CHAPTER 4
The Kurdish issue has constituted a central problem confronting Iraqi governments ever since the State of Iraq was established in 1920. This problem has comprised both internal and external aspects. In the domestic political context the Kurds, on the basis of their ethnic and linguistic difference from the Arab majority, have justifiably pressed for a special status within the Iraqi State. Yet on many occasions that genuine desire has been exploited by external powers with an interest in keeping the contemporary State of Iraq disunited and weak\(^1\).

Kurdistan, the land of the Kurds, is situated, in the Western part of Asia, in West Asia. It does not constitute a State, and the territory known as Kurdistan is shared by four countries namely Turkey, Iran, Iraq and Syria\(^2\). The Kurds of Iraq hoped that in a country under British influence they might enjoy greater freedom and their national life would develop into maturity. The Iraqi Government agreed to recognize the Kurds as a people having their own cultural identity and granted them full status as Iraqi citizens. Upon the termination of British tutelage, it was hoped that in time the Kurds would be integrated with

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Arabs and other entho-cultural groups to form the Iraqi nation.\(^3\)

But after independence neither the Kurds nor the Arabs in true sense were prepared to form a national identity and failure to create a new national identity for Iraq was the root cause of Kurdish reluctance to give up their Kurdish identity. As the Arabs always asserted the Arab character of the country and the new generation identified itself with Pan-Arabism, the Kurds feared that their dependence on an Iraqi identity might be merely a step toward their ultimate assimilation by the advocates of Arab nationalism. The Kurdish nationalism that had been in the making before independence began to grow and was given impetus by the corresponding growth of Arab nationalism after World War-II. Without a serious attempt to discourage either trend or to impress on both Kurds and Arabs about the necessity of stressing the supremacy of the Iraqi national identity.\(^4\)

Since Kurdish nationalism took the form of tribal uprisings led by tribal chiefs - Mulla Mustafa and

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others it was suppressed by force on the ground that they were rebellions challenging the authority of the Central Government. Nothing constructive was done to win the confidence of the Kurds and the root cause of dissatisfaction, remained virtually untouched. Long before it came to power, the Ba‘th Party was perhaps the first political party to tackle the Kurdish question with a positive and constructive approach. 5.

The Kurdish issue was one of the questions mentioned in the National Revolutionary Command Council’s (NRCC) statement on the morning of February 8, 1963, when the Ba‘th came to power in a coup. This statement declared that one of the goals new governments’ was to achieve national unity by “manner that would guarantee the national interest, strengthen the common struggle against Imperialism, and (express) respect for the rights of minorities by allowing them to participate in the national life.” 6.

However, negotiations between the Kurdish leaders and the new ‘Iraqi Government did not lead to a satisfactory agreement. When Jalal Talibani, personal representative of Mulla Mustafa, arrived in Baghdad on 19 February 1963 and met Tahir Yahya, Chief of Staff, he was

5. Ibid, p. 102.

told with reservations that Kurdish autonomy was to be declared soon. It was at that time that Bakr and 'Ammash, the Premier and the Defence Minister, declared in broad terms 'Kurdish rights' rather than autonomy. They seem to have feared that an immediate declaration of autonomy might arouse Pan-Arab criticism of the Ba'thi Government, although Ba'ith leaders had agreed on Kurdish autonomy in principle. They told Kurdish leaders that the Kurdish problem should be discussed with the broader scheme of Arab unity. An announcement of the 'Iraqi Government that guaranteed 'the rights of the Kurds', on March 1, 1963 the two Kurdish members of the 'Iraqi Government, viz Baba Ali and Fuad Arif, accompanied by Tahir Yahya and Ali Hayder Sulayman, to negotiate with Mulla Mustafa. The basic Kurdish demands were discussed and Mulla Mustafa insisted that as a first step the principle of autonomy should be recognized, but the details would be subjected to future negotiations. The principal Kurdish demands were:

1. Equal rights for Arabs and Kurds within a unified State,

2. The Post of Vice-President and Assistant Chief of Staff of the Iraqi Republic should go to Kurds;

3. Kurdistan to comprise the provinces of Sulaymania, Kirkuk, Arabil, and the Kurdish districts of Mosul and Diyala provinces, with its own executive and legislative council, the authority of the Kurdish administration to include justice, internal affairs, education, health, agriculture. Appointments of Kurds to all Official posts, Kurdish language should be given the status of the second official language.

4. Kurds to belong to the N.C.R.C. in proportion to their percentage in Iraqi population.

5. Oil revenues and customs due to be shared on the same proportion basis.

6. Military movement in Kurdistan by the Iraqi army to be made only with the consent of the Kurdish administration.

The Ba’th leaders, though accepting autonomy in principle, hesitated to make a formal declaration because they feared that if it might constitute a step towards an ultimate independence. They, therefore, formed a ‘popular delegation’ (not officially to represent the government) to negotiate with Mulla Mustafa to substitute the word ‘decentralization’ for ‘autonomy’. The Government issued a statement on March 9, 1963.

8. Ibid, p. 270.
Since one of the main aims of the Revolution of Ramadhan 14 (Feb. 8) 1963 is to establish a modern system based on the best administrative and governmental methods, and since the methods of decentralization has proved to be beneficial, therefore, the Revolution, acting on the basis of revolutionary principals announced in its first communique providing for strengthening of Arab-Kurdish brotherhood and for respect of the rights of Kurds and other minorities, approves the national rights of the Kurdish people on the basis of decentralization. This should be entered in the provisional and the permanent constitutions when they are enacted. A committee will be formed to lay down the broad lines of decentralization.

During the latter part of March, 1963, Kurdish leaders met to establish an atmosphere of solidarity to back up the Kurdish delegation that was going to try to negotiate for a special status for the Kurds with the Baghdad Government. After a month of much waiting and some meetings, including one with Deputy Prime Minister Sadi, the Kurdish delegation presented on April 24, 1963 a formal version of their familiar proposals for autonomy to the Baghdad Government. In sum by these proposals pointed out asked that Iraq should make a unified state comprising two

nationalities, Arabs and Kurds, with each enjoying equal rights; that the Kurds would be allowed to exercise legislation in a defined area including the northern provinces of Sulaymaniyah, Kirkuk and Arbil, and domain districts populated by Kurdish majority in Mosul and Diyala provinces, that this region have a share in all revenues and be represented on the twenty-man NCRC in proportion to its representation in the population at large; and that the military forces in Kurdistan be exclusively Kurdish, except in time of national emergency. The proposals were not formally rejected, and the Government took pains to deny them in early May, 1963 when that the talks for negotiations came to an end. More alarming was the news that the Government began to reimpose restrictions in the north, especially the economic blockade, which was taken as sign that it was preparing for a resumption of the fighting. On 10 June, 1963 it arrested the Kurdish representatives, demanded the surrender of Mulla Mustafa and his forces within twenty four hours, and launched an offensive with a savagery for exceeding Qasim's. The fighting continued till February 1964.

After the fall of the Ba'th government, it was now Tahir Yahya, the new Premier, who had been in


contact with Kurdish leaders to reopen negotiations. No agreement seems to have been reached, but two communiques were issued simultaneously by President Arif and Mulla Mustafa on 10 February 1964, declaring a cease fire. Negotiations were conducted between Kurdish and Iraqi leaders but no agreement was reached, despite exchange of letters to resolve specific issue between Abd al-Salam Arif and Mulla Mustafa. Hence fighting again broke out in March with no marked success for either side. 

Settlement of Kurdish question devolved upon Bazaz, the civilian Premier, who realized that the internal social and economic conditions could not be improved until the Kurdish question was brought to an end. On 15 June 1966 al Bazaz appeared on radio and television and declared himself ready to recognize Kurdish nationalism and the Kurds 'national rights'. After twelve days of negotiations he announced the Declaration of 29 June, which recognized clearly and unequivocally the 'binational character of the Iraqi State. Before it had opportunity to implement this programme, the Bazaz government was replaced by an army officer who was not in favour of such a settlement. After Party's return to power in July 1968, the Ba'th Party leaders saw a fresh in the Kurdish problem a major threat to


the existence of the Iraqi State and a dangerous opportunity for foreign elements to interfere in the internal affairs of Iraq. The Party declared its intention to find a fundamental solution to the Kurdish problem. This intention, however, met with the same old obstacles. First there was the increasing confidence of the Kurdish leadership under the Mulla Mustafa. He was determined not to come to term with the central government before obtaining all his demands. Second, there was the problem of convincing the party members and the Iraqi and Arab public opinion that autonomy was not equivalent to separation. Finally, there was the continuing opposition by the military to a peaceful settlement.

Desperate to resolve the issue, the new Ba’thist regime launched the war in Kurdistan in April 1969. In the Kirkuk plain the Kurdish peasant were expelled from their lands or massacred.

While these struggles were taking place, General Al-Bakr, anxious as ever to appear in the role of ‘father of the nation’, made overtures to the left and sent an emissary, Aziz Sharif, to negotiate with General Barzani.


These secret talks led eventually to an agreement on 11 March 1970\textsuperscript{16}.

Following the signing of an agreement between Saddam Husain and Mulla Mustafa al-Barzani, President al-Bakr in his message to the nation on March 11, 1970, announced that the Revolutionary Command Council had solved the Kurdish problem in accordance with the resolution of the Ba'\textquotesingle th Party's Seventh Regional Congress. The programme included the following measures:

1. Recognition of Kurdish as the official language in those areas where Kurds constitute a majority. Kurdish and Arabic would be taught together in all schools.

2. Participation of Kurds in government, including the appointment of Kurds to key posts in the state.

3. Furtherance of Kurdish education and culture.

4. Requirement that officials in the Kurdish area speak Kurdish.

5. Right to establish Kurdish student, youth, women's and teacher's organizations.

6. Economic development of the Kurdish area.

7. Return of Kurds to their villages or financial compensation.

8. Agrarian reform

9. Amendment of the Constitution to read "the Iraq People consist of two main nationalities! the Arab and the Kurdish nationalities.

10. Return of the Clandestine radio stations and heavy weapons to the government.

11. Appointment of Kurdish Vice-President.

12. Amendment of provincial laws in accordance with this declaration.


The implementation of the March Manifesto was expected to lead eventually to "self-rule" in the Kurdish area within the framework of the new provincial law in which the principle of administrative decentralization was enshrined. It was a compromise between the Mulla's demand for autonomy and direct control of the Kurdish area by the central authority. In the new provincial law, self-rule for the Kurdish area was a form of decentralization which the

17. Ghareeb Edmund, op, cit, p. 87.
law has provided for the rest of the provinces in order to preserve the country's unity within the new decentralized system. The Ba'ath leaders naturally took it for granted that under the new administrative system the central authority was supreme while Mulla Mustafa contended that certain residuary powers to be exercised by him through the mechanism of self-rule.18

However important differences arose in the interpretation of the principle of "self-rule" as envisioned in the March Manifesto. First Mulla Mustafa demanded that four of the provinces specified in the new provincial law - Sulaymaniya, Kirkuk, Arbil, Sinjar and Duhok - should be considered Kurdish even though some of the towns and localities within them may not be inhabited by a majority of Kurds, like the cities of Kirkuk and Khanaqin. Second, he demanded the retention of certain powers to conduct Kurdish foreign relations which he had exercised during the defacto regime when he was at war with the central government. Third, he demanded the retention of control over the Pesh Merga - the Kurdish militia - though he agreed that this force should become part of the national army. The Ba'ath leaders rejected the Mulla's three demands.19

Despite initial optimism that the March Manifesto would provide the basis for a permanent understanding, by September 1972, the agreement was showing signs of breakdown. The factor leading towards breakdown are clearly stated in the memorandum exchanged between the Ba’th Party and the Kurdish Democratic Party (KDP) at this time 20.

The Ba’th Party’s memorandum, of September, 1972, although admitted some mistakes committed by government officials, placed the major share of balance for the worsening situation on the leadership of Mulla Mustafa al-Barzani. KDP policy was criticised in three fields. First, in its external relations the KDP was accused of maintaining and strengthening its relation with Iran. Second, in the field of internal policy the memorandum accused the KDP of working to establishing its own undisputed authority in Iraqi Kurdistan through bypassing and some times defying the authority of the central government. Third, the KDP was accused of plotting directly and indirectly against the Iraqi regime 21.

In answer to the Ba’th Party the KDP sent a yet longer memorandum to the Ba’th leadership. The latter

20. Niblock, Tim, op. cit, p. 50.
21. Ibid, p. 51
memorandum failed to deny the accusation which had been made, but sought to exonerate the KDP from blame by citing the KDP's own complaints and observations, that were the real reasons behind the deteriorating situation. The government was blamed for its failure to honour its obligations in the March Manifesto. Three major undertakings of the manifesto had not been implemented, according to the memorandum, first, the KDP had neither been given due representation in the legislature and executive, nor a Kurdish Vice-President for the republic had been appointed. Second, the demarcation of the proposed autonomous Kurdish region had not been carried out, and finally, the Kurdish area had not been allocated a special share in the economic plan. Besides its major complaints, the KDP had other reasons also for adopting an intrasigent stand. First, there was the role of Shah of Iran and the CIA who furnish Mulla Mustafa with a great deal of material and moral support thus enabling him to persist in his defiance of the Iraqi government. Second, the Kurdish leaders were alarmed by some abortive attempts on the lives of their leaders, especially on Mulla Mustafa.

22. Ibid-52- See for detail Ghareeb, Edmund, pp. 115-123.
23. Niblock Tim, op, cit, p. 53.
However, between March 1974 and March 1975 the Kurdish Peshmarga took arms again, despite the fact that the government had declared, in March 1974, the Kurdish area as an autonomous region. Differences over the interpretation of the Manifesto for autonomy were the main reasons behind the eruption of fighting. Other reasons were the Kurdish continuing claim for the oil-rich province of Kirkuk to be included in the autonomous region, over the extent of powers to be given to autonomous region, and over the Kurds participation in the central government.  

Due to the sophistication of the weapons used, the new war was tough and intensive. Both sides were better equipped and organized, but the Iraqi army retained upper hand. After the initial success of the peshmarga, the Iraqi army staged its counter-offensive and in a few months managed to remove the peshmarga’s threat to Zakho and Mosul, together with clearing the routes leading from and to the plain. In July and August the Peshmarga were forced into the mountains along the Turkish and Iranian borders after an extensive offense launched by the Iraqi Military Command. From this time the Peshmarga had to rely on Iranian reinforcements without which they could not resist the heavy Iraqi offensive, including the bombing of Kurdish town and


villages. But the agreement between Iraq and Iran on the frontier dispute in March, 1975, left the Peshmarga at the mercy of the Iraqi army bombing.\textsuperscript{26}

With no support from outside within days of the Iraqi-Iranian understanding, the Kurdish revolt collapsed. The Iraqi government declared a general one-month amnesty to all Kurds and asked the peshmarga to lay down their arms. Most Kurds feared reprisals and crossed the border into Iran rather than submit to the Iraqi government. Mulla Mustafa, his family and prominent members of the KDP were among the first to cross. At the end of the amnesty period the Iraqi army moved almost unharassed into the hearland of KDP, gaining control of all Iraqi Kurdistan. By May, 1975 armed activity in Iraqi Kurdistan had come to an end.\textsuperscript{27}

Telibani, however, remained active in the Kurdish national movement, and when Barzani's rebellion collapsed in 1975, Telibani set up its headquarters in Damascus, where the regime of Hafiz Assad, inimical to the Iraqi Ba'thists, provided him a base from which to continue the Kurdish resistance. Telibani's group, the Patriotic union of Kurdistan (PUK), conducted Fedayeen-type raids into

\textsuperscript{26} Khadduri, Majid, 1968, op, cit, p. 109.
\textsuperscript{27} Niblock, Tim, op, cit, p. 57.
Iraq when the war between Iran and Iraq broke out in September 1980. The Telebani’s PUK established bases in Iraq as - Sulaymaniyyah’s region of Southern Kurdistan for example 28.

The Iran-Iraq war made allies out of erstwhile enemies; Iraq aided the Iranian Kurdish guerrillas, particularly the Ghassemilou forces. An Telebani, too found himself cooperating with Baghdad, howbeit indirectly. In the summer of 1983 Iran invaded Iraqi Kurdistan in a drive spearheaded by guerrillas of the Iraqi Kurdish Democratic Party, Barzani’s old party, now headed by his sons, Massoud and Idris. The Iranian thrust into northern Iraq presented Telebani with a crucial dilemma. Over the years the enmity between himself and Barzani’s had ripened until there was little hope of reconciliation. Telebani felt that he could not ally with Iranian because to do so he would have had to join forces with his hated enemies, the Barzans 29.

Saddam Husan at this stage took advantage of Telebani’s predicament by offering to declare a truce with the PUK. Saddam asked Telebani to incorporate his guerrillas into the Iraqi army, where they would form a border guard and defend northern Iraq against the Iranian and the

29. Ibid.
Barzanis. Saddam in return was ready to make a significant grant of autonomy to the Kurds.\(^{30}\)

The Ba'thist leadership from the very start realized that solution had to be found to the Kurdish problem which weakened Iraq both internally and externally. The proposals to the Kurds, as expressed in the Manifesto of March 11, 1970, and in the Autonomy law of March 11, 1974, acknowledged the existence of the Kurdish people as a distinct national group within Iraq possessing their own language and culture. It further recognized the existence of a "Kurdish area", which by virtue of the majority of its population gave it the designation of Iraqi Kurdistan. The Autonomy Law also granted a number of national rights to the Kurds and offered them the opportunity to run their own affairs locally through autonomous government organs.\(^{31}\) At the same time, however, this Autonomy Law limited Kurdish control over natural resources and placed the security apparatus of the autonomous area under central government. The law made it clear that the Iraqi government considered the Kurdistan area and its people to be an indivisible part of Iraq.

At the same time, aware that the solution to

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the Kurdish problem lies beyond the achievement of military and political victory, the Ba’thist leadership has tried to win the support and loyalty of the Kurds through a peaceful process of social and economic reconstruction. The Ba’th government has implemented major economic development programs designed to appease the Kurds by transforming the economic structure of the Kurdish area and improving their conditions.

Saddam Husain has continued his efforts to rally Kurdish support for the autonomous process in Kurdish area. During several tours of the Kurdish area in March and August 1979 he said that the Ba’th Party was open to all Iraqis without discrimination.

The fall of Mulla Mustafa has ended the costliest war in Iraq’s modern history. The government now felt free to pursue its objective at hom and abroad. Externally the end of the war meant that Iraq is able to play a more effective role in regional affairs, especially in the Gulf region and in the nonaligned movement. Iraq has also embarked on major programs for industrial and agricultural development and for improving the standard of living of its people. Iraq’s policy of cooperation with Arabs neighbors and the expansion of relations with the

32. Ibid.
Third World and with European and Latin American countries has revealed its growing role as a regional power and active member of the nonaligned movement. This is demonstrated in Iraq’s decision to host the Baghdad Summit Conference, using it as a forum to explain its Arab and regional policies and in the decision to hold the non-aligned summit conference in Baghdad in 1982.

The granting of autonomy to the Kurds and ambitious development schemes have strengthened Iraq’s hand in its confront action with the new regime in Iran. The conflict over the shatt-al Arab and the land border area was sharpened by ideological differences between the Arab nationalist and socialist regime in Baghdad and fundamentalist regime in Tehran. The Iranian leadership made no secret of its intention to export its Islamic revolution to Iraq and has supported some Kurdish and religious opponents to the Iraq regime.

Broadly speaking, Iraq has proved in practice to recognise Kurdish national rights to a greater extent than either Turkey or Iran. However, the Iraqi resort to force to resolve the Kurdish question has aroused suspicion in Kurdish nationalist circles.