵ In total, the Mahabad army consisted of 70 active duty officers, 40 non-commissioned officers, and 1,200 lower-enlisted privates.²⁰⁶

Mustafa Barzani, as one of the higher-ranking commanders, was again responsible for doling out titles among his men. Barzani appointed Major Bakr Abd al-Karim commander of the first regiment and Mohammed Amin Badr Khan, Mamand Maseeh, and Faris Kani Boti his company commanders; Captain Mustafa Khoshnaw was to be commander of the second regiment with Sa'id Wali Beg, Khoshavi Khalil, and Mustafa Jangeer his company commanders; and Captain Mir Haj Ahmad was appointed commander of the third regiment and Salih Kani Lanji, Haider Beg Arif Beg, and Wahab Agha Rawanduzi were his company commanders.²⁰⁷ Many of these men had served under Barzani since the police raids of 1943. Now under the banner of the Mahabad Republic, they remained extremely loyal to Barzani.

Besides appointing higher levels of command, Qazi Muhammad helped to literally define who his forces were. On orders from Muhammad, a committee of "hand-picked litterateurs and writers" constructed distinct terms for positions in the Kurdish military. Among the many words

²⁰³ Eagleton, pg 57.

²⁰⁴ Roosevelt, MEJ, pg 257.

²⁰⁵ Roosevelt, For Lust of Knowing. Pg 268.

²⁰⁶ Eagleton, pg 78.

²⁰⁷ Barzani, pg 100.

the committee helped standardize was the Kurdish word for soldier – “*peshmerga*” – a term meaning “one who faces death” or one willing to die for a cause.²⁰⁸

Despite protests leading to Shaykh Ahmad Barzani’s dismissal from Mahabad, Qazi Muhammad and the Kurdish Parliament’s first deployment of the *peshmerga* was to put down resisting tribes in the region.²⁰⁹ These were minor conflicts however, compared to the new army’s first test against Iranian forces eager to reclaim their land. Knowing Iranian intentions and fearing a withdrawal of Soviet aid, many of the *peshmerga*, including much of Mulla Mustafa Barzani’s forces, were deployed on the republic’s southern boundary.

On 29 April 1946, only five days after the Mahabad Republic signed a military cooperation accord with neighboring Azarbaijan²¹⁰, the First Kurdish Regiment, located in the southeast corner of the republic in Qahrawa, faced 600 Iranian soldiers reinforced with artillery and cavalry.²¹¹ Regional support for the Mahabad *peshmerga* included numerous small Kurdish tribes “always ready for fighting and looting”.²¹²

The *peshmerga* under Barzani’s command quickly showed their abilities against Iranian forces, ambushing the first Iranian units to reach Qahrawa, killing 21, wounding 17, and capturing 40. Although short lived, the ambush is considered the first military victory for the Kurdish Republic.

The Mahabad *peshmerga* also engaged Iranian reconnaissance teams in the region as the Iranians attempted to mass forces throughout early May 1946.²¹³ Kurdish offensives were limited to minor skirmishes due to the removal of Soviet influence in the region that month²¹⁴, possibly due to a Soviet-Iranian oil agreement²¹⁵. A ceasefire agreement signed 3 May 1946 between Kurdish forces and Iranian General Ali Razmara discouraged major attacks, promoted withdrawals, and allowed each side to further equip their forces in the region.

By mid-May 1946 Kurdish forces included nearly 12,750 *peshmerga*, 1,800 of which were dedicated infantry under the command of Mustafa Barzani. The majority of the forces were cavalry-based, which according to Eagleton, “could still terrify an ill-armed or badly organized

²⁰⁸ Chyet, Michael L. *Kurdish-English Dictionary*, pgs 452, 453.

²⁰⁹ Jwaideh, pg 749.

²¹⁰ Roosevelt, MEJ, pgs 257, 258.

²¹¹ Eagleton, pg 86.

²¹² Roosevelt, MEJ, pg 260.

²¹³ Eagleton, pgs 86, 90.

²¹⁴ Roosevelt, pg 269.

²¹⁵ McDowall, pg 243.

force, but it could not prevail against trained infantry carrying repeating rifles and concealed by the rugged terrain of Kurdistan”.²¹⁶

On 15 June 1946 the period of preparation ceased as the fighting positions of the Second Kurdish Regiment at Mamashah (Mil Qarani) were attacked by two Iranian battalions supported by artillery, tanks, and aircraft.²¹⁷ The purpose of the Iranian assault was two-fold: first, to seize the highest point of Kurdish occupation in the area and second, to stop Kurdish snipers from attacking Iranian supply vehicles. Although accounts of the Battle of Mamashah vary, the *peshmerga* again demonstrated their expert use of cover and concealment.²¹⁸ Among the *peshmerga* killed during the battle was Khalil Khosavi, a Kurdish soldier who “demonstrated capable leadership and utmost courage.”²¹⁹ Mustafa Barzani correctly predicted that the surrender of Khosavi’s hilltop position would only come with his death.²²⁰

Khosavi’s actions in the battle prior to his death are at the root of the battle’s conflicting accounts. According to Masud Barzani, after Iranian forces seized the initial “upper hand,” Khosavi led *peshmerga* forces, reinforced by the First Kurdish Regiment, in a successful counterattack, repelling the Iranian assault.²²¹ Other accounts portray the battle as an Iranian victory, albeit a victory for Kurdish morale and increasing the regional confidence in the *peshmerga*.²²² According to Eagleton, neither Kurdish nor Soviet reinforcements arrived, leaving the Barzani forces stranded in their defensive positions and allowing Iranian forces to seize the hill.

McDowall also explores the question of Kurdish reinforcements in the area, stating the apparent lack of assisting forces may have been due to tribal disunity. According to McDowall, regional Kurdish tribal leader Amr Khan only brought tribal fighters from the Shikak and Harki tribes south after receiving a Soviet bribe. These fighters, lacking the dedication of the Barzani *peshmerga*, were quick to flee the battlefield as fighting intensified.²²³ As a result of the Kurdish

²¹⁶ Eagleton, pgs 92, 93.

²¹⁷ Barzani, pg 104.

²¹⁸ Eagleton, pg 95.

²¹⁹ Barzani, pg 104.

²²⁰ Eagleton, pg 96.

²²¹ Barzani, pg 104.

²²² O’Ballance, pg 31.

²²³ McDowall, pg 243/ O’Ballance, pg 32.

military defeat in the Battle of Mamashah, the Iranian military was able to seize the highland, erect military watchtowers, and ensure a military presence in the area.²²⁴

Lack of tribal unity continued to hinder the cause of the Mahabad Republic following the Battle of Mamashah. As tribal interest in Qazi Muhammad's government waned, the Barzani *peshmerga* were left as Mahabad's lone fighting force. Despite their loyalty, Barzani's fighters had their own difficulties with the government as lack of food and diminished sanitary conditions caused a typhoid outbreak, hindering their fighting ability.²²⁵ As a result, the cause of the Mahabad army was all but lost by late 1946 as even promised Soviet aid failed to arrive.²²⁶

The Mahabad Republic faced its most difficult challenge as Iranian forces planned to reclaim Mahabad following the seizure of Iranian Azarbaijan in December 1946.²²⁷ Initially the Mahabad government resisted Iranian advances positioned the *peshmerga* in both Saqqiz and Mahabad.²²⁸ Shortly thereafter, negotiations began in order to ensure the peaceful reoccupation of Mahabad. Key to the agreement was the withdrawal of Barzani forces from Mahabad. After the Barzanis, including the *peshmerga* and their families, withdrew to Naqada on 15 December 1946, the Iranian military entered Mahabad, officially ending the one-year life of the Kurdish Republic.²²⁹

Post-Mahabad Journeys and Conflicts

Following the fall of Mahabad, the Barzanis and their *peshmerga* again faced the struggle of resisting national powers without the support of a recognized nation. After leaving Mahabad and ordering the establishment of defensive positions between Mahabad and Naqada, Mulla Mustafa and several of his officers were ordered by Iranian officials to dismiss the *peshmerga*, lay down their arms, and integrate into Iranian controlled areas. If they failed to do so, the Iranian government stated they would order military action against the Barzanis.²³⁰ Although Mulla Mustafa may have agreed with the proposal, Shaykh Ahmed Barzani stood defiant, stating

²²⁴ Roosevelt, MEJ, pg 261.

²²⁵ Barzani, pg 105.

²²⁶ Roosevelt, MEJ, pg 265.

²²⁷ Ibid, pg 266.

²²⁸ Barzani, pg 112.

²²⁹ Roosevelt, MEJ, pg 266.

²³⁰ Barzani, pg 116.

the Barzanis and their *peshmerga* would stay until the spring thaw when they would then travel back to Iraq.²³¹

With both sides at a political impasse, conflict became inevitable. As he did prior to earlier conflicts, Mustafa Barzani divided his *peshmerga* into several fronts and assigned command. Barzani appointed Ali Khalil, Salih Kaniya Lanji, and Kako Mulla Ali commanders of the Nalos-Sofiyan Front; Hassan Ali Sulayman Kakshar, Sultan Mar'an Agha, and Mahmud Mira commanders of the Qalatan Front; Aris Khano and Mahmud Ahmad Babkayi commanders of the Albeh-Koyek Front; and As'ad Khoshavi, Mohammad Amin Mirkhan, and Sheikhomer Shandari commanders of the Margavar Front. Although several of the aforementioned had led *peshmerga* forces earlier, including Salih Kaniya Lanji and Mohammad Amin Mirkhan (both of whom had commanded since the 1943 raids on Iraqi police stations), the loss of many officers to executions in Iraq and Iran forced Barzani to make changes in *peshmerga* command.²³²

The Barzani *peshmerga*, again outnumbered by their opposition, was well armed in anticipation of the conflict. Despite Iranian attempts to disarm the remnants of Mahabad, the Barzani *peshmerga* was able to smuggle out 3,000 rifles, 120 machineguns, numerous hand grenades, and two 75 mm artillery cannons.²³³ These cannons fell under the command of former Iranian officer Tafrashiyan and six other trained Kurdish officers.²³⁴ Iranian forces, on the other hand, were numerically superior and aided by American experts and weaponry.

In March 1947, the Barzani *peshmerga* finally faced their Iranian foes.²³⁵ During the conflict the *peshmerga* once again fought with tenacity and dedication.²³⁶ In various battles throughout mid-March, the *peshmerga* defended themselves against numerous offensives as Iranian forces continued their attacks, often recruiting rival tribes to oust the Barzanis.²³⁷ Even though many *peshmerga* were killed in the fighting, more Iranians died as the Kurds claimed early victories. Among these victories was the Battle of Nalos, where *peshmerga* forces effectively used their artillery to kill many Iranian soldiers, including Colonel Kalashi, the

²³¹ Eagleton, pg 117.

²³² Barzani, pg 121.

²³³ Eagleton, pg 115.

²³⁴ Barzani, pg 121.

²³⁵ See Appendix B: Maps map 4 for a depiction of the location of battles following the fall of the Kurdish Mahabad Republic.

²³⁶ Ghassemlou, pg 78.

²³⁷ Eagleton, pg 120.

Iranian regimental commander.²³⁸ The *peshmerga* also took many Iranian officers and soldiers captive, further reducing Iranian military effectiveness.

Other *peshmerga* highlights during their various post-Mahabad battles include ambushing an Iranian military column, killing 50 enemy soldiers and capturing Iranian Lieutenant Jahanbani, son of General Jahanbani.²³⁹ Lieutenant Jahanbani was used as a bargaining chip to save the Barzanis from Iranian air force attacks²⁴⁰, the only Iranian method of punishing the Barzanis that at the time minimized Iranian casualties.

With his forces withering under the continuous attack, Mustafa Barzani realized the need to flee Iran and cross the border into Iraqi Kurdistan. The Barzani plan of escape was two-fold: first, Shaykh Ahmad Barzani, after receiving a written guarantee of amnesty from Iraqi authorities, would cross into Iraq with a majority of the tribe, including the former Iraqi military officers who had led the *peshmerga*. The second wave of Barzanis fleeing the Mahabad region was to be led personally by Mustafa Barzani and included most of the *peshmerga*.

The return plan faced mixed results. Once the first group crossed the Kalashin Pass the Iraqi army immediately seized the ex-Iraqi officers and brought them to trial, executing many.²⁴¹ Among the Kurdish Army officers put to death were Izzat Abd al-Aziz, Mustafa Khushnaw, Muhammad Mahmud, and Khayrullah Abd al-Karim. At their death, each of these officers yelled patriotic slogans praising the ideal of Kurdish nationalism.²⁴²

The second wave of Barzani followers also faced Iraqi forces upon their return. Prior to crossing the border, Barzani divided his forces into five sections and appointed Shaykh Sulayman, As'ad Khoshavi, Mamand Maseeh, Mohammad Amin Mirkhan, and Mustafa Mizori commanders. These commanders led their *peshmerga* into Iraqi Kurdistan, defeating Iraqi police and jash forces. After their victory, Mustafa Barzani and his commanders were finally able to lead their troops into Barzan on 25 April 1947.²⁴³

Almost immediately, the Iraqi government, after arresting Shaykh Ahmad Barzani and other family members, sought the surrender of Mulla Mustafa Barzani.²⁴⁴ Knowing arresting Mustafa Barzani would not be a simple task, the Iraqi military began mobilizing forces towards

²³⁸ Barzani, pg 121.

²³⁹ Eagleton, pgs 120-121.

²⁴⁰ Barzani, pg 124.

²⁴¹ Eagleton, pg 121.

²⁴² Jwaideh, pg 766.

²⁴³ Barzani, pg 127.

²⁴⁴ O'Ballance, pg 34.

the Barzan region.²⁴⁵ Once the attack became imminent Barzani realized he had to flee yet again. Because both Turkish and Iranian Kurdistan could no longer be regarded as safe haven, Barzani decided to take his *peshmerga* to the relative security of the Soviet Union.²⁴⁶

The *peshmerga* journey to the Soviet Union began in late May 1947. Receiving accommodations and supplies from Kurdish villages along the way²⁴⁷, Barzani and his forces were able to weave their way along the Iran-Turkey border and made their way north to the USSR. Often, as the Barzani-led forces crossed into Iranian territory, they had to prepare for potential Iranian military assaults. Using their well-refined skills in cover and concealment, the *peshmerga* were often able to elude the Iranian military presence. In areas where stealth was impossible, the *peshmerga* did not hesitate to engage their adversaries with their guerrilla tactics. On 9 June 1947, for example, the *peshmerga* attacked the flank of an Iraqi army column.²⁴⁸ During the two-front attack, led by both Mustafa Barzani and As'ad Khoshavi, the *peshmerga* killed hundreds of Iranian soldiers, destroyed several tanks, rendered an artillery battery ineffective, and downed an Iranian aircraft.²⁴⁹ After evading or engaging the Iranian army throughout their trip, the Barzanis, along with over 500 *peshmerga* and their families²⁵⁰, crossed the Araxes River into the Soviet Union on 18 June 1947. In total, they traveled nearly 220 miles in 14 days.²⁵¹

The period from 1945 to mid-1947 was integral to the development of the *peshmerga* as a recognized fighting force. First and foremost, the soldiers of the Mahabad Republic were given the title of *peshmerga*, a Kurdish term, rather than *serbaz*, the Persian word for soldier.²⁵² Defining who they were in the Kurdish, rather than the Persian context, only added to the fighters' loyalty and morale. As they were being "named", the development of the *peshmerga* military structure grew dramatically during the period of the Mahabad Republic. No longer was the military organization confined to fighters of the Barzani tribe. The Mahabad administration effectively merged officers and soldiers from Iranian and Iraqi Kurdistan, creating a unified Kurdish force that crossed tribal lines.

²⁴⁵ Barzani, pg 128.

²⁴⁶ Eagleton, pg 126.

²⁴⁷ Barzani, pgs 129-132.

²⁴⁸ Eagleton, pgs 127-128.

²⁴⁹ Barzani, pg 133.

²⁵⁰ Ibid, pg 361.

²⁵¹ Eagleton, pg 129. See also Appendix B: Maps map 3 for a depiction of the Barzani route to the U.S.S.R.

²⁵² Chyet, pgs 452, 453.

The downfall of the Mahabad Republic, however, destroyed the Kurdish Army's organization, as many fighters returned to their respective tribes. As a result, the Barzani *peshmerga* and others loyal to Mustafa Barzani were left as the only force willing to defy the Iranian government in the name of Kurdish nationalism. Unfortunately, with their limited numbers and lack of national recognition, Barzani's trek to the USSR can be seen as his only realistic avenue of escape.²⁵³ With their commander leaving and their hopes for a free Kurdistan dashed, many *peshmerga* had little choice but to follow Barzani into the Soviet Union.

***Peshmerga* in the USSR (1947-1958)**

Life for the *peshmerga* failed to improve upon entering the Soviet Union. They were quickly brought to an impromptu compound surrounded by barbed wire and guarded by Soviet troops. According to Masud Barzani, the Kurdish exiles were interrogated, given bread and soup, and treated as prisoners of war.

The *peshmerga* also were soon deprived of their leader. Within weeks of their arrival, Mustafa Barzani was escorted to Nakhichevan, Soviet Armenia, where he stayed until being transferred to Shush and finally to Baku, Soviet Azarbaijan. Eventually, many of the *peshmerga* leaders were separated from the rank and file and their families. Among those separated were Shaykh Sulayman, Ali Mohammad Siddique, Sa'id Mulla Abdullah, and Ziyab Dari. The separation would not last however, as the rest of the Barzani tribe and their *peshmerga* were brought to Baku by the end of 1947. While in Baku, the *peshmerga* were reorganized under the command of As'ad Khoshavi. Under Khoshavi, Sa'id Wali Beg, Mohammad Amin Mirkhan, Mamand Maseeh, and Misto Mirozi were appointed company commanders. Once reconstituted and given Soviet uniforms and weapons, the *peshmerga* conducted training in "regular" military operations under the tutelage of several Soviet military officers.

After their first few years in the Soviet Union, the *peshmerga* and other followers of Barzani saw their training cease, quickly becoming subject to government manipulation. For long periods the *peshmerga* were separated from their leadership with many forced into hard labor. Only after Barzani personally wrote to Soviet leader Josef Stalin did conditions finally

²⁵³ According to Dana Adams Schmidt, Barzani inquired about refuge for him and his men in the U.S. while in a meeting with U.S. Ambassador George V. Allen in Tehran. (Schmidt, pg 104.)

improve for his followers. The *peshmerga* were finally reunited with their command in late 1951.

Under their improved conditions in Tashkent, Soviet Uzbekistan, the Barzanis and the *peshmerga* improved their lives dramatically. Many took advantage of the opportunity and became literate, with some even attaining degrees of higher education.²⁵⁴ This period of relative prosperity for the exiled Kurds also led to the interesting phenomenon of Kurdish men marrying blond haired, blue eyed Soviet women, many of whom were widows of deceased WWII Soviet soldiers.²⁵⁵ Finally, after nearly 20 years, the followers of the Barzanis were allowed to live “normal” lives.

Conditions also improved for Mulla Mustafa Barzani as he was eventually granted the privileges of a leader-in-exile. Throughout his years in the USSR, Barzani was able to broadcast via Soviet radio²⁵⁶ and attended courses in language²⁵⁷ and politics. Although many sources claim Barzani was given the rank of general in the Soviet Army²⁵⁸, Masud Barzani denies that this occurred²⁵⁹. Possibly most important, however, was Barzani’s ability to correspond with Kurdish exiles throughout the world, including Jalal Talabani and Ismet Cherif Vanly.²⁶⁰

Meanwhile, the successful coup d’etat of Brigadier Abd al Karim Qasim and his followers in Iraq in July 1958 opened a new chapter in Iraqi-Kurdish relations. Shortly after taking power, Qasim pardoned Shaykh Ahmad Barzani and allowed Mulla Mustafa, his followers, and his *peshmerga* to return to Iraq.²⁶¹ The Barzani exile in the Soviet Union ended after 12 years, and upon their return, the *peshmerga* would once again play a prominent role in Iraqi regional politics.

²⁵⁴ Barzani, pgs 135-143, 150.

²⁵⁵ Salem, pg 11.

²⁵⁶ Edmonds, MEJ, pg 62.

²⁵⁷ Kinnane, pg 59.

²⁵⁸ Ibid, pg 59/ Kurdish Red Seen as Leader. New York Times, 8 Apr 1959.

²⁵⁹ Barzani, pg 140.

²⁶⁰ Ibid, pg 150.

²⁶¹ Edmonds, MEJ, pgs 3, 7.

CHAPTER 3: The *Peshmerga* in Modern Iraq (1958-2003)

Return to Iraq/ Prelude to War (1958-1961)

The 1958 Revolution, similar to the post-WWI political re-alignment, offered the Kurds a chance to again push for independence or autonomy through political means. Optimism ruled as many Iraqi Kurds found a voice in the Democratic Party of Kurdistan (KDP). According to the new Iraqi governing body, power in the nation was to be shared among the Sunni, Shi'i and Kurdish populations.²⁶²

After Barzani's return, the *peshmerga* and other Barzani followers were allowed back into Iraq. Through a joint Soviet-Iraqi endeavor, the Soviet ship Grozia carried nearly 800 returnees from the port of Odessa to Basra. Upon their arrival, the former government dissidents were warmly greeted and granted general amnesty.²⁶³ As he had with Qazi Muhammad in Mahabad in 1946, Mulla Mustafa Barzani placed himself and his *peshmerga* under the command of Abd al-Karim Qasim in 1958.

Qasim, knowing the *peshmerga*'s proven ability, employed them to suppress numerous uprisings throughout 1959.²⁶⁴ In the first of these skirmishes, the *peshmerga* successfully defeated a major demonstration by Arab nationalist officers in Mosul "disillusioned by Qasim's 'betrayal'" and intent on creating a strictly pro-Arab Iraq. Although Kurdish fighters fought "at the behest of Mulla Mustafa"²⁶⁵, Barzani did not personally command any of his *peshmerga*²⁶⁶.

In July 1959, the *peshmerga* again came to the aid of Qasim to defeat a second revolt. Supported by anti-Iraq forces in Turkish and Iranian Kurdistan, Shaykh Rasid rose against the Qasim government, seizing police stations and surrounding pro-government forces in Sidakan. Once more Qasim called upon Barzani and his fighters to quell the uprising. After calling up 1,000 *peshmerga*, Barzani was able to defeat Shaykh Rashid's forces and in two days drive the dissenters into Iran.²⁶⁷ For Barzani and his *peshmerga* the offensive was worth the effort, as

²⁶² McDowall, pg 302.

²⁶³ Barzani, 185-187.

²⁶⁴ McDowall, pg 304/ Barzani, pg 215.

²⁶⁵ McDowall, pg 304.

²⁶⁶ Kinnane, pg 61.

²⁶⁷ Barzani, pg 215.

earlier Barzani conflicts with Shaykh Rashid were among the several reasons the Faysal government attacked the Barzanis in 1931-32.²⁶⁸

The cooperation between *peshmerga* forces, led by Barzani, and the Qasim government only served to strengthen the ties between the Kurds and the Iraqi Arabs. Among the Kurdish gains during this time were the inclusion of a Kurdish sun dish on the Iraqi flag²⁶⁹, placement of Kurds in high government positions, and mention in the provisional constitution of a joint Arab-Kurd “homeland”²⁷⁰. The removal of pro-Arab Colonel Abd al Salam Arif, Qasim’s Deputy Premier and Minister of the Interior, was also seen as a step towards Kurdish appeasement, although Arif was also regarded as a threat to Qasim.²⁷¹

Despite these acts of concession, Kurdish optimism began to wane. Throughout northern Iraq many of the traditional tribal enemies of the Barzanis, including the Harkis, Surchis, Baradustis, Jaf, and Pizhdar tribes, and followers of the late Shaykh Mahmoud, opposed the return of Mulla Mustafa Barzani and the *peshmerga* and their growing ties to the Qasim regime. These tribes also began to violently revolt against the new Iraqi government in objection to the 1959 Agrarian Reform Law. Although the tribal leaders tried negotiating with Qasim, their efforts were in vain. Once again, the *peshmerga*, supplemented by Iraqi military forces, were ordered to suppress dissent.

Peshmerga support for Qasim ceased to be reciprocated however, as Qasim began to grow fearful of Barzani’s growing political and military influence. After pardoning Baradost and Pizhdar rebels²⁷², Qasim began to supply these and other anti-Barzani tribes with weapons and support throughout 1959 and 1960²⁷³. Barzani became aware of this attempt to undermine his power after several of his tribesmen intercepted Iraqi logistic trucks on their way to the Zibari tribe. These trucks were stocked with rifles and automatic weapons and included a letter by an Iraqi military officer.²⁷⁴ Although Qasim denied supporting anti-Barzani tribes, relations had permanently deteriorated between him and Barzani.

As tension continued to grow between Qasim and Kurdish political, tribal, and military leaders throughout 1960, Mustafa Barzani attempted to garner support for an inevitable conflict.

²⁶⁸ Jwaideh, pg 824.

²⁶⁹ Izady, pg 67.

²⁷⁰ Jawad, pg 38.

²⁷¹ Iraq Demotes Arif, Enemy of the West, New York Times, 1 October 1958.

²⁷² McDowall, pgs 307-310.

²⁷³ O’Ballance, pg 39.

²⁷⁴ Schmidt, pg 75.

During a visit to Moscow in November 1960, for example, he spoke with “high-level” Soviet officials, including Nikita Khrushchev, and asked for Soviet aid. Although military support was not promised, the Soviets pledged to support the Kurdish Democratic Party²⁷⁵ and continued broadcasting propaganda to the Iranian Kurds²⁷⁶. Barzani left the Soviet Union a “bitter and disillusioned man”²⁷⁷, unhappy with the meager support.

The *peshmerga* returned to action upon Barzani’s return to Barzan in 1961. Barzani quickly used his men to take advantage of the tribal disunity in northern Iraq. Although hesitant to attack government troops, *peshmerga* forces were ordered to seize strategic passes and bridges and defeat tribes unfriendly to the Barzanis.²⁷⁸ By the end of 1961, Barzani was able to control most of Iraqi Kurdistan.²⁷⁹

The Qasim regime, disappointed with Barzani’s growing power, used a strike on Iraqi forces by Shaykh Abbas Muhammad’s tribal Arkou fighters to justify air strikes throughout Iraqi Kurdistan, including Barzan.²⁸⁰ These strikes only solidified Kurdish resolve, unifying the tribes and bringing Mulla Mustafa Barzani officially into the conflict. According to McDowall, Qasim had “brought together two distinct Kurdish tribal groups, the old reactionary chiefs ... and Mulla Mustafa whose agenda was a blend of tribalism and nationalism”.²⁸¹

The Kurdish-Iraqi War (1961-1970)

As he joined the still-tribal rebellion against the Iraqi government, Mulla Mustafa Barzani began to consolidate his forces and provide a system of organization to supplement his already established *peshmerga*. Under Barzani’s lead, non-Barzani tribal forces were used as irregulars and instructed to conduct guerrilla attacks on Iraqi military positions.²⁸² Barzani’s involvement and the recognition of the rebellion also led to the defection of thousands of Iraqi

²⁷⁵ Barzani, pg 231.

²⁷⁶ Iraq is Troubled by Kurdish Tribe, New York Times, 27 December 1960.

²⁷⁷ O’Ballance, pg 41.

²⁷⁸ Ibid, pg 47.

²⁷⁹ McDowall, pg 310.

²⁸⁰ O’Ballance, pg 47.

²⁸¹ McDowall, pg 310.

²⁸² Ibid, pg 310. See also Appendix B: Maps map 5 for a depiction of the major battles of the Kurdish-Iraqi War.

soldiers, including officers.²⁸³ These Kurdish soldiers, who comprised as much as one-third of the Iraqi military²⁸⁴, increased the professionalism and organization of the *peshmerga*.

By fall 1962, after nearly a year of conflict, Barzani had nearly 15 to 20,000 troops at his command, including the 4 to 5,000 original *peshmerga*. Among his other forces was a rotating reserve of 5 to 15,000 soldiers serving in six-month rotations and 10 to 20,000 local reserves serving as home guards or “territorials”.²⁸⁵ Barzani divided the *peshmerga* into groups of 10 (*dasta*), 50 (*pal*), 150 (*surpal*), 350 (*lek*), and 1,000 (*surlek*). With many new recruits and the deaths of several long-time *peshmerga* veterans such as Mohammad Amin Mirkhan and Shaikhomer Shandari²⁸⁶, Barzani was forced to make numerous leadership decisions. Appointments were made in regards to rank, with fighters becoming officers, non-commissioned officers, and privates. Among the officers, Barzani appointed Assad Hoshewi commander of the northwest sector, responsible for nearly one-third of the Kurdish force. Other command appointments included tribal leaders Abbas Mamand Agha and Shaykh Hossein Boskani.²⁸⁷

In order to engage the Iraqi forces, the *peshmerga* and the other miscellaneous Kurdish fighters armed themselves with Lee-Enfield bolt-action rifles, old bolt-action German rifles, Czech-made Brno rifles,²⁸⁸ Soviet Semenov semi-automatic rifles²⁸⁹, and Soviet Glashinkov machine guns. Numerous arms captured from Iraqi forces were also used, including the Degtyarov machine gun.²⁹⁰ Other weapons purchased from arms bazaars in the region were smuggled into Iraq by Syrian, Iranian, or Lebanese Kurdish benefactors.²⁹¹ Unfortunately for the *peshmerga*, lack of ammunition and defective rounds were a problem for their most often used weapon, the aforementioned Brno.²⁹² Although Pollard claims Kurdish marksmanship was poor overall²⁹³, *peshmerga* veterans are quick to proclaim their marksmanship prowess during battle²⁹⁴.

²⁸³ Schmidt, pg 61.

²⁸⁴ 100 Towns Reported Destroyed In Kurds' Revolt Against Kassim. New York Times, 24 Apr 1962.

²⁸⁵ Schmidt, pg 62.

²⁸⁶ Barzani, pg 359.

²⁸⁷ Ibid, pgs 59-62.

²⁸⁸ Tucker, pg 5.

²⁸⁹ See Appendix A: Weapons of the Kurdish Forces.

²⁹⁰ See Appendix A: Weapons of the Kurdish Forces.

²⁹¹ O'Ballance, pg 55.

²⁹² Schmidt, pg 63/ Tucker, pg 5.

²⁹³ Pollard, pg 161.

²⁹⁴ Tucker, pg 4, 16.

Logistics were also an obstacle for the *peshmerga* despite rules limiting distracting non-essentials from the fighting corps. Although only items necessary for the upkeep of soldiers were allowed to be carried, supplying this material proved to be difficult. As combat increased, the *peshmerga* established supply points in caves throughout the region where items such as sugar, cheese, grain, rice, and excess weaponry were often available. Supporting peasantry were also encouraged to set aside 10 percent of their produce for the cause as *peshmerga* carried little to no money.²⁹⁵ Outside sources, such as sympathetic Kurds from Iran and Turkey also contributed supplies to the rebellion.²⁹⁶ By the end of the war, Iran supported the Kurdish cause with heavy weaponry²⁹⁷ and Israel sent numerous Israeli commandos who not only fought alongside the *peshmerga*, but also offered “very good advice”²⁹⁸ – including setting up a communications network and training the *peshmerga* in sabotage and demolitions²⁹⁹. The U.S., through its clandestine agencies, also allegedly supported the *peshmerga*.³⁰⁰

Despite their ample supply, the *peshmerga* faced numerous challenges moving and carrying items. Although they had unimpeded access to major roads at night and secondary routes during the day³⁰¹, tactical mobility dictated the *peshmerga* move much of their logistics via man or donkey³⁰² – neither of which carried mass quantities. Many *peshmerga* were forced to maximize the little they had, incorporating homemade bombs and explosives into their arsenals.³⁰³

Besides weapons and food, the *peshmerga* considered captured Iraqi military radios among their most coveted supplies. With numerous former Iraqi soldiers among the ranks, the *peshmerga* were able to decipher many Iraqi transmissions and provide key intelligence for Kurdish operations.³⁰⁴ Operational decisions using this intelligence were made by *peshmerga* commanders, including Mustafa Barzani, stationed in highly-mobile, makeshift command centers. Schmidt describes one “headquarters” as “a blanket under a tree above a mountain torrent” with rifles hanging from tree branches and “a canvas bag, apparently containing some

²⁹⁵ Schmidt, pg 64.

²⁹⁶ Pollard, pg 158.

²⁹⁷ McDowall, pg 320.

²⁹⁸ Tucker, pg 39.

²⁹⁹ Larteguy, pg 92.

³⁰⁰ McDowall, pg 326.

³⁰¹ Pollard, pg 159.

³⁰² O’Ballance, pg 55.

³⁰³ Tucker, pg 16.

³⁰⁴ Schmidt, pg 64.

papers, hung from another branch”.³⁰⁵ Despite their stolen information and impressive guerrilla tactics, this lack of command and control limited head-on *peshmerga* offensives and prohibited operations consisting of more than one sar pel (150-250 troops).³⁰⁶

After realizing conflict was inevitable and exhausting all avenues of political reconciliation, the KDP finally joined the rebellion in December 1961. KDP leadership quickly established a triangular area of command from Raniya in the north, Sulaymaniya in the southeast and Kirkuk in the southwest. This area was divided into four sectors with separate commanders appointed to each, although Mustafa Barzani was still regarded as the “senior and presiding Kurdish leader”.³⁰⁷ Among the leaders of the KDP military were party secretary Ibrahim Ahmad, commander of the Malouma Force; Jalal Talabani, commander of the Rizgari Force; Omar Mustafa, commander of the Kawa Force; Ali Askari, commander of the Khabat Force; and Kamal Mufti, commander of the Third and Fourth Forces of Qaradagh.³⁰⁸

KDP forces varied little from the northern Barzani-led *peshmerga*. Although even the smallest unit of the new “Kurdish Liberation Army” was assigned a political instructor³⁰⁹, a majority of the fighting forces came from regional tribes³¹⁰ and not Kurds from urban areas. Like Barzani’s forces, these troops were also assisted in organization and tactics by deserting Iraqi officers.³¹¹ Using this support, the KDP was eventually able to create five battalions and a military “academy” led by a former commander of King Faysal’s Royal Guard.³¹²

Despite mention of the *peshmerga* fifteen years earlier, O’Ballance, Jawad, Pollard, and McDowall state this KDP-created force was the first to be labeled “*peshmerga*”.³¹³ Similar to the armed forces of the Mahabad Republic, this *peshmerga* force was also willing to face death for the idea of a recognized Kurdistan. In the ranks of Talabani and Ahmad the leadership of the Kurdish Liberation Army became known as “sar merga” – “leading death”.³¹⁴

³⁰⁵ Ibid, pg 59.

³⁰⁶ Pollard, pg 161.

³⁰⁷ Kinnane, pg 69.

³⁰⁸ Stansfield, pg 71.

³⁰⁹ Kinnane, pg 69.

³¹⁰ McDowall, pg 311.

³¹¹ Pollard, pg 159.

³¹² Kinnane, pg 81.

³¹³ O’Ballance, pg 54/ Jawad, pg 82/ Pollard, pg 159/ McDowall, pg 311.

³¹⁴ O’Ballance, pg 54.

Initially only 20 Iraqi battalions and six mobile police units opposed the growing Kurdish rebellion.³¹⁵ By 1963, nearly 3/4 of the Iraqi army was engaged in combat operations.³¹⁶ Unlike the *peshmerga*, these troops were reinforced by heavy weaponry, armor and various types of Soviet-made air support.³¹⁷ The Iraqis were also supported by the *jash*.³¹⁸ As they did in earlier conflicts with the Barzanis, the Iraqi government recruited numerous Kurds to fight for the government. Although many were from tribes staunch in their hatred for the Barzanis, some *jash* were unemployed Kurds seeking payment through any means.³¹⁹ Many of the tribal *jash* were placed under the command of their respective tribal leadership³²⁰ although a select few were assigned to “The Saladin Cavalry” – a new Kurdish mercenary force³²¹. At its peak, the Iraqi military employed nearly 10,000 *jash*. This number decreased however, as the impartial Kurds grew tired of fighting their fellow people.³²²

With their limited supply and smaller numbers the *peshmerga* were forced to use non-conventional tactics such as roadblocks, ambushes³²³, sniper attacks³²⁴, and other tactics designed to “starve out” the government’s soldiers³²⁵. Unlike earlier Iraqi Kurdistan conflicts, the use of cavalry was limited, if not nonexistent. *Peshmerga* strategy was primarily infantry-based and focused on the need for endurance, speed, movement by night, and deception³²⁶ – skills advantageous in the mountainous Kurdish homeland.

By 1963, the numerous battles and skirmishes between both the Barzani and KDP-led *peshmerga* and the Iraqi military had become a stalemate. The *peshmerga* kept control of Iraqi Kurdistan and the Qasim regime refused to grant Kurdish independence or autonomy. Qasim was eventually overthrown by pro-Arab Baathists led by Abd al Salaam Arif.³²⁷ Under Arif, the pattern of Iraqi assaults and *peshmerga* guerrilla counter-assaults lasted throughout the decade.

³¹⁵ Kurds Reported to Resist Attack. NY Times, 27 May 1962.

³¹⁶ Pollard, pg 158.

³¹⁷ Schmidt, pg 71.

³¹⁸ See pg 29 for a definition of the term *jash*.

³¹⁹ McDowall, pg 312.

³²⁰ O’Ballance, pg 57.

³²¹ Schmidt, pg 70.

³²² O’Ballance, pg 57.

³²³ Pollard, pg 158.

³²⁴ Schmidt, pg 67.

³²⁵ O’Ballance, pg 58.

³²⁶ Schmidt, pg 66.

³²⁷ McDowall, pg 312, 313.

Along with the ability to continue operations for nearly 10 years, the Kurdish-Iraqi War saw Kurdish women assist the *peshmerga* in ways not seen before. As members of the Kurdistan Women’s Federation assisted the war effort through clandestine means³²⁸, Margaret George, an Assyrian Kurd, led her own small *peshmerga* unit near Akra. A former hospital attendant, George decided to fight after *jash* forces attacked her village. After leading her unit for several years and killing a prominent *jash* officer, George left to tend to her father. According to Schmidt, she was removed from command after many *peshmerga* found her too impetuous to lead.³²⁹ After her death, George became a heroine to the Kurds – the “Joan of Arc of *peshmerga*”.³³⁰ Thousands of *peshmerga* carried a photo of her in remembrance.³³¹ George remains idolized among *peshmerga*, who describe her as “brilliant”, “valiant”, and a “great guerrilla fighter”.³³²

The 1960s conflict is one of the most important eras in *peshmerga* history, second only to the short-lived Mahabad Army. Kurdish soldiers again proved their skill in battle against an enemy far superior in numbers and equipment. Unlike earlier conflicts however, during the 1960s there was neither a retreat nor surrender. Because of the *peshmerga*, negotiation became the only Iraqi means to victory.

Although *peshmerga* forces saw action in Mahabad, their force structure was unlike that of any earlier Kurdish army. As the conflict progressed from tribal-based revolts to a full-out war, three distinct Kurdish militaries developed. While some tribes maintained their traditional tribal fighting corps, the other entities, the KDP and the Barzanis, featured their own *peshmerga* forces. Each of these “militaries” were successful in controlling their own region – the tribes in the northwest, central Iraqi Kurdistan led by Barzani, and the southern forces under the command of the Ahmad/Talabani-led KDP.³³³

Like the military “boundaries” separating these fronts, these three commands were also divided along the spectrum of Kurdish political ideology. Whereas the tribal groups still fought their ongoing battle against government control, the KDP *peshmerga* force was the first Kurdish army in Iraq with entirely nationalist objectives. Located in the center both geographically and

³²⁸ Mojab, pg 9.

³²⁹ Schmidt, pgs 135, 160.

³³⁰ Tucker, pg 38.

³³¹ Schmidt, pg 135.

³³² Tucker, pg 38.

³³³ Schmidt, pg 61.

ideologically was Mustafa Barzani and his *peshmerga*, who fought for an independent Kurdistan, albeit one governed by Barzani tribal leadership.

The fighting tactics of the *peshmerga* were also a mix of old and new styles. Although the use of cavalry vanished into “the romantic past”³³⁴, the *peshmerga* employed many of the guerrilla strategies of earlier conflicts. Hiding weapons depots in the mountains, for example, was seen frequently during the 1925 Shaykh Said Revolt. Other traditional strategies included using the mountains for supply points, sniper positions, and staging areas. By applying these proven courses of action and utilizing modern ideas such as military organization and rank structure, the *peshmerga* were able to become a more effective guerrilla force.

The growing ability of the *peshmerga* was not lost on the Iraqi government. During several rounds of cease-fire negotiations, the Iraqi government frequently called for the disbandment of the *peshmerga* prior to the granting of autonomy.³³⁵ Barzani believed dismissing the military force was “putting the cart before the horse”, knowing the *peshmerga* presence was essential to the Kurdish cause and could not be disbanded before the Kurdish people achieved their goals and objectives.³³⁶

Beyond their organization, tactics, and importance, the most dramatic evolution of the *peshmerga* during the 1960s was its expansion. No longer was the title of Kurdish soldier confined to the followers of Mustafa Barzani. The decision by the KDP to label their fighters “*peshmerga*” not only increased the size of the force, but also instilled a growing level of pride in membership. To be called a Kurdish soldier became a testament of those willing to face death for Kurdistan. Unfortunately, the ideological rift between the Ahmad/Talabani faction and Mustafa Barzani would also grow, forcing the *peshmerga* to choose what type of Kurdistan they were willing to die for.

***Peshmerga* and the Barzani-Talabani/Ahmed Split**

The period of growing division between Mustafa Barzani and Kurdish intellectuals Ibrahim Ahmad and Jalal Talabani, like the rise of the Barzani tribe, is important to both *peshmerga* history and the overall history of Kurdish nationalism. Knowing the lessons learned

³³⁴ Ibid, pg 66.

³³⁵ Ibid, pg 287.

³³⁶ Jawad, pg 178.

by generations of Kurds – that only an organized military could lead to victory – both Barzani and the Ahmad/Talabani faction realized whomever controlled the *peshmerga* controlled the future of the Kurdish struggle.

Ideologically as well as geographically, much of the division between Barzani and Ahmad/Talabani occurred between the interests of northern tribes and southern intellectuals. These southern intellectuals were ideologically more liberal than the traditional conservative tribes.³³⁷ Many, including Ahmad, embraced socialist/communist ideas and led the KDP to a leftist platform. Having refused the ideals of communism during his exile in the USSR, Barzani again declined endorsing Marxist philosophy.³³⁸

Aware of Barzani's prominence among Kurds, the KDP appointed Barzani "honorary president" while he was still in exile. The KDP regarded Barzani as the supreme Kurdish commander and the epitome of the movement. After his return to Iraq in 1958, Barzani's attempts to overreach the authority of his position irritated Ahmad and eventually Talabani.³³⁹ Mounting rifts between the leaders occurred during the numerous Kurdish-Iraq ceasefire negotiations as Barzani emphasized his own goals over those of the KDP. Barzani believed the short-lived ceasefire between February and June of 1963, for example, was a "historical moment for a real settlement". Talabani, on the other hand, opposed the ceasefire, claiming the Arif regime was not trustworthy and Kurdish forces were still in a position to further advance the cause.³⁴⁰ A similar disagreement occurred prior to a 1964 ceasefire as Barzani negotiated directly with President Arif, ignoring the KDP political body completely.³⁴¹

As a result of these agreements with the Arif regime and Barzani's growing political strength, Ahmad grew to resent Barzani, claiming all Barzani orders should be ignored by the *peshmerga* because Barzani had "exceeded his competence as president".³⁴² Despite Ahmad's claims, *peshmerga* loyalty remained with Barzani. Barzani used his loyal military to force Ahmad, Talabani, and 4,000 of their *peshmerga* into Iran in July 1964.³⁴³ Talabani and his

³³⁷ Gunter, pg 228.

³³⁸ Jawad, pg 160.

³³⁹ Izady, pg 212.

³⁴⁰ Schmidt, pg 288, 289.

³⁴¹ Gunter, pg 228.

³⁴² Jawad, pg 168.

³⁴³ Ibid, pg 172.

peshmerga, although still at odds with Barzani leadership, returned to Iraq after the resumption of the conflict in 1965³⁴⁴, hoping to contribute to the overall cause of Kurdish autonomy.

Unable to reconcile their differences and still attempting to fight the war, both Talabani and Barzani vied for the favor of the revolving Iraqi government. Barzani, once he consolidated his KDP power, became the lead for negotiations with the Arif government, refusing to send *peshmerga* against Israel in 1967. The rise of the Baath party in 1968 led to the rise of Talabani as the Kurdish figurehead as all allies of the Arif regime were removed.³⁴⁵ During each faction's time of favor with Baghdad, their respective *peshmerga* were protected by Iraqi forces and openly attacked the opposite faction.³⁴⁶

Even with Baathist support, the Ahmad-Talabani KDP was unable to defeat Barzani and his *peshmerga*.³⁴⁷ In late 1969, the Baath party began to negotiate with Barzani in an attempt to finally end the decade-long conflict. As Saddam Husayn, Baath Party Deputy Chairman of the Regional Command, met with Barzani in Kurdistan, Ahmad and Talabani were left with little choice but to return under Barzani's leadership.³⁴⁸

The future of the *peshmerga* was a key point in the peace settlements. The Iraqi government, knowing they could not convince Barzani to disband his military, agreed to institute "The Frontier Militia Force"³⁴⁹ composed primarily of *peshmerga* veterans³⁵⁰. Comparable to Ottoman garrisons generations earlier, this frontier guard was to "protect the safety of the frontiers of the Republic of Iraq".³⁵¹ Although Barzani hoped for 10,000 *peshmerga* to remain active, the Baath party allowed only 6,000.³⁵² Nearly 8,000 of the deactivated *peshmerga* received monthly payments and many families of deceased *peshmerga* were given housing³⁵³ as the government attempted to integrate them into the new Arab-Kurdish society. As a result of the 1970 accord and Ahmad and Talabani's return, Barzani's prominence as the Kurdish supreme leader was further cemented. Despite the potential for peace, patterns of distrust and broken promises would reemerge.

³⁴⁴ Ibid, pg 179.

³⁴⁵ Gunter, pg 228.

³⁴⁶ Jawad, pg 210/ Gunter, pg 228.

³⁴⁷ O'Ballance, pgs 88, 89.

³⁴⁸ Gunter, pg 229.

³⁴⁹ Ministry of Information, pg 139.

³⁵⁰ Jawad, pg 261.

³⁵¹ Ministry of Information, pg 139.

³⁵² Jawad, pg 261.

³⁵³ Ministry of Information, pgs 147,135.

The Second Kurdish-Iraqi War (1974-1975)

Although armed conflict was minimal from 1970 to 1974, tension between the Iraqi government and the Kurds continued unabated. Additional Kurdish political demands and an attempt on Mustafa Barzani's life³⁵⁴ served to drastically increase hostility. By 1973, Kurdish discouragement was solidified as reports circulated that the Iraqi military received supplies of "poison gas" from the Soviet Union.³⁵⁵ The Kurdish leadership again saw the *peshmerga* as their only recourse for recognition.

Even the *peshmerga* were not immune to the growing rift between the Iraqi government and the Kurdish leadership. Shortly after its inception, conflict emerged over the duties and command structure of the *peshmerga* border guard. Whereas the Baath party wanted the force under the command of the national army so as to attack Iran and assist in the 1973 Arab-Israeli War, Barzani and the KDP insisted the border guard be placed under the orders of the minister of the interior. The Iraqi government also claimed the Kurds granted over 120,000 individuals paperwork identifying them as *peshmerga* and exempting them from government conscription. The harshest accusations against the *peshmerga* were charges of murder, kidnappings, rape, assault, and robberies similar to those levied against the Hamidiya Cavalry nearly 70 years earlier.³⁵⁶

Barzani, knowing conflict was forthcoming, consolidated the *peshmerga* and continued to recruit throughout the early 1970s. By spring 1974, nearly 50-60,000 *peshmerga* were enrolled in Barzani's ranks.³⁵⁷ International support also continued as Iran and Israel gave supplies and weapons, attempting to weaken the Arab nationalist regime of Ahmad al Bakr.³⁵⁸ The United States also assisted the *peshmerga* more openly during the early 1970s, supplying money and weapons through the CIA, countering Iraq's ties with the Soviet Union.³⁵⁹ These alliances quickly drew the ire of the Baath regime.³⁶⁰

³⁵⁴ McDowall, pg 332.

³⁵⁵ Kurdish Representative's Call on State Department. U.S. Department of State, Memorandum of Conversation, 5 Sept 1973.

³⁵⁶ Ghareeb, pgs 109, 122, 124, 125.

³⁵⁷ Pollard, pg 176.

³⁵⁸ McDowall, pg 330, 331.

³⁵⁹ Jawad, pg 312.

³⁶⁰ McDowall, pg 331.

With his *peshmerga* larger and better equipped than ever before, Barzani, on the advice of foreign advisors (possibly Israeli, Iranian, or American)³⁶¹, drastically reorganized his force. Earlier guerrilla tactics were abandoned and the *peshmerga* were re-assigned into completely conventional units. Believing international military support would continue throughout the conflict³⁶², Barzani ordered these units to face the Iraqi enemy head-on³⁶³.

Peshmerga units began offensive operations by seizing the town of Zakhu and the surrounding Turkish frontier area after Barzani decided against further diplomacy, rejecting the Iraqi government's proposed Autonomy Law of 1974.³⁶⁴ According to McDowall, Barzani's strategy was two-fold: "to hold the mountainous country along a line from Zakhu to Darbandikan" and "to hold the Kirkuk oilfield in artillery range".³⁶⁵ Although the *peshmerga* lacked modern heavy weaponry, they were able to supplement their own weaponry with American-style mortars and 122mm guns³⁶⁶ and Soviet-made AK-47s and RPG-7s³⁶⁷. The *peshmerga* also received support from every aspect of the Kurdish society, as animosity towards the Iraqi government permeated through both urban and tribal Kurds.³⁶⁸

The Iraqi army counterattacked in April 1974. Their strategy was also two-fold, first reinforcing their overwhelmed Iraqi Kurdistan units and second, changing to the offensive, attempting to finally eliminate the *peshmerga* threat. As the Iraqis attacked deep into Kurdistan, Barzani's order to abandon guerrilla tactics and confront the Iraqi army head-on resulted in catastrophe. Although the *peshmerga* may have downed over 100 Iraqi planes and destroyed over 150 tanks³⁶⁹, they lacked the firepower of the Iraqis. According to Pollard, the overmatched *peshmerga* units "stood, fought, and were blown to bits".³⁷⁰

Realizing they could no longer control the cities, the remaining *peshmerga* fled to the mountains.³⁷¹ From their more accustomed concealed positions, the *peshmerga* were able to

³⁶¹ Ghareeb, pg 162, 163.

³⁶² Ibid, pg 335.

³⁶³ Pollard, pg 179.

³⁶⁴ O'Ballance, pg 95.

³⁶⁵ McDowall, pg 337.

³⁶⁶ O'Ballance, pg 93.

³⁶⁷ Many of these Soviet arms were seized by the *peshmerga* from Iraqi soldiers and weapons points. (Tucker, pg 5). See Appendix A: Weapons of the Kurdish Forces.

³⁶⁸ O'Ballance, pg 95

³⁶⁹ Iraqi Forces Seize Most Kurdish Towns. New York Times, 27 Sept 1974.

³⁷⁰ Pollard, pg 179.

³⁷¹ O'Ballance, pg 96

decrease their losses and engage the advancing Iraqi forces from hidden sniper positions.³⁷² These tactics allowed the Kurdish military to claim a kill ratio of 20 to 30 Iraqi soldiers killed for each *peshmerga* death.³⁷³ During the Battle of Khaladizy, for example, *peshmerga* were able to prevent the Iraqi army from seizing the high ground near Sulaymaniya by accompanying their mortar attacks with hidden sniper fire. The *peshmerga* did not surrender their ground despite taking many casualties due to continuous Iraqi air attacks on their positions.³⁷⁴ The success of the Battle of Khaladizy was one of the few bright spots for the *peshmerga* during the war. With their losses mounting, their supply lines captured, and the Iraqis maintaining their positions throughout the winter of 1974³⁷⁵, Kurdish hopes for victory were crushed. The final blow to the *peshmerga* forces came via the Algiers Accord, signed between Iran and Iraq in March 1975.

In an attempt to stop one of the *peshmerga*'s primary benefactors, Saddam Husayn met with the Iranian Shah during an OPEC summit in Algiers, Algeria.³⁷⁶ By conceding part of the Shatt al Arab waterway and limiting support for Iranian opposition groups, the Iraqi government received assurance that the border between the two nations would close³⁷⁷ and security in the area would become tighter³⁷⁸, thereby ending Iranian infiltration and Kurdish support³⁷⁹. Once the agreement was announced, Iranian artillery and other firepower quickly marched back into Iranian territory³⁸⁰, leaving the already-battered *peshmerga* nearly defenseless.

With the termination of Iranian support, the allies of Iran also stopped supporting the Kurdish cause. In what many *peshmerga* veterans refer to as "Kissinger's Betrayal"³⁸¹, the U.S. government ceased providing military and financial aid to the *peshmerga*.³⁸² Despite their pleas, the Kurdish leadership discovered the American objective was only to weaken Iraq and prevent an attack on Iran – not to assist in achieving Kurdish autonomy.³⁸³ *Peshmerga* fantasies of

³⁷² Tucker, pg 30.

³⁷³ [Iran Lists Costs of Aiding Kurds Who Fled Iraq](#). New York Times, 12 Jan 1975.

³⁷⁴ Tucker, pg 30.

³⁷⁵ Pollard, pg 179.

³⁷⁶ [Iran and Iraq Sign Accord to Settle Border Conflicts](#). New York Times, 7 Mar 1975.

³⁷⁷ [Iraqis Reported Attacking Kurds](#). New York Times, 10 Mar 1975.

³⁷⁸ McDowall, pg 338.

³⁷⁹ New York Times, 7 Mar 1975.

³⁸⁰ Pollard, pg 180.

³⁸¹ Tucker, pg 26. (Kissinger refers to then-U.S. Secretary of State Henry Kissinger.)

³⁸² Safire, William. [Son of 'Secret Sellout'](#). 11 Feb 1976.

³⁸³ Blum, pg 145.

American tanks and airplanes³⁸⁴ disappeared as they once again considered themselves “abandoned” by a military superpower.³⁸⁵

Seeking to gain the upper hand, Iraqi forces attacked *peshmerga* positions the day after the Algiers Accord was signed.³⁸⁶ Several Iraqi divisions advanced on the remnants of the Kurdish Army as Iraqi airplanes continued to bomb select locations, including Mustafa Barzani’s Galalah headquarters.³⁸⁷ Hundreds of Kurds, both *peshmerga* and civilians, were killed as Iraqi forces seized previous *peshmerga* strongholds at Mount Zozuk, Mount Sertiz, and Mount Handran.³⁸⁸ The indiscriminate Iraqi assault, lack of foreign assistance, and dwindling supplies and ammunition³⁸⁹ caused over 200,000 Kurds to flee to Iran³⁹⁰, including 30,000 *peshmerga*³⁹¹. Many remaining *peshmerga* gave up their weapons and surrendered to the Iraqi forces while others possibly hid their weapons, hoping to continue the fight.³⁹²

Overall, the Kurdish-Iraqi War of 1974-75 nearly destroyed the *peshmerga*’s fighting ability and with it the entire Kurdish cause. Fearing reprisals, the KDP leadership fled to Iran in March 1975; upon their return to Iraq months later they found strict controls on their activities.³⁹³ Barzani also fled Iraq and would not return until after his death in 1979.³⁹⁴ The surviving *peshmerga* were either forced underground or ordered to live in settlements where they were unable to carry their rifles.³⁹⁵ Kurdish culture was increasingly marginalized as the uncontested Baath party tightened its grip on Iraq. Once proud *peshmerga* veterans could only watch as thousands of Kurds were relocated, villages were destroyed, and millions were forcefully integrated into Iraqi society.³⁹⁶ After over 40 years of fighting, most for the cause of Kurdish nationalism, Mustafa Barzani’s last military operation was perhaps his greatest failure.

³⁸⁴ Saleem, pgs 40, 41.

³⁸⁵ The first time being by the Soviet Union in 1947 in Mahabad.

³⁸⁶ Pollard, pg 180.

³⁸⁷ NY Times, 10 Mar 1975.

³⁸⁸ Pace, Eric. Kurdish Setback in Iraq Reported. NY Times, 11 Mar 1975.

³⁸⁹ Pace, Eric. Iraqi Kurds Face Arms Shortages. NY Times, 13 Mar 1975.

³⁹⁰ For a first hand account of the Kurdish exodus out of Iraq, see Saleem pgs 50-52.

³⁹¹ Pollard, pg 180.

³⁹² Neumann, Ronald E. Iraqi Kurds in Iran: Situation of Request. U.S. Espionage Den. V 31:49-54.

³⁹³ O’Ballance, pg 98, 102.

³⁹⁴ Ghareeb, pg 174.

³⁹⁵ O’Ballance, pg 100.

³⁹⁶ McDowall, pg 340.

Creation of the PUK (1975-1979)

The exodus of the KDP leadership and failing health of Mustafa Barzani created a “power vacuum” in Iraqi Kurdistan. Loyal KDP members saw leadership pass to Barzani’s sons Idris and Masud.³⁹⁷ Although dissention began in the 1960s, without Mustafa Barzani’s unifying presence those unhappy with the direction of the KDP began to create their own organizations. Among these splinter groups was the Patriotic Union of Kurdistan (PUK). Formed in Damascus in July 1975³⁹⁸ and led by Jalal Talabani, the PUK combined Talabani’s loyal ex-KDP followers³⁹⁹ with left-wing organizations Iraqi Komala and the Socialist Movement of Kurdistan⁴⁰⁰.

Among the leadership of the PUK was distinguished *peshmerga* commander Ali Askari. Askari, while exiled in Nasiriya⁴⁰¹, was appointed commander of PUK military operations⁴⁰². This emerging PUK force consisted of Talabani’s loyal *peshmerga* and the Komala militia, a small force dedicated to continuing the revolution.⁴⁰³ Although not yet organized, numerous anti-government raids were conducted in the name of the PUK beginning in the summer of 1975 and continuing throughout 1976.⁴⁰⁴ These raids were looked at disapprovingly by the exiled Mustafa Barzani, who claimed his *peshmerga* would fight Askari’s force if “he chose to take up arms against the GOI (Government of Iraq)”.⁴⁰⁵

Organization of the PUK *peshmerga* occurred in 1977 when Talabani returned to Iraq from his exile in Damascus. After setting up headquarters in Nawkan, on the Iranian side of Iraqi Kurdistan and in Qandil, in Iraqi Kurdistan, Talabani divided his *peshmerga* into harams (regiments) and stationed one haram in each district of Iraqi Kurdistan. PUK operations within each district depended on its control by Iraqi forces. If there was a weak Iraqi presence a permanent *peshmerga* base would be established, a strong presence, on the other hand, dictated secretive mobile PUK operations, most of which occurred at night.

³⁹⁷ Ibid, pg 343.

³⁹⁸ Facts on File, 2 Aug 1975.

³⁹⁹ Izady, pg 214.

⁴⁰⁰ McDowall, pg 343.

⁴⁰¹ Stansfield, pg 83.

⁴⁰² O’Ballance, pg 103.

⁴⁰³ Stansfield, pg 83.

⁴⁰⁴ Ghareeb, pg 182.

⁴⁰⁵ Stansfield, pg 84.

The umbrella-like structure of the PUK and its growing *peshmerga* organization caused further dissent with the KDP, who had “little else but a belief in the figure of Barzani and the strength of a certain few tribes”.⁴⁰⁶ Minor clashes between the *peshmerga* of the KDP and the PUK occurred in July 1976, January 1977, and February 1977. Never before had *peshmerga* turned their weapons on fellow Kurds, especially those who had a common enemy in the Iraqi regime. These conflicts would continue unabated throughout the late 1970s.

Perhaps the earliest major clash between KDP and PUK *peshmerga* occurred in the Baradust area in April 1978 and resulted in the death of PUK commander Ali Askari. Sent by Talabani to pick up an arms supply in Turkish Kurdistan, Askari and his 800-man force were attacked by a KDP *peshmerga* unit led by Sami Abd al Rahman. Although Askari advocated military cooperation between the KDP and the PUK against the Baath regime, his *peshmerga* were no match for the 7,500-man KDP force⁴⁰⁷, many of whom were more knowledgeable of the terrain.⁴⁰⁸ Askari’s *peshmerga* also suffered from numerous attacks from Iraqi and Iranian air attacks prior to engaging Abd al Rahman’s *peshmerga*. Approximately 700 PUK *peshmerga* were killed in the fighting, including Askari. The heavy losses caused many *peshmerga* to abandon the PUK in search for stronger, more effective leadership.⁴⁰⁹

The KDP *peshmerga* also suffered the death of key leaders in the late 1970s. The first of these was the passing of longtime *peshmerga* commander As’ad Khoshavi in May 1978. Khoshavi, the young brother of legendary *peshmerga* Khalil Khoshavi⁴¹⁰, had led *peshmerga* forces since before the creation of the Mahabad Army. As’ad Khoshavi eventually rose to the rank of corps commander under Mustafa Barzani.⁴¹¹

The second and most significant loss to the KDP and all of Kurdistan was the death of Mulla Mustafa Barzani. After fleeing Iraq and entering Iran in 1975, Barzani traveled to the U.S. in 1976 to receive treatment for lung cancer.⁴¹² He died on 2 March 1979 in a Washington, D.C. hospital. After his death, Barzani’s body was brought to Ushnavia in Iranian Kurdistan where his grave was quickly desecrated. The vandalism forced the Barzani family to move the casket

⁴⁰⁶ Ibid, pg 85.

⁴⁰⁷ McDowall, pg 344, 345.

⁴⁰⁸ Gunter, pg 230.

⁴⁰⁹ Stansfield, pgs 87-89.

⁴¹⁰ See the 1946 Battle of Mamashah – pg 38.

⁴¹¹ Barzani, pg 360.

⁴¹² Ghareeb, pg 181.

to Barzan.⁴¹³ A large funeral procession marked the return of Barzani⁴¹⁴, creator of the first organized *peshmerga* force and perhaps the most significant Kurdish leader of the 20th century.

The Iran-Iraq War (1980-1988)

Shortly after Mustafa Barzani's death, his two main adversaries, Iraqi President al-Badr and Iranian Shah Muhammad Reza Pahlavi, were removed from power and replaced by Saddam Husayn and Ayatollah Khomeini, respectively. The KDP, knowing Husayn was unlikely to grant Kurdish autonomy, quickly allied its *peshmerga* with the ayatollah. Having returned to Iraqi Kurdistan in 1979, Masud Barzani organized a force of 5,000 men and placed them at the service of Tehran.⁴¹⁵ The PUK was less supportive, however, as their left-wing ideology contrasted with the governing doctrine of the Islamic Republic.⁴¹⁶

The politics of the region became more complex on 22 September 1980 when Iraqi military forces began their assault on Iran.⁴¹⁷ True to their alliance, the KDP *peshmerga* began assaulting the anti-government Iranian Kurdish Democratic Party (KDPI).⁴¹⁸ For Masud Barzani, overthrow of the Husayn regime was more important than a pan-Kurdish alliance with the KDPI.⁴¹⁹ Talabani and the PUK, believing conflict among Kurds was detrimental to the overall cause, opposed Barzani and the KDP both politically and militarily. The two parties' *peshmerga* began attacking each other and lobbied for Kurdish popular support.⁴²⁰ Well-practiced in guerrilla warfare, neither *peshmerga* force attempted to engage the other head-on, instead opting for ambushes⁴²¹ and other hit-and-run attacks. Both sides also used their international allies to their advantage as the KDP remained close with Iran and the PUK received supplies from Syria and Libya.

While again splitting Iraqi Kurdistan into north and south regions as they had during the 1960s war, both party's *peshmerga* continued to fight the international war. After agreeing to

⁴¹³ O'Ballance, pg 115.

⁴¹⁴ Tucker, pg 6.

⁴¹⁵ Ghareeb, pg 184.

⁴¹⁶ Stansfield, pg 90.

⁴¹⁷ Pollard, pg 184.

⁴¹⁸ McDowall, pg 346.

⁴¹⁹ Ghareeb, pg 185.

⁴²⁰ Clash between Kurdish Groups. BBC Summary of World Broadcasts, 21 Aug 1981/ PUK Statement. BBC Summary of World Broadcasts, 20 Nov 1981.

⁴²¹ BBC Summary of World Broadcasts, 21 Aug 1981.

allow for the free movement of supplies throughout Kurdistan⁴²², *peshmerga* of both parties were able to inflict losses on military forces in the area⁴²³ and hold key terrain⁴²⁴. These temporary agreements culminated with a joint KDP-PUK operation in Sulaymaniya in August 1982.⁴²⁵ As in earlier conflicts, the *peshmerga* seized weapons and supplies from their defeated foes. Among the spoils were medicines, vehicles, RPGs and other heavy weaponry, and two tanks.⁴²⁶ Unlike prior wars, *peshmerga* forces added political kidnapping to their repertoire in order to gain international support and demand regional concessions.⁴²⁷

By the mid-1980s the Iran-Iraq War had become a stalemate, as both sides attacked each other with little to show for their losses. The conflict also wore down both party's *peshmerga* as they were no closer to autonomy or independence than at the onset of the war. Further damage to *peshmerga* combat effectiveness came via Turkey as the Turkish military, attempting to quell its own Kurdish threat, destroyed KDP bases in Iraq and killed hundreds of *peshmerga*.⁴²⁸

From September 1981 to May 1982 Iran launched a series of counterattacks on Iraq, opening fronts in both southern Iraq and Iraqi Kurdistan.⁴²⁹ These attacks severely hampered the ability of the PUK and forced the group to move their headquarters from the Iran-Iraq border and closer to Iraqi forces. Seeking a respite from their heavy losses⁴³⁰, the PUK negotiated a ceasefire with Baghdad on 3 January 1984. The agreement, like the 1970 accord, allowed greater Kurdish autonomy and the incorporation of the PUK *peshmerga* into a 40,000-man Kurdish border guard.⁴³¹ As the Iraqis reduced their enemies, the PUK *peshmerga* benefited from the agreement, receiving Iraqi weaponry and new senior leadership, including Kosrat Rasoul.⁴³² Many PUK *peshmerga* disagreed with the alliance, leaving the party and joining the KDP.⁴³³

The ceasefire of 1984 was short-lived. By January 1985, Saddam Husayn, receiving ample U.S. aid, no longer needed PUK *peshmerga* assistance. Without the PUK *peshmerga* and

⁴²² McDowall, 346, 347.

⁴²³ Kurdish Operations in Iraq in Final Quarter of 1981. BBC Summary of World Broadcasts, 6 Feb 1982.

⁴²⁴ Tucker, pg 24.

⁴²⁵ Gunter, pg 230.

⁴²⁶ O'Ballance, pg 127/ BBC Summary of World Broadcasts 6 Feb 1982.

⁴²⁷ Kurds Announce Kidnappings. New York Times, 29 May 1985.

⁴²⁸ McDowall, pg 347.

⁴²⁹ Pollard, pgs 193-199.

⁴³⁰ McDowall, pg 348.

⁴³¹ Diplomats Report Iraqi Deal with Kurds. New York Times, 4 Jan 1984.

⁴³² Stansfield, pg 90.

⁴³³ McDowall, pg 349.

following a defeat at the al-Faw peninsula in February 1986, Husayn suddenly lacked the manpower to defeat the Iranians. To compensate, the Iraqi government expanded the military draft, removing conscription exemptions such as college enrollment.⁴³⁴ Among those drafted were numerous Kurdish students, including Ahmad Abdullah, who deserted the Iraqi ranks and joined the *peshmerga*, eventually becoming a KDP intelligence officer.⁴³⁵ The infusion of intellectuals such as Abdullah both hindered the Iraqi cause and aided the *peshmerga*. These new *peshmerga* were joined by thousands of Kurds who also deserted the Iraqi military. In May 1987, for example, an entire 400-man battalion joined the PUK, supplying not only personnel but their weapons as well.⁴³⁶

Newfound manpower and the creation of a joint PUK-KDP Kurdistan National Front (KNF) in February 1987 increased the expectations of the *peshmerga*. Unified under a joint command in May 1987, *peshmerga* on both sides were able to take advantage of Iranian military support and expand their operations, seizing military centers and towns throughout Iraqi Kurdistan.⁴³⁷ In Sulaymaniya in April 1987, for example, 2,000 *peshmerga* held the city prior to the arrival of the Iranian main force.⁴³⁸ *Peshmerga* forces would continue their precise attack and guerrilla assaults until mid-1988⁴³⁹, helping capture the towns of Rawanduz, Shaqlawa, and Atrush.⁴⁴⁰

The combined PUK-KDP-Iranian attacks enraged the Husayn regime. In an attempt to discourage *peshmerga* enrollment and intimidate those in the ranks, the Iraqi government openly executed or tortured their Kurdish prisoners. Not only were many *peshmerga* subject to the horrid conditions of prison camps, where random killings were commonplace⁴⁴¹, but through 1987 and 1988, the Iraqi government began punishing Kurdish civilians for the actions of the *peshmerga*. Commanded by Iraqi General Ali Hasan al Majid, Iraqi forces killed or deported thousands of Kurds in order to cut off *peshmerga* supply lines.

⁴³⁴ Pollard, pg 219.

⁴³⁵ Tucker, pgs 41-46.

⁴³⁶ Kurdish Guerrillas Escalate Mountain War Against Iraq. Associated Press, 14 Jun 1987.

⁴³⁷ McDowall, pg 352.

⁴³⁸ O'Ballance, pg 144.

⁴³⁹ Iranian Military Communiques and Reports. BBC Summary of World Broadcasts, 23 March 1988/ Iran reports military successes by Iraqi Kurdish dissidents. BBC Summary of World Broadcasts, 13 May 1988/ PUK operations against Iraqi forces. BBC Summary of World Broadcasts, 21 June 1988.

⁴⁴⁰ McDowall, pg 352.

⁴⁴¹ Tucker, pg 34.

Employing a “scorched earth policy”⁴⁴² the Iraqi military began using chemical weapons on *peshmerga* positions in several locations⁴⁴³, including Halabja⁴⁴⁴. The use of mustard and sarin gas by Iraq and the lack of any protective equipment caused many *peshmerga* to wrap themselves in burlap bags and cover their mouths, eyes, and noses with rags.⁴⁴⁵ Eventually these attacks spread to civilian targets after the Iranian ceasefire on 20 August 1988. The chemical attacks continued as Iraqi armor and aircraft rapidly deployed to Iraqi Kurdistan, forcing thousands of Kurds to flee Iraq, including many *peshmerga* and their families.⁴⁴⁶ Overall, nearly 4,000 villages were destroyed, 1.5 million Kurds were displaced, and between 150 and 200,000 people were killed.⁴⁴⁷ The Iraqi government succeeded once again in eliminating the Kurdish “threat”, nearly destroying *peshmerga* combat effectiveness. The last *peshmerga* resistance affiliated with the Iran-Iraq conflict ceased operations in early September 1988.⁴⁴⁸

1989-1990

Despite the Iraqi government’s unprecedented attack on Iraqi Kurdistan, the fighting spirit of the *peshmerga* lived on. Still united under the Kurdistan Front⁴⁴⁹, both Masud Barzani and Jalal Talabani understood the importance of continuing the Kurdish struggle⁴⁵⁰. Kurdish people, many of whom were living in temporary shelters in Iran and Turkey⁴⁵¹, needed to know they still had someone fighting for the cause. With Kurdish political power again marginalized, the *peshmerga* once more represented the Kurds’ only hope for autonomy.

Realizing the need to continue, yet lacking the ability to stage large-scale operations, Barzani and Talabani reorganized their remaining few thousand *peshmerga* into small strike teams. The goal of these teams was to reduce Iraqi military effectiveness and “prevent Baghdad from hiding the fact of continued resistance”.⁴⁵² Under Barzani, each strike team consisted of 10

⁴⁴² McDowall, pg 353.

⁴⁴³ Tucker, pg 5.

⁴⁴⁴ O’Ballance, pg 169.

⁴⁴⁵ Tucker, pg 5.

⁴⁴⁶ Fleeing Assault by Iraqis. Kurds Tell of Poison Gas and Lives Lost. New York Times, 5 Sep 1988.

⁴⁴⁷ McDowall, pgs 360-361/ Ochsenswald and Fisher, pg 659.

⁴⁴⁸ McDowall, pg 360/ Lewis, Paul. Iraqi Says Kurd Uprising Has Been Defeated. New York Times, 4 Sep 1988.

⁴⁴⁹ McDowall, pg 368.

⁴⁵⁰ McDowall, pg 368, The Changing War for Kurdistan. Jane’s Defence Weekly, 12 Aug 1989.

⁴⁵¹ How the Kurds Are Cared For: 7 Months in Tents. New York Times, 31 Mar 1989.

⁴⁵² McDowall, pg 368.

to 60 “highly-mobile, well-trained” *peshmerga*, armed with AK-47 rifles, light and medium machine guns, 81mm and 82mm mortars, and RPG-7 rocket launchers.⁴⁵³ Caches of weapons and supplies were again established in the mountains as the PUK received support from Syrian sympathizers. With their new strategy, the *peshmerga* conducted several successful ambushes⁴⁵⁴, threatened vital Iraqi economic targets such as oil pipelines⁴⁵⁵, and established military control of a small area in northern Iraq⁴⁵⁶.

***Peshmerga* During Operation Desert Storm (1990-1991)**

Peshmerga strikes continued to harass the Iraqi government until August 1990. Following Iraqi’s invasion of Kuwait, the Kurdistan Front decided small attacks on Iraqi targets were no longer necessary and began talks with the U.S., leader of the coalition to drive Iraq out of Kuwait. Seeking “more reliable” allies, the U.S. government declined Kurdish support.⁴⁵⁷ Kurdish leadership did receive an offer from Iraqi President Saddam Husayn however, asking for five years of peace in order to improve Kurdish living standards.⁴⁵⁸ Husayn realized the difficulty of fighting both the amassing coalition and the growing Kurdish military threat. Refusing to ally with Husayn, but still without international support, *peshmerga* forces remained neutral during the first U.S.-Iraqi War.⁴⁵⁹

Despite their neutrality, *peshmerga* leadership was not stagnant following the Kuwait invasion. In accordance with the decisions of the KNF, the *peshmerga* expanded their covert forces in both size and scope, conducted a propaganda campaign to rekindle Kurdish nationalism, incorporated Kurdish Iraqi army deserters, and developed a cooperative network with the *jash*. This new *peshmerga-jash* network allowed the *peshmerga* to acquire previously unattainable support, including intelligence, and forgave the *jash* for past their allegiances.⁴⁶⁰ Each of these actions benefited the *peshmerga* and increased their effectiveness in the months following the first U.S.-Iraq War.

⁴⁵³ Jane’s Defence Weekly, 12 Aug 1989. See also Appendix A: Weapons of the Kurdish Forces.

⁴⁵⁴ McDowall, pg 368.

⁴⁵⁵ Jane’s Defence Weekly, 12 Aug 1989.

⁴⁵⁶ Turkey Offers Temporary Haven to Top Iraqi Kurd. New York Times, 4 Sep 1988.

⁴⁵⁷ O’Ballance, pg 183, 184.

⁴⁵⁸ Hussein Visits Kurds and Pledges Prosperity. New York Times, 26 Oct 1990.

⁴⁵⁹ O’Ballance, pg 184.

⁴⁶⁰ Stansfield, pg 92/ McDowall, pg 370.

The 1991 Uprisings

The Iraqi army entered the first U.S.-Iraqi War with the fifth largest military in the world.⁴⁶¹ The strength and speed of the Allied military attack however forced the Iraq military to withdraw from Kuwait after sustaining thousands of destroyed vehicles⁴⁶² and thousands of casualties. Following the Allied assault, many Iraqi troops deserted the ranks⁴⁶³, no longer confident in Saddam Husayn's leadership. Thousands of frustrated Iraqi Shi'ites, including many ex-soldiers, took advantage of the Iraqi defeat and low military morale, beginning riots throughout southern Iraq. Only weeks after the 28 February 1991 Allied-Iraqi ceasefire, nearly ten cities in southern Iraq were under "popular" control.⁴⁶⁴

The spirit of revolution also took hold in Iraqi Kurdistan. Instigated by the *jash* seizure of Raniya on 4 March, the Kurdish populace and thousands of deserters quickly became "overnight *peshmerga*" and overthrew government control in Raniya, Chawar Qurna, Koi-Sanjaq, Sulaymaniya, Halabja, Arbat, Arbil, Duhuk, Zahku, and Kirkuk. KNF *peshmerga* forces, who had engaged northern Iraqi military positions several times since 27 February⁴⁶⁵, came to the assistance of the *jash* and Kurdish populace, conducting initial occupations of towns and manning tactical positions overlooking popular-controlled areas.⁴⁶⁶ Unlike conflicts in the three previous decades, *peshmerga* were no longer forced to squander their limited resources establishing military control over urban areas, leaving the cities in the authority of locally selected administrators.⁴⁶⁷ By 14 March, Kurdish officials controlled nearly 75% of Iraqi Kurdistan.⁴⁶⁸

Led by the *peshmerga* and largely assisted by the *jash*⁴⁶⁹, the Kurdish rebellion reached Mosul on 14 March⁴⁷⁰ and Kirkuk on 17 March⁴⁷¹. Although numbering over 100,000, the

⁴⁶¹ CDI Primer: Iraqi Military Effectiveness. CDI (Center for Defense Information), Eye on Iraq. 12 November 2002.

⁴⁶² Jaffee Center for Strategic Studies. War in the Gulf: Implications for Israel./ Al-Jabbar, pg 5.

⁴⁶³ Fierce Fighting reported in Basra; Kurds reportedly in control of Sulaymaniyah. BBC Summary of World Broadcasts 12 March 1991.

⁴⁶⁴ Al-Jabbar, pg 8.

⁴⁶⁵ McDowall, pg 393.

⁴⁶⁶ BBC Summary of World Events, 12 March 1991/ Al-Jabbar, pg 11.

⁴⁶⁷ Al-Jabbar, pg 12.

⁴⁶⁸ Iraqi rebels 'will defy bloodbath'. The Guardian, 14 March 1991.

⁴⁶⁹ McDowall, pg 371.

⁴⁷⁰ The Guardian, 14 Mar 1991.

⁴⁷¹ Iraqi Troops reportedly retake towns, heavy fighting continues. United Press International. 17 Mar 1991.

peshmerga assault on Kirkuk – the “jewel in the Kurdish crown”⁴⁷² – was not an instant success⁴⁷³. Victory over the oil-rich city occurred two days later on 19 March.⁴⁷⁴ Kurdish optimism in the region was short-lived however, as the Iraqi government quickly attempted to reinstate their control, especially in Kirkuk.

Following their re-occupation of southern Iraq and defeat of the Shi’a rebels⁴⁷⁵, Iraqi forces turned their focus to the *peshmerga* and the Kurdish populace. Iraqi units deployed to suppress the Kurdish threat, including the Iraqi Republican Guard and other miscellaneous aircraft, heavy artillery, and tanks⁴⁷⁶ – many of which were withdrawn from the Kuwait frontlines during the opening attack of the coalition⁴⁷⁷. Armed with their usual assortment of rifles, machine guns, and mortars, the *peshmerga* were quickly overpowered.⁴⁷⁸ The terrain of Kirkuk and Arbil, the largest of the Kurdish-captured cities, was also a disadvantage for the *peshmerga*, as both were located in a plain below the mountains.⁴⁷⁹ The *peshmerga* again lacked the resources and ability to “hold” cities.

With no international support, the “overnight *peshmerga*” began to disappear. Faced with a growing food shortage⁴⁸⁰ and the incoming Iraqi force, thousands of Kurds, including many *peshmerga* and *jash*, surrendered the cities and fled towards the mountains. The speed in which their positions were abandoned was highly uncharacteristic of the *peshmerga*. Their mass exodus and lack of resistance left the surprised Masud Barzani and Jalal Talabani with only their most loyal *peshmerga* bodyguards to provide defense. These few *peshmerga* controlled key passes⁴⁸¹ and occupied abandoned towns, fighting the advancing Iraqis and enabling their fellow Kurds to escape⁴⁸².

The fear of Iraqi retribution caused over 1.5 million Kurds to flee towards both Iran and Turkey.⁴⁸³ Unsatisfied with the *peshmerga* abdication, Iraqi President Husayn ordered a continued attack on *peshmerga* mountain positions and the columns of traveling Kurds. Despite

⁴⁷² McDowall, pg 372.

⁴⁷³ UPI, 17 Mar 1991.

⁴⁷⁴ McDowall, pg 372.

⁴⁷⁵ Cockburn, pg 28.

⁴⁷⁶ McDowall, pg 372.

⁴⁷⁷ Pollack, pg 263.

⁴⁷⁸ McDowall, pg 372.

⁴⁷⁹ Cockburn, pg 28.

⁴⁸⁰ Saddam deploys Guards to quell Baghdad revolt. The Independent, 25 March 1991.

⁴⁸¹ O’Ballance, pg 187.

⁴⁸² Kurds Flee Homes Again as Baghdad Bombs North. Christian Science Monitor, 2 April 1992.

⁴⁸³ McDowall, pg 373.

the *peshmerga* opposition's ability to slow down Iraqi ground forces, the Iraq air assault went unabated, attacking Kurdish refugees and causing mass confusion on the roads to the border.⁴⁸⁴ The Iraqi military were again ordered to use chemical weapons, although according to certain reports one of the "chemicals" dropped on the fleeing Kurds was merely flour.⁴⁸⁵

Under the auspice of United Nations Resolution 688, many nations and international organizations came to the aid of the fleeing Kurds, providing them with basic necessities such as food and medical care. Among the lead countries assisting the Kurdish plight was the U.S., one of few who also believed the resolution also allowed for military protection. In total, nearly 12,000 U.S. military service members stayed in Iraq in support of Operation Provide Comfort. This U.S. force was divided into two groups: "Joint Task Force Alpha" and "Joint Task Force Bravo" and included the 10th Special Forces Group.

Peshmerga from both the KDP and the PUK played an integral role in the operations of the U.S. Special Forces and the other international groups. Although years of betrayal and wavering alliances made the *peshmerga* and their command initially suspicious, once a bond of trust was established, the *peshmerga* began willingly supporting the relief effort.⁴⁸⁶ Led in part by Noshirwan Mustafa⁴⁸⁷, *peshmerga* units provided security for their allies and eliminated Iraqi secret agents in the area. Unlike their interaction with the British effort, who denied their mobility, the cooperation between the *peshmerga* and the U.S. Special Forces created a bond that carried on to the next U.S.-Iraqi conflict in 2003. Unfortunately for *peshmerga* forces however, the 1991 U.S. Special Forces deployment was for humanitarian purposes only, and could not provide military assistance. After assisting the relief effort, the *peshmerga* were called upon to ensure the safe travel of civilians as the Kurdish populace attempted to return to their homes.⁴⁸⁸

1991-1995

After the return of a majority of Kurds to their cities and villages and the withdrawal of international forces in July 1991, the *peshmerga* again confronted Iraqi forces. Throughout the

⁴⁸⁴ Iraqi Helicopters "attack" refugee camps; influx into Iran and Turkey continues. BBC Summary of World Broadcasts, 12 April 1991/ McDowall, pg 373.

⁴⁸⁵ Cockburn, pg 29.

⁴⁸⁶ Clancy, pgs 471-490.

⁴⁸⁷ Kurdish Wars 1945-2001, Regiments.org, 11 May 2005.

⁴⁸⁸ Clancy, pgs 471-490.

month *peshmerga* stationed in Arbil and Sulaymaniya clashed with Iraqi military units and succeeded in capturing the cities on 20 July. As Talabani and Barzani worked in the political arena, attempting to negotiate Kurdish autonomy, *peshmerga* battles with Iraqi units took place in Kirkuk, Kifri, Kalar, and Sulaymaniya throughout the fall of 1991.⁴⁸⁹ In early October, for example, after the *peshmerga* allegedly killed 60 Iraqi soldiers near Sulaymaniya, Iraqi artillery shelled the aforementioned towns plus Maysan, another predominately Kurdish area.⁴⁹⁰

Knowing his weakened military could not handle an all-out conflict with the *peshmerga* and with the international eye still on the Kurdish situation, Iraqi President Husayn ordered a blockade of Iraqi Kurdistan in late October 1991. Minefields and three Iraqi military corps prevented food and other necessities from crossing the Iraqi-Kurdistan line and entering Kurdistan.⁴⁹¹ As the winter months took their toll, Kurdish leaders offered to withdraw the *peshmerga* from all towns south of Arbil in exchange for lifting the blockade. If the blockade was not ended, *peshmerga* operations would continue. During this time the only income to Iraqi Kurdistan was provided by tolls manned by *peshmerga* from Iraq to Turkey.⁴⁹²

As negotiations with Saddam Husayn proved unsuccessful, the KNF planned its own “Kurdistan National Assembly” (KNA), a freely-elected Iraqi Kurdistan government.⁴⁹³ Among the benefits of a Kurdish government was the ability to create a unified *peshmerga* force of 80,000 men and eliminating the assortment of armed Kurds who had taken to the streets upon their return.⁴⁹⁴ The idea of a unified force failed, however, as neither the KDP nor the PUK were willing to relinquish their *peshmerga* forces, although they did merge under a unified command in September 1992.⁴⁹⁵ Among the first *peshmerga* operations under the new command was an October 1992 joint Turkish-Kurdish assault on Turkish Kurds who had fled to northern Iraq and set up rebel positions.⁴⁹⁶

The newly-elected KNA, even with a position dedicated strictly to *peshmerga* affairs⁴⁹⁷, could not hide the tension between the KDP and the PUK and their respective *peshmerga* forces.

⁴⁸⁹ McDowall, pg 378.

⁴⁹⁰ O’Ballance, pg 194.

⁴⁹¹ McDowall, pg 379.

⁴⁹² O’Ballance, pg 196, 197.

⁴⁹³ See Appendix B: Maps map 6 for a depiction of the Kurdish Autonomy Region of the early 1990s.

⁴⁹⁴ McDowall, pg 380.

⁴⁹⁵ O’Ballance, pg 201.

⁴⁹⁶ McDowall, pg 384.

⁴⁹⁷ Gunter, Kurdish Predicament in Iraq. Pg 75.

Without a national force, several *peshmerga* commanders began “selling” their units to the highest bidding party. According to McDowall, among the most notable of these rogue leaders was Muhammad Haj Mahmud, commander of 20,000 *peshmerga*.⁴⁹⁸ Conflict also erupted between local KDP and PUK *peshmerga* in May 1994 when a land dispute in Qala Diza sparked fighting in the town as well as in Rawanduz and Shaqlawa, killing between 600 and 1,000.⁴⁹⁹ Sporadic fighting continued throughout the summer, finally ending with a temporary ceasefire in August 1994.⁵⁰⁰

The Kurdish Civil War (1995-1998)

By the mid-1990s, *peshmerga* of the KDP and the PUK had redivided Iraqi Kurdistan.⁵⁰¹ Each side had also become well-armed since the end of the U.S.-Iraq War. The KDP, with its 25,000 active *peshmerga* and 30,000 reserves, fielded light artillery, various small arms, numerous multiple rocket launcher systems, mortars, and SA-7s. The PUK, while having less manpower with only 12,000 active *peshmerga* and 6,000 reserves, had greater firepower, including T-54 and T-55 tanks, artillery pieces, multiple rocket launchers, 106mm recoilless rifles, light anti-aircraft machine guns, SA-7s, and 60mm, 82mm, and 120mm mortars.⁵⁰²

KDP and PUK *peshmerga* continued their skirmishes throughout 1995, killing hundreds and infuriating the Kurdish populace.⁵⁰³ Ceasefires were signed and broken as both sides sought allies to strengthen their forces. For the PUK these allies included Syria and Iran.⁵⁰⁴ The KDP received help from perhaps the most unlikely of allies, the Iraqi government. The ability of the KDP’s newfound ally was evident as Iraqi artillery “softened” PUK targets before Iraqi tanks and helicopters began their assault. The heaviest Iraqi attack occurred in Arbil in August 1996 when 3,000 lightly-armed PUK *peshmerga*, led by Kosrat Rasoul, faced 30-40,000 Iraqi soldiers. The Iraqi military seized Arbil and helped the KDP *peshmerga* to push the PUK frontlines closer

⁴⁹⁸ McDowall, pg 386.

⁴⁹⁹ Gunter, MEJ, pg 233/ McDowall, pg 386.

⁵⁰⁰ McDowall, pg 386.

⁵⁰¹ Ibid, pg 386.

⁵⁰² Cordesman, pgs 229, 230. See also Appendix A: Weapons of the Kurdish Forces.

⁵⁰³ Gunter, MEJ, pg 235.

⁵⁰⁴ Gunter, MEJ, pg 238, 239/ McDowall, pg 388.

to the Iranian border.⁵⁰⁵ Not until the arrival of Iranian aid could the PUK *peshmerga* regroup and counterattack, regaining most of their lost area.⁵⁰⁶

The KDP-Iraqi attack on the PUK did more than effect the internal politics of Kurdistan. The KDP's alliance with Husayn officially ended the operations of U.S. NILE (Northern Iraq Liaison Element) Teams in northern Iraq. These teams, comprised of CIA and Department of Defense components, joined with *peshmerga* of both parties in an attempt to merge their efforts to remove Saddam Husayn with the efforts other anti-regime political fronts.⁵⁰⁷ Allied with the CIA-backed Iraqi National Congress (INC), *peshmerga* forces were to seize the cities of Mosul and Kirkuk as the Iraqi military overthrew Husayn.⁵⁰⁸ Although the *peshmerga* provided key intelligence to the NILE teams, their preoccupation with the inter-Kurdish rivalry frustrated U.S. operatives. As a result of the failed coup and the KDP-Iraq alliance, numerous PUK leaders were captured and the U.S. units were forced to leave northern Iraq.⁵⁰⁹

Conflict between the KDP and the PUK lasted throughout 1997 and for a majority of 1998 before the two sides finally agreed on a U.S.-backed ceasefire in September 1998. The U.S. insisted on the *peshmerga* stand down if the Kurdish parties wished to be included among continuing U.S.-sponsored Iraqi opposition groups. According to McDowall, the KDP and the PUK "found themselves hostage to the U.S. policy to overthrow Saddam". Unfortunately for the Kurdish cause, the nearly decade-long "Kurdish Civil War" disheartened many Kurdish civilians, as they began to lose confidence in the political leadership of the warring factions.⁵¹⁰

The Kurdish Civil War also reintroduced the notion of the woman warrior to Kurdish society. Suffering from heavy losses throughout the 1990s, the PUK was the first party in Iraq to recruit women *peshmerga*. In 1996, the PUK enrolled 11 women in the initial *Peshmerga* Force for Women, including Zoulfan Garib Rahim and Srwar Ismail Karim. Driven by patriotism and a desire to avenge the deaths of their family members, neighbors, and other fellow Kurds, these women went through a 45-day basic training, learning parade drills and basic marksmanship with various rifles, mortars, and RPGs.⁵¹¹

⁵⁰⁵ Cockburn, pgs 241-245.

⁵⁰⁶ McDowall, pg 388.

⁵⁰⁷ Francona, phone interview, 10 Oct 2005.

⁵⁰⁸ Sterns, Randy. The CIA's Secret War in Iraq. ABC News.

⁵⁰⁹ Francona, phone interview, 10 Oct 2005.

⁵¹⁰ McDowall, pgs 391, 392.

⁵¹¹ Strauss, Julius. Iraqi troops will face 500 Kurdish women warriors. www.portal.telegraph.co.uk, 26 Feb 2003.

1998-2003

After the 1998 “Washington Agreement”⁵¹², fighting between the KDP and the PUK *peshmerga* came to an end. As active PUK *peshmerga* put down their weapons, elder *peshmerga* veterans began filling more political PUK roles. With the KDP increasingly led by Barzani family members, the political tension between the Kurdish parties remained.⁵¹³

The international emergence of the al-Qaeda terrorist network following the 11 September 2001 attacks on the U.S. did not allow *peshmerga* weapons to be silent for very long. Although sporadic fighting continued with the PKK (the Turkish-based Kurdish Worker’s Party), the PUK *peshmerga* faced its largest threat from Ansar al-Islam, an al-Qaeda-sponsored militant group attempting to establish itself on the Iraqi side of the Iran-Iraq border.⁵¹⁴ Led by Mulla Krekar, a Kurd of strict Islamic faith, Ansar al-Islam was composed of over 500 guerrilla fighters, many of whom fled Afghanistan after the U.S. Operation Enduring Freedom.

Although they had faced traditional military opposition from the Iraqis and mountain-based guerrilla tactics during inter-Kurdish fighting, the PUK *peshmerga* had difficulty countering the fanatical assault of Ansar al-Islam. The foreign fighters used suicide attacks, assassinations, mines, bombs, and swords and machetes to not only kill the *peshmerga* but to desecrate their bodies.⁵¹⁵ Whereas Ansar al-Islam allegedly received support from Iran, Saudi Arabia, and Iraq⁵¹⁶, the PUK *peshmerga* had only the KDP forces as allies. Both parties were steadfast in their displeasure about the Ansar al-Islam presence. PUK commander Anwar Dolani, for example, asserted there is “no room for terrorism in Iraqi Kurdistan”⁵¹⁷ and Masud Barzani claimed *peshmerga* forces did not need assistance to defeat the unwelcome militants.⁵¹⁸ Despite Kurdish solidarity, U.S. preparations to oust Iraqi President Saddam Husayn brought welcome reinforcements to the conflict.

⁵¹² KDP Leader Views Situation In Iraqi Kurdistan, Kurdish Infighting, Ansar Al-Islam. World News Connection, 11 Nov 2002.

⁵¹³ Stansfield, pg 182, 183.

⁵¹⁴ Kurds say al-Qaida has terror camps in north Iraq. Manchester Guardian Weekly, 4 Sep 2002.

⁵¹⁵ Manchester Guardian Weekly, 4 Sep 2002/ Threat of War: Militant Kurds training al-Qaida fighters: Extremists suspected of testing chemical weapons and links to Iraq. The Guardian (London), 23 Aug 2002.

⁵¹⁶ The Guardian, 23 Aug 2002.

⁵¹⁷ Jund al-Islam is a terrorist and there is no room for terrorism in Iraqi-Kurdistan, KurdishMedia.com, 17 Oct 2001.

⁵¹⁸ World News Connection, 11 Nov 2002.

***Peshmerga* During Operation Iraqi Freedom (2003)**

The deployment of CIA agents to Kurdistan⁵¹⁹ followed by U.S. Special Forces⁵²⁰ began a new era in U.S.-Kurdish relations, an era that would witness unprecedented cooperation between *peshmerga* forces and the most powerful military in the world. Arriving in July 2002, the CIA seldom worked with the *peshmerga*, despite their claim to be on a counterterrorism mission against Ansar al-Islam. To the disappointment of PUK *peshmerga* intent on destroying Ansar al-Islam, the true mission of the CIA was to acquire intelligence about the Iraqi government and military. Whereas the mission itself confirmed U.S. intentions of removing Saddam Husayn, the CIA's method of paying informants reduced the *peshmerga*'s ability to purchase black market weapons. CIA-*peshmerga* operations eventually went beyond the scope of intelligence gathering however, as PUK *peshmerga* were used to destroy key rail lines and buildings prior to the U.S. attack in March 2003.⁵²¹

Peshmerga cooperation with the 10th U.S. Special Forces Group was far closer than the *peshmerga*-CIA relationship. Upon the arrival of the 10th Group in January 2003, the *peshmerga* became an integral part of Operation Viking Hammer, an assault within Operation Iraqi Freedom designed to destroy the Ansar al-Islam presence. The elimination of Ansar al-Islam was beneficial to both the U.S. and the *peshmerga*. For the *peshmerga*, not only was Ansar al-Islam unwelcome but it would pose a threat to *peshmerga* operations during the forthcoming assault on Iraq and could also possibly remain a nuisance in a post-war Iraq.⁵²² The U.S. Special Forces saw Operation Viking Hammer as a way to earn Kurdish trust and destroy a part of the al-Qaeda network.⁵²³ As confidence in American intentions increased, PUK and KDP *peshmerga* were again placed under the command of foreign leadership, repeating a pattern seen in the Mahabad Republic and under Qasim after the 1958 Revolution. The PUK *peshmerga* would be commanded by U.S. Lieutenant Colonel Kenneth Tovo and fellow Lieutenant Colonel Robert Waltemeyer was assigned to lead the KDP forces.⁵²⁴

Beginning on 21 March 2003, U.S. forces launched Tomahawk missiles at selected Ansar al-Islam positions throughout the Sargat Valley. In preparation for the ground assault, Tovo

⁵¹⁹ Woodward, pg 140.

⁵²⁰ Robinson, pg 296.

⁵²¹ Woodward, pgs 140, 336, 350.

⁵²² Yildiz, pg 103.

⁵²³ Murray and Scales, pgs 188-190.

⁵²⁴ Robinson, pg 301.

divided his forces into six mixed *peshmerga*-Special Forces units. The *peshmerga* in two of these teams refused to contribute to the assault for various reasons including having lost too many personnel in previous fighting.⁵²⁵ The *peshmerga* who did fight were once again armed with AK-47s, rocket-propelled grenades, and other assorted weapons.⁵²⁶

Operation Viking Hammer attacked Ansar al-Islam on 28 March 2003 and immediately encountered resistance from numerous dug-in positions.⁵²⁷ The use of American close air support to remove more entrenched opposition vastly increased *peshmerga* morale. Throughout the battle the *peshmerga* employed their own close range artillery, assisting the effort and proving their value alongside their better-equipped allies. Within two days, the *peshmerga*-Special Forces teams succeeded in removing Ansar al-Islam from the Sargat Valley, killing most and forcing those who remained to flee over the Iranian border. Despite their well-armed adversaries, only 24 *peshmerga* were killed in the fighting, compared to an enemy body count of over 300.⁵²⁸

The second *peshmerga*-10th Group operation involved assaulting the Iraqi “Green Line” – the northern-most front of Iraqi forces.⁵²⁹ Despite the build up of Coalition forces south of Iraq, the Iraqi command did not consolidate their forces to face the incoming threat. Perhaps in an effort to guard the oil-rich cities of Mosul and Kirkuk, a multidivisional force of Regular Army and Republican Guard units remained in the north.⁵³⁰ The objective of the *peshmerga*-Special Forces assault on these Green Line units was to “push the Iraqis off their positions” and clear an advance on Mosul and Kirkuk.⁵³¹ Although the *peshmerga* were eager to seize the cities, the U.S., hoping to alleviate any ethnic violence, urged them not to enter the cities until U.S. command and control was established.⁵³²

As overwhelmed Iraqi forces began a strategic retreat to positions closer to Kirkuk, *peshmerga* units occupied the vacated Iraqi territory.⁵³³ After Kirkuk’s quick abdication, PUK *peshmerga*, initially assigned to surround the city and supplement U.S. authority, took control of

⁵²⁵ Ibid, pgs 302, 306.

⁵²⁶ Murray and Scales, pg 191.

⁵²⁷ See Appendix B: Maps map 7 for a depiction of Operation Viking Hammer.

⁵²⁸ Robinson, pg 320.

⁵²⁹ See Appendix B: Maps map 8 for a depiction of the Green Line Battle of Task Force Viking.

⁵³⁰ Biddle, et al. 2004.

⁵³¹ Murray and Scales, pg 192.

⁵³² Burke, Jason. Two wars merge in Kurdish north. The Observer, 23 Mar 2003.

⁵³³ Vogel, Steve & Vick, Karl. U.S. Moves To Increase Firepower In North. Washington Post, 30 Mar 2003.

the city.⁵³⁴ Meanwhile, the KDP *peshmerga*, reinforced by additional American units, attempted to seize Arbil and the regional airfields around Mosul.⁵³⁵

Difficult fighting north and west of Mosul involved nearly 100,000 *peshmerga* and thousands of American soldiers. Assisted again by Coalition air strikes, Mosul was surrounded on 10 April 2003. Although PUK *peshmerga* remained in Kirkuk against the wishes of the U.S. leadership, KDP *peshmerga* were urged not to occupy Mosul.⁵³⁶ Led by General Jamil Mahmoud Suleyman Besefky, the first KDP *peshmerga* force entered Mosul on 10 April, engaged the Iraqi army, secured their objectives, and pulled out of the city on 12 April. Besefky's *peshmerga* continued contributing to the U.S. mission by establishing checkpoints in the Greater Talafel area near Mosul.⁵³⁷

With the occupation of Baghdad by U.S. forces on 9 April 2003⁵³⁸, the Iraqi army was all but completely defeated. The combined *peshmerga*-U.S. assault from 21 March to 12 April 2003 defeated 13 Iraqi divisions, prevented Iraqi forces from reinforcing their southern defenses, captured strategic airfields throughout northern Iraq⁵³⁹, and diminished the ability of the Ansar al-Islam terrorist group. The Kurdish *peshmerga*, assisted by the U.S. military, were finally able to defeat the Iraqi military and topple its oppressive leadership. The rule of Saddam Husayn and the Baath party was over. The fighting spirit of the *peshmerga* had succeeded in forcing a new chapter in Kurdish history – yet another era of attempted power sharing between Arabs and Kurds.

⁵³⁴ Robinson, pg 325.

⁵³⁵ Murray and Scales, pg 193.

⁵³⁶ Robinson, pgs 331, 332.

⁵³⁷ Tucker, pg 23.

⁵³⁸ Murray and Scales, pg 230.

⁵³⁹ Robinson, pg 340.

EPILOGUE: ***Peshmerga in the New Iraq (2003-2005)***

Months after the U.S. occupation of Baghdad and the toppling of Saddam Husayn's government, the U.S. administration decided to dissolve the formerly Baath-controlled Iraqi army in May 2003. Replacing the army would be a new fighting force able to provide security for the fledgling government and defend against any internal or external threats. Once trained, this force would be inclusive and "transcend Iraq's various ethnic and sectarian communities".

⁵⁴⁰ The dismissal of thousands of former Iraqi soldiers, however, posed an immediate threat and left a large void in the security of the nation – a void the *peshmerga* were frequently called upon to fill.

Similar to the 1970 Accord, the U.S. command and interim Iraqi government assigned many *peshmerga* as official border guards⁵⁴¹, hoping to intercept insurgent foreign aid and protect the nascent government. In August 2003, these border guards, after being trained by U.S. and Israeli officers⁵⁴², began to take the place of party-controlled *peshmerga* on the Iranian border.⁵⁴³ By November, five battalions, totaling nearly 1,300 soldiers, graduated from a border guard training school in Qalacholan.⁵⁴⁴ A majority of these graduates were engaged almost immediately as they neared a base camp of Turkish-Kurdish rebels.⁵⁴⁵

As many *peshmerga* became border guards or were assigned to protect vital oil pipelines⁵⁴⁶, others continued operations with the U.S. Special Forces. Nearly 7,000 *peshmerga*, nicknamed "Peshrambo", were trained in commando operations and assisted in the hunt for Ansar al-Islam and other Al-Qaeda related militants.⁵⁴⁷ Successful raids by *peshmerga* forces arrested over 300 Ansar al-Islam sympathizers by late September 2003.⁵⁴⁸ *Peshmerga* also

⁵⁴⁰ Sharp, Jeremy M. Iraq's New Security Forces: The Challenge of Sectarian and Ethnic Influences. CRS Report for Congress, 25 Mar 2005, pgs 1, 3.

⁵⁴¹ Israeli Officers Train Kurdish Militias in Northern Iraq. BBC Monitoring International Reports, 9 Aug 2003.

⁵⁴² US-Kurdish Forces Start Military Manoeuvres – Agency. BBC Monitoring International Reports, 18 Aug 2003.

⁵⁴³ Iraqi Kurds prepare to say goodbye to peshmergas. Agence France Presse, 15 Aug 2003.

⁵⁴⁴ Four Hundred new border guards complete training in Iraqi Kurdish region. BBC Worldwide Monitoring, 2 Nov 2003.

⁵⁴⁵ Iraqi Paper Reports Armed Kurdish Groups Attack on Peshmerga Border Guards. BBC Monitoring International Reports, 10 Nov 2003.

⁵⁴⁶ Peshmergas to Protect Pipelines in Northern Iraq. Turkish Daily News, 23 Dec 2004.

⁵⁴⁷ U.S. Forces Training Kurdish Peshmerga Forces. BBC Monitoring International Reports, 4 Oct 2003.

⁵⁴⁸ Kurdish Troops Arrest 100 Islamic Group Elements In Northern Iraq. World News Connection, 22 Sep 2003.

accompanied regional Special Forces teams throughout Iraq, filling roles as interrogators, perimeter security, and neighborhood patrols. Examples include approximately 30-40 *peshmerga* who fought alongside soldiers of U.S. Special Forces Operational Detachment Alpha (ODA) 092 in Samarra in December 2003 and a Baghdad patrol whose mission was to keep Iraqis of questionable allegiance in line.⁵⁴⁹

The increasing importance of the *peshmerga* was not limited to the men of Kurdistan. Since the beginning of their training in 1996, women *peshmerga* saw their instruction expand, learning not only military tactics and strategy but also math, computer science, and history.⁵⁵⁰ Commanded by Srwar Ismail Karim, one of the original 11 PUK women *peshmerga*, the growing women's force engaged both the Iraqi military and Ansar al-Islam.⁵⁵¹ Numbering nearly 500 in 2003, women *peshmerga* filled many of the same border guard positions as their male counterparts.⁵⁵²

Since 2003, training between the *peshmerga* and the U.S has evolved into a mutual relationship. As numerous U.S. forces deploy to Iraq in an attempt to quell the insurgencies and rebuild the Iraqi infrastructure, Kurdish-Americans have started helping American troops prepare for their mission while on American soil. In Fort Irwin, California, for example, numerous Kurdish-Americans, including possibly former *peshmerga*, have been employed to act as insurgents or villagers in mock towns in the base training areas.⁵⁵³ The inclusion of combat-experienced Kurds "adds to the realism" as the U.S. attempts to simulate the experiences of Iraqi missions.⁵⁵⁴

Despite these successes, the *peshmerga* involvement in the new Iraqi army was disputed throughout 2003, 2004, and into 2005. Although most agreed on the importance of including the *peshmerga* and other groups such as the Shiite-majority Badr Brigade in the new army⁵⁵⁵, the details of the integration have quickly become a problem. Whereas various ministers of *peshmerga* affairs proudly proclaimed more than 30 percent of the future army would be *peshmerga*⁵⁵⁶ and offered the services of over 35,000 *peshmerga*⁵⁵⁷, cautions over ethnic

⁵⁴⁹ Czarnecki, personal interview, 15 Aug 2005.

⁵⁵⁰ Howard, Michael. Revenge spurs women's army. Guardian, 26 Nov 2002.

⁵⁵¹ Women warriors await call to revenge. The Age, 2 Mar 2003.

⁵⁵² BBC Worldwide Monitoring, 2 Nov 2003.

⁵⁵³ Bowman, Tom. Revamped Training Has Guard Fit to Fight. The Baltimore Sun, 25 Apr 2005.

⁵⁵⁴ Interview with Will Williams, Titan Corporation, via phone 23 Aug 2005.

⁵⁵⁵ Iraqi Council Says "New Units" To Play a Security Role. BBC Monitoring International Reports, 3 Dec 2003.

⁵⁵⁶ Iraq: Kurdish peshmerga to make up third of new army. BBC Worldwide Monitoring, 8 Sep 2003.

animosity prevented the Iraqi interim government from utilizing the *peshmerga*'s experience.⁵⁵⁸ According to a U.S. plan for *peshmerga* integration, 25,000 would become members of the national army and would be paid by the Iraqi ministry of defense. The remaining 50,000 would be placed in border patrol units, become part of an Iraqi National Guard, or be part of a Kurdistan-based counter-terrorism force.⁵⁵⁹

Complicating the *peshmerga* integration was the KDP and the PUK's insistence that they keep their own select *peshmerga* forces.⁵⁶⁰ Neither party was even willing to merge its military with the other.⁵⁶¹ The continuing loyalty to party militias caused many to doubt the "viability" of a unified Iraqi army. In official statements Masud Barzani insisted the KDP keep their *peshmerga*, calling them a "symbol of the resistance".⁵⁶² Jalal Talabani also contributed to the idea of retaining a loyal *peshmerga* force by discussing initiatives that would invest in accommodations for *peshmergas*, including housing and a special *peshmerga* store.⁵⁶³ The failure of the Kurdish parties to disband their forces in accordance with a June 2004 agreement⁵⁶⁴ led other militia groups to question their own disbanding intentions⁵⁶⁵. This issue, along with Kurdish political demands that Kirkuk be placed under Kurdish administration⁵⁶⁶, has become among the most contentious debates in the post-war Iraq.

Although the *peshmerga*'s military integration has been cautious, political relations with the Kurdish leadership took a large step forward when former *peshmerga* leader and PUK founder Jalal Talabani was elected President of Iraq in May 2005.⁵⁶⁷ With Masud Barzani elected President of Iraqi Kurdistan in June 2005,⁵⁶⁸ the potential to achieve the goals of generations of *peshmerga* became greatly enhanced. This notion was not lost on former Iraqi

⁵⁵⁷ [Iraqi Kurdish Minister Says US "Reluctant" To Accept Peshmerga Help](#). BBC Monitoring International Reports, 7 Nov 2003.

⁵⁵⁸ Sharp, pg 5.

⁵⁵⁹ Steele, Jonathan. [Yesterday's Heroes Could Soon Be Tomorrow's Traitors](#). The Guardian, 23 Jul 2004.

⁵⁶⁰ Sharp, pg 5.

⁵⁶¹ Steele, 23 Jul 2004.

⁵⁶² Sharp, pgs 5, 6.

⁵⁶³ [Iraqi Kurdish Leader Talabani Calls for Modern Training For Militias](#). BBC Monitoring International Reports, 12 Dec 2003.

⁵⁶⁴ Filkins, Dexter. [9 Iraqi Militias Are Said to Approve Deal to Disband](#). New York Times, 8 Jun 2004.

⁵⁶⁵ Ciezadlo, Annia. [Though Battle-Hardened, Iraq's Kurdish militia struggles for role](#). Christian Science Monitor, 2 Mar 2005.

⁵⁶⁶ [Kurds Insist on Peshmerga, Kirkuk](#). Turkish Daily News, 5 Mar 2005.

⁵⁶⁷ [From Peshmerga to President – Jalal Talabani](#). Turkish Daily News, 8 May 2005.

⁵⁶⁸ [Barzani sworn in as president of Iraq's Kurdistan](#). Turkish Daily News, 15 Jun 2005.

President Saddam Husayn, who claimed U.S. President George W. Bush replaced him with his own “worst enemy” – a Kurdish *peshmerga*.⁵⁶⁹

⁵⁶⁹ Turkish Daily News, 8 May 2005.

CONCLUSION

This paper has attempted to chronicle the development of the *peshmerga* and its role in the Kurdish struggle in Iraq. While supporting the goals of Kurdish nationalism, the *peshmerga*'s continuous battles and defiance of central authority, despite being frequently outnumbered or overpowered, have reinvigorated the Kurdish warrior spirit. To mention the *peshmerga* in passing, as many authors have done, or to label the *peshmerga* as merely “guerrilla fighters”, is to marginalize the contribution of the organized Kurdish fighting force in 20th century Kurdish history. For a people who have depended on their fighting ability for centuries in order to maintain their cultural existence, it is difficult to picture the Kurdish culture of Iraq without the *peshmerga*.

Although there is a sense of optimism following the fall of the Saddam Husayn regime, the broken promises of the past have forced the Kurds to look to their own as the most reliable means of protection. As seen in this paper, not only have previous internal agreements been nullified⁵⁷⁰, but the Kurds have also been “abandoned” by three of the world’s premier superpowers: the British in the 1920s, the Soviet Union in the 1940s, and the U.S. in both the 1970s and the 1990s. It is little surprise then that after gaining power the Kurds would be hesitant to disband their only real source of self-defense. To rely on an inclusive “Iraqi” Army that seeks the best interest of the Iraqi state over that of Iraqi Kurdistan would be counterproductive to the goals of Kurdish nationalism – autonomy or independence for Iraqi Kurdistan. Inclusion in an Arab-Kurdish force would be also against the Kurdish expression “Biāndi bidé gohshte jānī āqībat pashimāni” – give a stranger your life’s blood, in the end you will regret it.⁵⁷¹

This internal military reliance has been recognized by Kurdish political leadership and the Kurdish populace. Politically, members of the Kurdish parties have called the armed resistance the “only alternative for revitalizing the Kurdish liberation movement”.⁵⁷² Socially, the *peshmerga* have become heroes, like the “gurd” of pre-Biblical times.⁵⁷³ Considered among

⁵⁷⁰ See the agreements of 1958 and 1970, pgs 47-50, and 61, respectively.

⁵⁷¹ Noel, pg 80.

⁵⁷² PUK Publications, pg 59.

⁵⁷³ See Introduction, pg 3.

the most prominent of the *peshmerga* heroes is Mulla Mustafa Barzani. Still highly revered and considered the “George Washington of Kurdistan”⁵⁷⁴, Barzani’s influence cannot be underestimated in the history of the *peshmerga*.

Although earlier attempts were made to merge tribal warriors in an inclusive Kurdish force, the 30 years of Barzani leadership was the turning point in creating a *peshmerga* military. Not an academically learned man, Barzani learned the benefits of military organization from the lessons learned in the early uprisings such as the Shaykh Said Revolt and the Khoybun Revolt, each of which trace their military roots to the Hamidiya Cavalry. By issuing levels of command and standards of conduct, he set the foundation for generations of *peshmerga*. With a standard rank structure in place, Barzani’s force became compatible with other military commands, extending from the Mahabad Republic to recent *peshmerga*-U.S. Special Forces operations. As Barzani’s military impact increased, so to did the influence of the Kurdish nationalist movement. Without the victories of Barzani’s *peshmerga*, Jalal Talabani and other Kurdish politicians would not have had the opportunity to impact and influence Iraqi Kurdish direction.

The ideal of the *peshmerga* as “guardians” of Kurdish nationalism will continue far beyond the generation of Mustafa and Masud Barzani and Jalal Talabani. As older *peshmerga* step away from the battlefield and assume political roles, new *peshmerga* fill the ranks. Similar to the long-standing bond the Kurdish people have with their rifles⁵⁷⁵, the tradition of men and women willing to sacrifice their lives for an independent or autonomous Kurdistan will continue. Even Iraqi Kurdish children are considered future *peshmerga* and their involvement in the cause is looked at approvingly by their parents.

Unfortunately for the *peshmerga* and Kurdish political aspirations, the Kurds must be reliant on regional cooperation to sustain any level of prosperity or security in the current geopolitical landscape. Kurdistan in general, especially Iraqi Kurdistan, is landlocked and lacks any independent way to export resources. Even with control of oil-rich Kirkuk, the Kurds must rely on pipelines traversing Turkish or Arab Iraqi lands. As long as the current landscape created by the Sykes-Picot Agreement of 1916 and the treaties of WWI stands, the Kurds are at the mercy of their neighbors. Their years of distrust and belief in Kurdistan, however, have mandated the need for an organized military force, one willing to face death. As an introductory

⁵⁷⁴ Tucker, pg 7.

⁵⁷⁵ For a detailed look at the Kurdish relationship with firearms see Ignatieff pgs 178-212.

study on the subject of the *peshmerga*, this thesis has attempted to show the importance of the Kurdish military and its relationship to the survival of Kurdish nationalism. It is recommended that study on this subject continue as to better relate to the mindset of the Kurdish nation.

APPENDIX A: Weapons of the Kurdish Forces (in order of appearance)

Chapter 1:

Yatagan (pg 2) – The yatagan was a type of Turkish sword used predominately from the mid-16th century to the late 19th century. Used by janissaries and other infantry soldiers, it was named after the town of Yatagan in southwest Turkey. Among the distinguishing characteristics of the yatagan are a winged hilt, to preventing the sword from slipping out of the hand, and an engraving on the flat of the blade, usually carrying an inscription such as a Koran verse.⁵⁷⁶

Chapter 2:

Lee-Enfield rifles (pg 51) – The Lee-Enfield rifle was a British rifle made from 1914 to the mid-1950s. Firing a .303 caliber round, the various Lee-Enfield models were all manually operated, using a rotating bolt action magazine. Each carried 10 rounds of ammunition and could hit targets between 2,000 and 3,900 yards. Although its parts were not interchangeable, it was considered one of the best bolt action battle rifles of the British Empire and the British Commonwealth.⁵⁷⁷

Brno rifles (pg 51) – The most popular rifle among the early *peshmerga*, the Brno was a long barrel long range rifle originally designed in Germany in the mid 1800s. Used extensively during Iran’s Constitutional Revolution (1906), the rifle was called the Brno after the Czechoslovakian city that began producing the rifle. By the late 1940s, however, Iran’s internal arms factories began producing their own Brno rifle. Although made primarily for the Iranian military, numerous rifles were acquired by the populace after Iranian soldiers abandoned their barracks after the Allied Forces seized Iran in 1941.⁵⁷⁸

Simonov SKS carbine rifles (pg 51) – The Soviet-made SKS (Samozaryadnyj Karabin Simonova – Simonov self-loading carbine) was designed after WWII in an attempt to create a rifle that could be used in close-range combat. Entering service at the same time as the more-popular AK-47, the SKS was a gas-operated, magazine fed, self-loading rifle designed to engage targets between 500-800 meters. The SKS’s easy availability and the cheap cost of its ammunition led to its popularity in many Soviet satellites, although its combat effectiveness was hindered by its limited magazine capacity.⁵⁷⁹

Degtyarov submachine gun (pg 51) – The Degtyarov submachine gun (also known as the PPD – Pistolet-Pulemyot Degtyarova) was produced by the Soviet Union in the late 1930s and the early 1940s. Although it had only a maximum range of 200 meters, the Degtyarov could fire up

⁵⁷⁶ Yatagan, the Turkish Sword. <http://www.turkishculture.org/weapons/yatagan.html>.

⁵⁷⁷ Rifle Short, Magazine, Lee-Enfield – SMLE (Great Britain). Modern Firearms. <http://world.guns.ru/rifle/rfl04-e.htm>.

⁵⁷⁸ Parsa, Ali. A Piece of History: Brno, the Persian Mauser. www.aliparsa.com, 2002.

⁵⁷⁹ Simonov SKS carbine (USSR- Russia). Modern Firearms. <http://world.guns.ru/rifle/rfl01-e.htm>.

to 800 rounds per minute. The early models of the Degtyarov were made exclusively for border patrol operations.⁵⁸⁰

122mm howitzer (pg 63) – The 122mm howitzer is a Soviet-made portable anti-tank heavy artillery gun. Towed by truck or armored tractor, the howitzer can fire between 4 to 8 rounds per minute with a maximum range of 15 kilometers. The most popular version of the 122mm howitzer, the D-30, can fire numerous types of rounds, including illuminating, smoke, leaflets, and incendiary rounds.⁵⁸¹

AK-47 assault rifle (pg 63) – The world's first widely used and successful assault rifle, the AK-47 (Avtomat Kalashnikova) is a gas-powered, selective-fired weapon. Designed in the Soviet Union in the late 1940s, the AK-47 became the basic individual infantry weapon of the Soviet Army until the 1960s. Because of its cheap cost and interchangeable parts, over 90 million AK-47s were manufactured throughout the world in the later half of the 20th century. Able to hold a 30 round magazine, the AK-47 was able to fire up to 40 rounds per minute in semiautomatic mode.⁵⁸²

RPG-7 Antitank Grenade Launcher (pg 63) – The RPG-7 (the Raketniy Protivotankoviy Granatomet) is a recoilless, shoulder-fired, muzzle-loaded, reloadable, antitank grenade launcher. Light enough to be fired by one person, the RPG-7 fires 85mm rocket-assisted grenades. The effective range of the RPG-7 varies from 500 meters for stationary targets to 300 meters for moving targets. When fired to its overall maximum range of 920 meters, the fired projectile self-destructs.⁵⁸³

81mm mortar (pg 74) – The 81mm mortar is a smooth-bore, muzzle-loaded, high-angle, indirect fire weapon. Able to fire in any direction due to its circular base plate, the mortar consists of a barrel, a sight, a bipod, and a base plate.⁵⁸⁴

SA-7 (pg 81) – The SA-7 is a portable, shoulder-fired, low-altitude surface-to-air missile system equipped with a high explosive infrared homing guidance. Introduced in 1972, the SA-7 has a maximum range of 5,500 meters and a maximum altitude range of 4,500 meters.⁵⁸⁵

T-54, T-55 tanks (pg 81) – The T-54 and T-55 model tanks were the main Soviet battle tanks from 1949 and 1958 to 1980, respectively. Although replaced by newer models, the T-54 and T-55 were consistently used by Arab forces against Israel in 1967 and 1973.⁵⁸⁶ The tanks were still among the Iraqi arsenal in the 1990s.⁵⁸⁷

⁵⁸⁰ Degtyarov PPD-40 submachine gun (USSR). Modern Firearms, <http://world.guns.ru/smg/smg01-e.htm>.

⁵⁸¹ D-30 Towed 122mm Howitzer. Military Equipment Guide – D-30, Military.com, 2005.

⁵⁸² General AK-47 Information. AK47 Information, AK-47.us, 2005.

⁵⁸³ RPG-7/ RPG-7v/ Antitank Grenade Launcher. GlobalSecurity.org, 2005.

⁵⁸⁴ M-29 81mm mortar. FAS Military Analysis Network, 2005.

⁵⁸⁵ SA-7 GRAIL. FAS Military Analysis Network, 2005.

⁵⁸⁶ T-54/T-55 Series Tanks. FAS Military Analysis Network, 2005.

⁵⁸⁷ Iraq Country Handbook, Department of Defense, pg 60, 1994.

106mm Recoilless Rifle (pg 81) – Developed after WWII, the 106mm recoilless rifle was one of the standard items of the U.S. armed forces. Featuring a rifled barrel, unlike other smoothbore rocket launchers, the 106mm rifle fires fin-stabilized, solid propellant rockets. Able to be fired from the shoulder or from a mounting, the 106mm is designed to be a light weight anti-tank weapon to stop main battle tanks. It has a maximum range of 8,420 yards.⁵⁸⁸

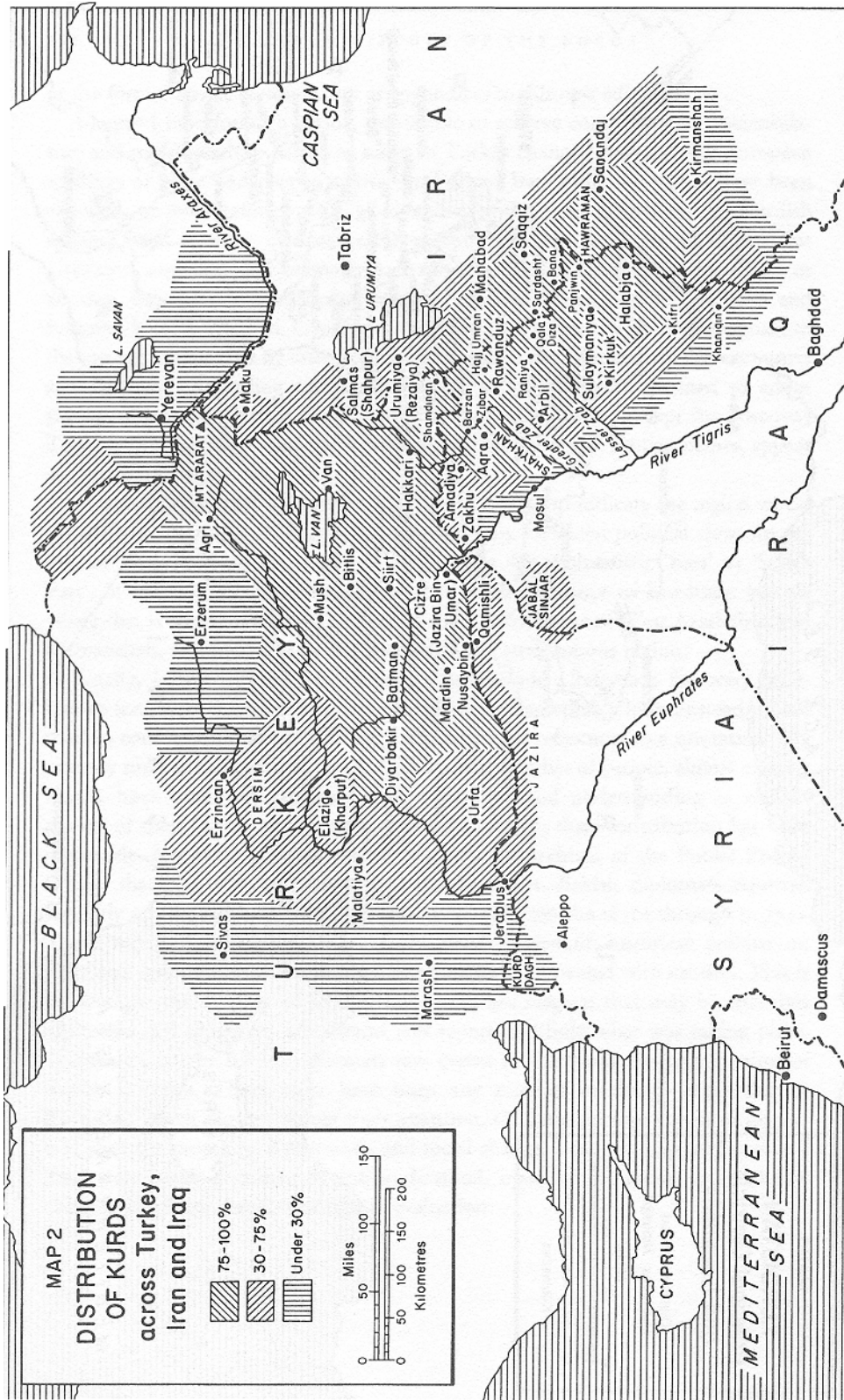
60mm mortar (pg 81) – The 60mm mortar was produced by the U.S. to replace its earlier WWII era mortars. A smooth-bore, muzzle loading, high-angle-of fire weapon, the 60mm mortar has a maximum range of 2.17 miles. Only weighing 46.5 lbs, it is designed to provide front-line commanders with an indirect fire weapon.⁵⁸⁹

⁵⁸⁸ Stoner, Bob GCMC (SW) Ret. M-40A1 106mm Recoilless Rifle with M-8c Spotting Rifle, 2005.

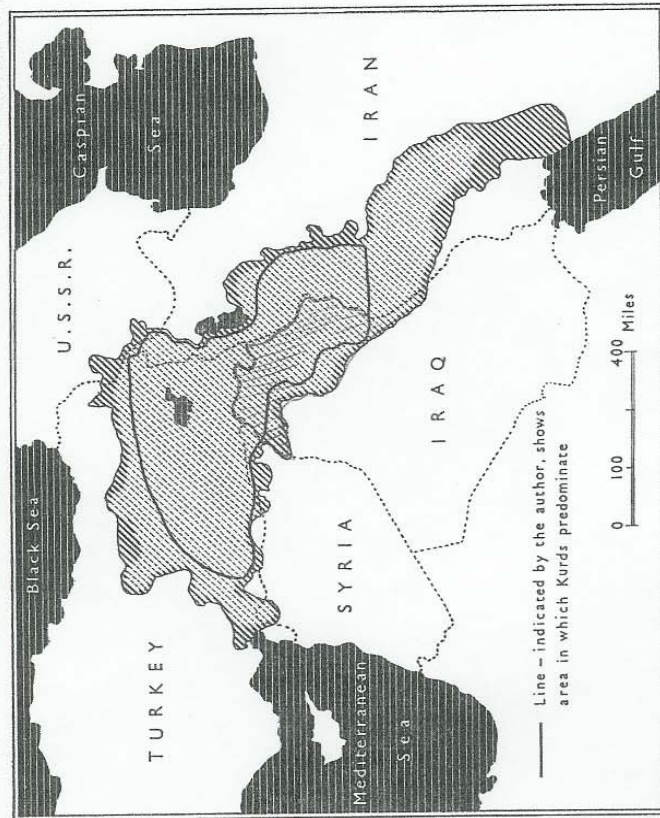
⁵⁸⁹ M-224 60mm mortar. Military Factory, 2005.

APPENDIX B: Maps

- 1 Map 1: Kurdistan: Principal Districts and Locations (acquired via A Modern History of the Kurds, David McDowall, 2004, pg xiii)
- 2 Map 2: Distribution of Kurds across Turkey, Iran, and Iraq (acquired via A Modern History of the Kurds, David McDowall, 2004, pg xiv)
- 3 Map 3: The Greater Kurdistan claimed by Kurdish Nationalists and Kurdistan as defined by William Eagleton (acquired via The Kurdish Republic of 1946, William Eagleton, Jr., 1963)
- 4 Map 4: The Boundaries of the Kurdish Republic, Sites of Battles, and the route of the Barzanis retreating to the USSR (acquired via The Kurdish Republic of 1946, William Eagleton Jr., 1963)
- 5 Map 5: Major Battles of the First Kurdish War (acquired via Arabs at War: Military Effectiveness 1948-1991, Kenneth M. Pollack, 2002, pg 160)
- 6 Map 6: Kurdish Autonomy Region (acquired via The Kurdish Struggle 1920-94, Edgar O'Ballance, 1996, pg 238)
- 7 Map 7: Operation Viking Hammer: Yellow Prong Battle against Ansar al-Islam (acquired via Masters of Chaos: The Secret History of the Special Forces, Linda Robinson, 2004, pg 314)
- 8 Map 8: The Green Line Battle of Task Force Viking (acquired via Masters of Chaos: The Secret History of the Special Forces, Linda Robinson, 2004, pg 327)



MAP 2: Distribution of Kurds across Turkey, Iran and Iraq



II. The Greater Kurdistan claimed by Kurdish Nationalists and Kurdistan as defined by the Author

MAP 3: Greater Kurdistan claimed by Kurdish Nationalists and Kurdistan as defined William Eagleton

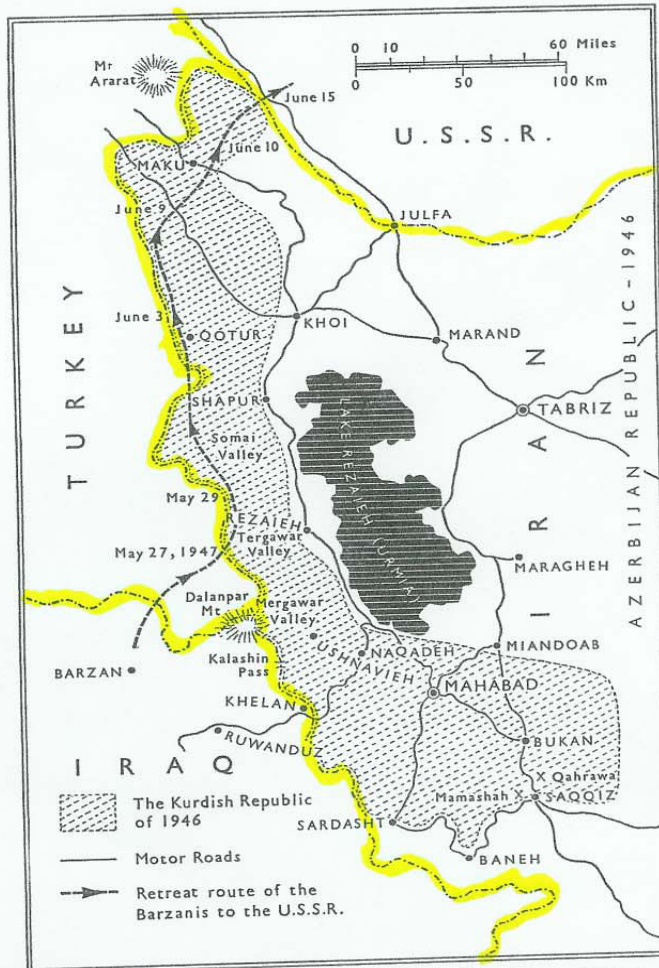
MATH

erity of the sentences, many maintain that it would have been clemency in dealing with that can never be positively the fact remains that the spirit of nationalism in Iran between 1945 and elsewhere in Kurdistan.

GENE

ne Barzanis including Shaikh and most of the women and military authorities. Nevertheless, military strength, under though divided among several eastern corner of the country. divided while negotiations were members of parliament in at the time that the influence of parliamentarians in Baghdad of clemency for the four army of the Kurdish Republic. However, at and the Iraqi army were executed. ustafa Khoshnao, Khairullah, Abdul Aziz were all executed. tion as personal aide to the

geance was in the air, had asylum in a friendly country, prominent Barzanis, was the led out by the blood of the shed in recent battle. Turkey troublesome nationalist Kurds. Only the Soviet Union crosses the Aras river. agreements had been made or Union beforehand. According when Mulla Mustafa called a that for him and a few others



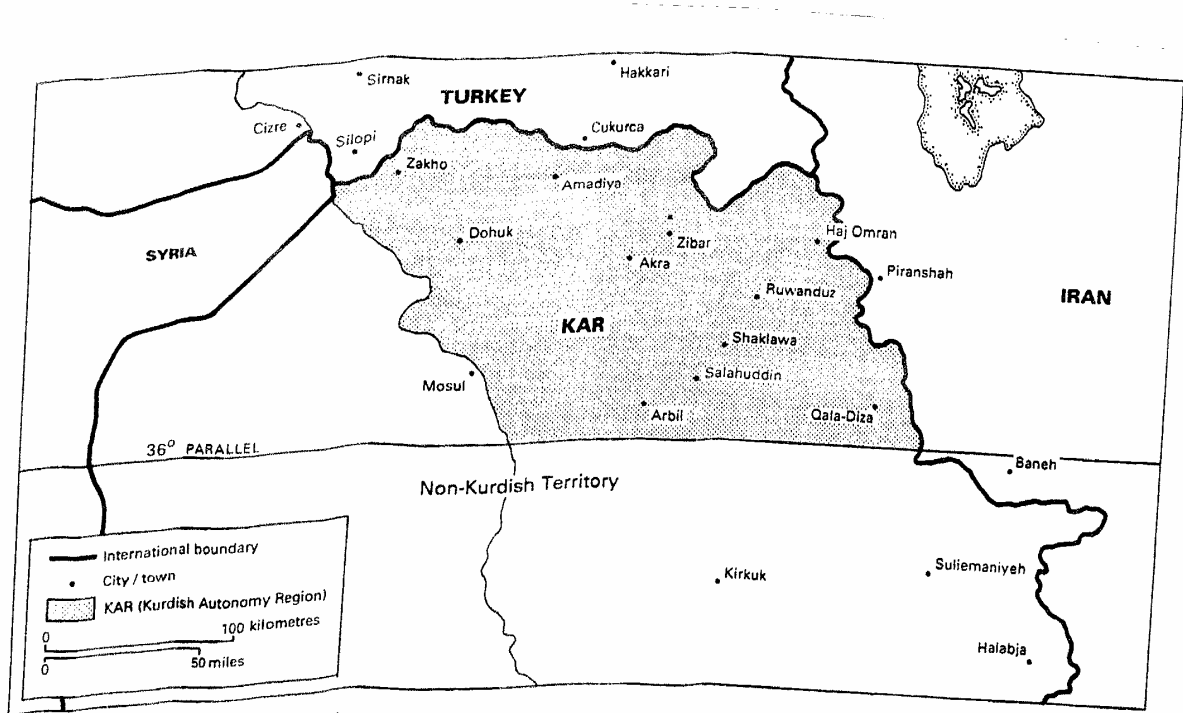
III. The Boundaries of the Kurdish Republic, Sites of Battles, and the route of the Barzanis retreating to the USSR

Eagleton, The Kurdish Republic of 1946

MAP 4: The Boundaries of the Kurdish Republic, Sites of Battles, and the Route of the Barzanis retreating to the USSR



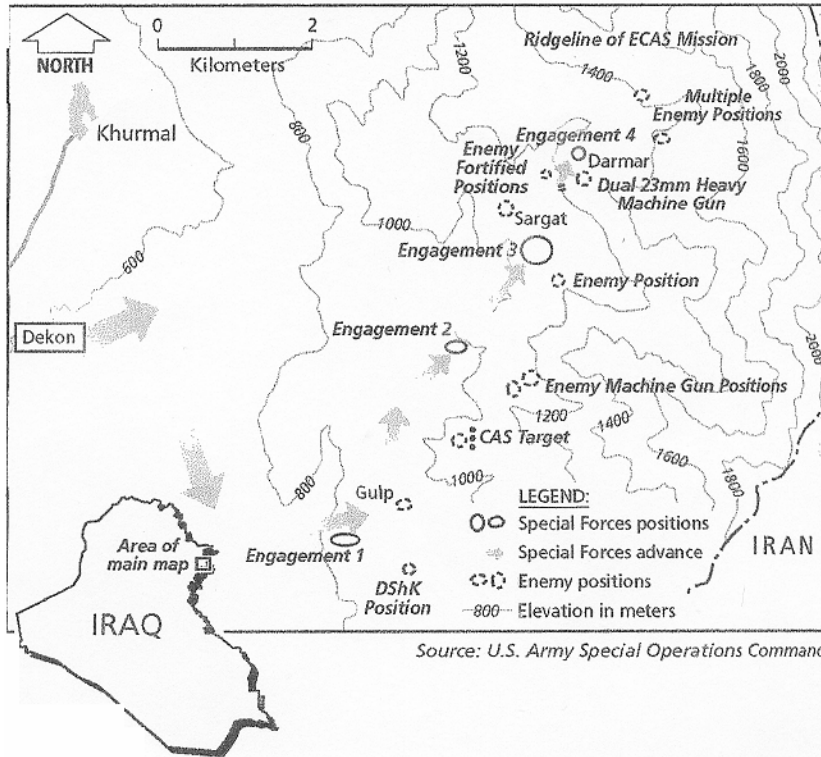
MAP 5: Major Battles of the First Kurdish-Iraqi War



4. Kurdish Autonomy Region

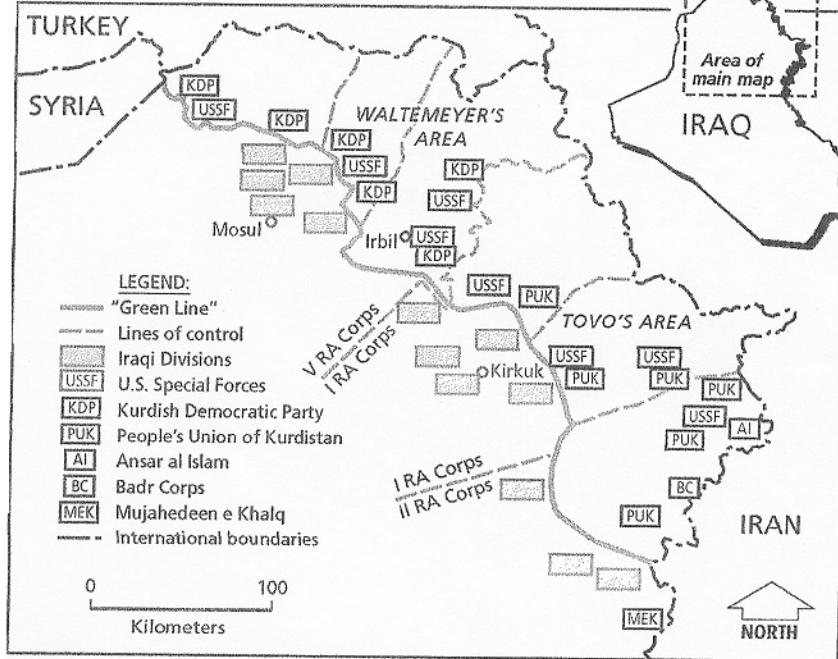
MAP 6: The Kurdish Autonomy Region

**Operation Viking Hammer:
Yellow Prong Battle against Ansar al Islam**



**MAP 7: Operation Viking Hammer:
The Yellow Prong Battle against Ansar al Islam**

The Green Line Battle of Task Force Viking



Source: U.S. Army Special Operations Command

MAP 8: The Green Line Battle of Task Force Viking

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BIOGRAPHICAL SKETCH

Michael G. Lortz was born neither in a manger nor with a golden spoon in his mouth. After living in Hicksville, New York until the age of ten, Michael and his family moved to Melbourne, Florida in 1987. While in Melbourne, Michael had aspirations of being a baseball player, a criminal psychologist, a lawyer, a politician, and the President of the United States. Not making any headway towards his career aspirations in Melbourne, Michael joined the U.S. Army in 1995. In the Army, Michael was able to see parts of the world many do not get the opportunity to see. After being all he could be in the Army, Michael enrolled in Florida State University in 1999. Realizing his presidential path had been derailed, Michael sought to become a writer, receiving a bachelor's degree in English/Creative Writing in 2003. With no job leads after sending out dozens upon dozens of resumes and with little chance of writing the Great American Novel, Michael changed his career goals yet again, hoping to assimilate his military experiences with his education. By linking his past experiences with a master's degree in International Affairs, Michael hopes to travel the world, influence global policy and make the world a better place. After 20 or so years in the international field, Michael hopes to retire and own a beachside bar where he can relax and share a beer or two with the local clientele.