Kurdistan was erased from world maps after World War I when the victorious nations carved up the Middle East and denied the Kurds of a nation state. Geographically, politically and economically marginalised, Kurds never stopped dreaming of a homeland but were never allowed to emerge as a coherent nation.

OLGA YOLDI writes about their struggle.

Still waiting..... KURDISTAN
Last September, Turkey’s parliament announced greater cultural freedom for the Kurds, after approving several constitutional reforms including measures easing restrictions on broadcasting and publishing in the Kurdish language. This was the best news for Turkish Kurds in decades but this was a reform package primarily aimed at strengthening Turkey’s campaign to join the European Union. Although the country had been accepted as a candidate for membership in 1999, it was told it needed to clean up its human rights record before it could start accession talks.

The issue of Kurdish language rights continues to be highly sensitive, given that the conflict in the ethnic Kurdish dominated south east has claimed more than 30,000 lives since 1984. Successive Turkish governments have resisted liftingcurbs on the use of the Kurdish language fearing this would further fan separatism among the country’s estimated 19 million Kurds. “Parliament is on the way to going down in history as the pioneers of Turkey’s reformation process,” wrote Ilnur Cevik, editor of the Turkish Daily News.

The Turkish parliament however stopped short of abolishing the death penalty -another condition set by the European Union for membership. For a country that spent US$10 billion dollars annually repressing the Kurds in the last 15 years of conflict, the reform package is seen as a step forward. Although there is a long way to go Turkey might find itself with no option but to seek a solution to the Kurdish problem.

“The process of democratisation could be successful in Turkey,” a representative of the Kurdistan Workers Party said. “The Kurdish problem will be solved if the country incorporates the Kurdish guerrillas and the Kurdistan Workers Party in an appropriate democratic system. Violence embedded in society and the social structure will lose its meaning and will be dumped in the dustbin of history,” he added.

Proposals to legalise Kurdish language education are absent from the reform package. Some politicians say that changes do not go far enough, that to be able to carry out major reforms it will be necessary to change the constitution. “The present constitution should be scrapped all together,” Mr Hasim Hasimi from the Motherland Party said to the Los Angeles Times.

The question is, how far is the Turkish government prepared to go in order to enter the European Union?
A LONG HISTORY

Kurds’ ethnic roots reach back thousands of years to the dawn of Mesopotamia. They were not actually called Kurds until the 7th century, when most of them converted to Islam. Kurdistan is situated in the mountains and plateau where the states of Turkey, Iraq and Iran meet (east and south east Turkey, northern Iraq and western Iran.)

Kurds constitute 28 per cent of the population in Turkey (about 19 million,) 24 per cent in Iraq, 12 per cent in Iran and 10 per cent in Syria. But Kurds can also be found in Lebanon, Armenia and Azerbaijan.

“Kurdish” people have existed as an identifiable group for possibly more than 2000 years, but only in the twentieth century did they acquire a sense of community as Kurds,” Historian David McDowall writes in his book A Modern History of the Kurds. “This sense of national community occurred at the same time when Turks and Arabs also began to embrace an ethnic sense of identity... As a consequence Kurds had to compete against states intent on forging a new identity based upon an ethnicity that they felt denied their own identity. Kurds were disadvantaged because they lacked both a civic culture and an established literature.”

But do Kurds constitute a nation or are they just an ethnic group? Kurdistan does not enjoy international acceptance as a nation within a recognised territory. It does not constitute a nation state because it lacks the institutions of government as well as a shared language. In fact language differences, the prevalence of different scripts - Latin in Turkey, Cyrillic in the ex Soviet Union and Persian in Iraq and Iran, cast a shadow on the uniqueness of a Kurdish language. Kurmanji, which is spoken by most northern Kurds and Sorani by southern Kurds, are perceived as dialects rather than languages and there are still constant debates about their status as languages.

Kurdistan is however real - it has survived in the imagination of most Kurdish nationalist groups and many Kurdish people who deeply believe in a Kurdish homeland-. Nevertheless Kurdistan is also an imaginary place. It has acquired a mystical quality as the land of mountains, wheat fields and deep fertile valleys, a place located in a major crossroad of the world, where ancient tribes and nomads used to live and wonder, where Kurds shared a common ancestry, a common culture and myths.

Historians have written that Kurdish identity was forged in the 1920s, but it was extreme poverty and state oppression that fuelled Kurdish nationalism over the years. However, the task of building a homeland would prove difficult if not impossible, as governments sought the assimilation of Kurds into their own territories and perceived Kurdish nationalism as a threat to the integrity of their national sovereignty.

It was the introduction of modern borders that changed the lives of Kurds forever. Although some borders have existed for centuries, the modern border became a major impediment for Kurdish unity and nationalism, as the Kurdish population suddenly became separated, divided, and fiercely controlled by governments. Frontiers would in fact transform the lives of many Kurds, particularly the pastoralists whose movements had been unrestrained by international borders for centuries.

Once frontiers were carved they would remain forever and Kurdish culture, language and identity have been constantly undermined by the regimes of the countries they inhabit.

“The border was also increasingly used for smuggling, still an important source of income in impoverished areas. Permeable frontiers afforded refuge to those offended by the state. Kurdish leaders have been seeking sanctuary in neighbouring states.... They would cross the border when defeated and cross it again to resume their rebellion.”

In 1920 Kurds lost an opportunity to form their own modern nation state under the Treaty of Sevres, which was never ratified, later to be abandoned in favour of the Treaty of Lausanne, which supported the division of Kurdistan. As a result, Kurds became the largest nation of people without a homeland. They would remain minority communities living in states with oppressive regimes that forcibly imposed a national identity on all ethnic groups. Over the years a history of resistance would develop.

Their demands for autonomy, self determination and separate statehood would bring them into direct confrontation with governments, which did not hesitate to declare war on Kurdish freedom fighters and on the defenseless civilians.

A CLASS STRUGGLE

On 29 June 1999 a Turkish court convicted Kurdistan Workers Party leader Abdullah Ocalan to death. The Turkish state called Ocalan a terrorist but many Kurdish people looked upon him as their leader. Following his conviction he declared:

“My sadness stems from the fact that Turkey could not learn from the policies applied in the world. Although a solution was possible for Kurdistan we did not seize the opportunity.”

Abdullah Ocalan had grown up a Muslim but became a Marxist while studying Political Science at Ankara University. In August 1984, Ocalan and small group of friends formed a clandestine group that ultimately became the Partiya Karkari Kurdistan PKK -The Kurdistan Workers Party, based on a Marxist- Leninist ideology. They launched a series of attacks and ambushes on Turkish forces in the Kurdish region and decided that theirs would be a class
The PKK’s manifesto consisted of educating the poor, the students, on breaking traditions that kept Kurds backward and on creating a free, open and progressive society. They recruited militants from the poorest and most oppressed sectors of Kurdish society in an effort to drive all Turkish forces from Kurdish territory and establish a united and independent Kurdistan.

The PKK initially declared war against the security forces, for they represented state oppression and against the landlords, who were perceived as perpetuating feudalism. For many years a small group of landlords had owned most of the land, (less than 3 per cent of the population owned 33 per cent of the arable land) and as a result had enormous power. The PKK started to shoot at landlords and launched spectacular ambushes against the security forces. But in the process it created a climate of fear and great ambivalence among ordinary Kurds. Some admired it for its courage but others loathed it because its Marxist ideology challenged the social order.

The government retaliated by employing Kurdish tribesmen to work as armed guards. Their mission was to guard the border areas to block PKK access to supplies and logistics. This strategy turned out to be effective in dividing the Kurdish population. The government exerted pressure on tribes (that were believed to be loyal to the state and hostile to the tribes that supported the PKK) to join the village guards. Some tribesmen were expelled from their villages when they refused to join the guards. Others decided to leave to avoid being caught between the PKK and the village guards. Those left behind soon became polarised by the conflict. Because village guards knew the mountains as well as the PKK guerrilla fighters, they were much more effective in fighting the guerrillas than regular military units. The PKK retaliated with brutal attacks.

As time went by the PKK was becoming a threat to the Turkish state because of the mass support it enjoyed from the Kurdish people. Conditions of life deteriorated...
as the conflict intensified. The government introduced a law prohibiting all expressions of Kurdish culture and allocated 200,000 troops to Kurdish areas. Turkish Kurdistan was now invaded not only by the guerrillas but also by the police, the gendarmerie, the army and the village guards.

Troops continued killing guerrillas and civilians. President Suleyman Demirel announced that the counter insurgency operation would involve systematic cleansing and deportation and indeed this is what happened. The Turkish government not only committed the most dreadful human rights violations against Kurds, such as physical abuse and torture of detainees, extra judicial killings and disappearances, but it also implemented a strategy of mass deportation of Kurdish people. By 1993, three hundred and sixty five villages had been emptied and three million people made homeless. Deprived of their livelihood, their homes and the land where they had lived for generations many had nowhere to go.

According to Human Rights Watch evacuations were carried out with extreme brutality by the armed forces. They were not only forced to leave their homes but saw their houses being destroyed and their possessions plundered. Most had to seek shelter in surrounding areas initially and later migrated to larger cities where they found themselves living in shantytowns. With no employment, education or connections an uncertain future awaited them. Few were able to escape the trauma of the violence and dislocation.

Turkey unsuccessfully sought the cooperation of its neighbours in an attempt to eradicate the PKK, but neither Iran nor Syria (which was backing the PKK) committed themselves.

In the early 1990s he PKK changed its direction. It stopped attacking civilians and, for the first time, Ocalan spoke of federalism as an option instead of separate statehood. He seemed to have reached the conclusion that the PKK would never defeat the Turkish army and the conflict would never be solved by military means. In December 1991 Ocalan announced his readiness to abandon the armed struggle for a negotiated solution.

The army continued its attacks on villages and guerrillas penetrating Northern Iraq where PKK had some bases. However in 1992 President Turgut Ozal seemed to have had a change of heart and was now more receptive to the idea of the PKK having a voice in Turkey’s political system.

In March 1993 Ocalan declared a ceasefire. He demanded cultural freedom, the abolition of the village guards, an end to the state emergency in Kurdistan and the recognition of Kurdish political rights. Unfortunately President Ozal, who was trying to convince the parliament to consider a peace process, died of a heart attack. Prime Minister Suleyman Demirel interpreted the ceasefire as a sign of weakness and refused to initiate talks.

“The state does not negotiate with terrorists,” he said.

In May, Ocalan declared the ceasefire over and resumed fighting, now launching a series of attacks on tourist areas, and taking tourists hostage. The PKK also attacked the Turkish embassy in Switzerland.

By 1993 the PKK had been waging war for a decade, but the armed struggle had not been effective in defeating the Turkish army or bringing a political solution to the Kurdish conflict. By 1996 it was struggling to maintain logistics and access to food and water. In 1998 Ocalan who had to leave his base in Syria, was arrested in Nairobi and brought back to Turkey to face trial. He was found guilty of treason and sentenced to death, but his case was taken to the European court in Strasbourg. Ocalan’s lawyer spoke of the unlawful abduction in Nairobi and the inadequate facilities for the preparation of his defense. President Demirel assured the international community that Turkey would indeed abide by Strasbourg’s ruling.

Following Ocalan’s trial many PKK supporters were detained by security forces and repression against the Kurds continued unabated. Ocalan called from prison for
a complete cessation of PKK military activity and the PKK announced that while it would abandon the armed struggle, Ocalan would continue to be their leader.

The army won the war against the Kurdish guerrillas but at a high price. The cost of suppressing the Kurds was more than US$100 billion since 1984. Had this money been invested in much needed economic development, education and health services in neglected Anatolia, the seeds of revolution may never have been sown.

Apart from the suffering inflicted on individuals and families and the loss of life the conflict hindered the political evolution of Turkey as a free democratic society. Military repression inevitably weakened civil society and human rights abuses brought Turkey into conflict with Europe.

The war also had a devastating impact on the economy, agriculture and the environment. The Kurdish provinces continue to be unquestionably the poorest in Turkey yet they receive only 10 per cent of the national development budget. Decades of total neglect have resulted in extreme poverty, high levels of illiteracy among the Kurdish population and a total lack of development. These are the real sources of oppression of the Kurdish people.

The recently announced greater cultural freedom for the Kurds will be of little value, unless the government takes serious steps to reverse the economic disparities between eastern and western Turkey, by investing in development, education and employment creation. Cultural freedom will not mean much to the Kurdish people, if they continue to be deprived of the most basic and fundamental human rights.

IRAQI KURDISTAN

SADDAM’S EXPERIMENTS -

On 17 March 1988 many people in the town of Halabja in Iraqi Kurdistan were not able to rise from their beds. They died unaware in their sleep. Just before sunrise fighter planes dropped tons of chemical and biological weapons on defenseless civilians.

The chemical bombardment had indeed been unprecedented in the history of the war against the Kurds. “The sound of crying and groans rose from every house... Many who survived the early morning bombings died later. That Friday afternoon, the magnitude of the Iraqi government’s crimes became evident. In the streets and alleys of Halabja, corpses piled up over one another. Children standing in front of their houses in the morning died from breathing cyanide gases.” Dr Christine Gosden and Mike Amitay write in their article Chemical Attack of Halabja by the Iraqi Regime.

More than 5,000 people died and over 10,000 more were wounded. Many of these were women and children. According to Middle East Watch, survivors who sought medical attention in Arbil were arrested, taken away and all males executed.

Halabja had been captured by Iranian troops aided by Kurdish guerrillas during the Iran-Iraq war, so the attacks were perceived as a punishment to the Kurdish population for sympathising with Iran.

According to British geneticist Dr Christine Gosden, who visited Halabja, the Iraqi government had been developing chemical weapons such as the potent nerve agent VX, biological nerve gases such as sarin and tabun, and mustard gas, which burn, mutate DNA and cause malformations and cancer. These gases can also kill, paralyze and cause immediate and lasting neuropsychiatric damage. Dr Gosden writes that Saddam had also developed biological weapons such as anthrax and the viciously toxic mycotoxins.

“...it is likely that the Iraqi government used mycotoxins in the Halabja bombing. This is one of the most dangerous biological agents ever devised because they are capable of producing the effect we fear most - being driven mad by designer psychosis and killing people from rapidly growing untreatable cancers,” she wrote.

About 250,000 people survived the chemical attacks. Ten years later survivors are still suffering from neurological damage and dying from cancers and respiratory ailments.

The Ba’ath Party of Iraq had a long history of perpetrating atrocities against the Kurds. It has always been an enthusiastic promoter of pan-Arabism - the unification of the Arab world through a form of Socialism based on nations, not on class - and during the Cold War found strong allies in Western countries such as the US.

The Kurds have been viewed as the weeds disturbing the Ba’athist vision. Khaled Salith

Iraqi Kurds under Saddam Hussein’s regime had two options: assimilation or extermination. In 1975 the Ba’ath Party embarked on the Arabisation of the oil producing areas in Kurdistan, evicting Kurdish farmers and replacing them with Arab tribesmen from the south. That same year when the Kurdish Democratic Party fled to Iran, after the collapse of the Kurdish uprising, many tribes were forced to leave their homes, their land and resettle in the barren desert in the south of Iraq. Later a quarter of a million people would also be forcibly evacuated from their homes by the borders with Iraq and Turkey.

Arabisation also meant that Kurds could neither sell their homes to other Kurds, nor could they build new homes or inherit land or property.

Divisions and rivalries within the opposition made the fight against Saddam a difficult task. When Iraq invaded Iran in 1980 the Kurdish leadership was deeply divided. The
Kurdistan Democratic Party (KDP), the Patriotic Union of Kurdistan (PUK), the Kurdistan Socialist Party (KSP) and the Iraqi Communist Party had a common goal: to overthrow the Ba’ath regime; but they were neither unified nor coordinated in their efforts.

The KDP and PUK’s guerrilla forces known as peshmergas - those near death operated independently from one another launching attacks against Iraqi troops and pro-government Kurdish militias, known as jash. Divisions and rivalries were so deeply entrenched that both Kurdish parties would later end up fighting against one another.

The KUP was established in Syria and supported by Syria and later Iran. The KDP, which revived its alliance with Iran after 1978, assisted the Iranian army to capture a border town during the Iraq-Iran war in 1983.

Saddam, who saw the dangers of Iranian cooperation with the Kurds, made attempts to negotiate with the KDP leader Masud Barzani but negotiations failed. Then he approached PUK leader Jalal Talabani, who announced a cease-fire. Talabani made a series of demands including the release of political prisoners, obtaining 30 per cent of oil revenue for the development of Kurdistan and an extension of the autonomous region to include the oil rich town of Kirkuk. The PUK argued that democratic elections in Iraq were fundamental for a free Kurdistan. But Saddam would not compromise, particularly after the US promised him support to defeat Iran.

In November 1986 Talabani and Barzani formed a coalition in Iran and announced the creation of the Kurdistan National Front, which included most Kurdish political parties. The Front would unify peshmerga forces and would be backed by Iran. Saddam, who had boasted the Kurds would not achieve anything because they were divided, saw the Front as a threat.

One year later when the Iraq-Iran war was coming to an end, Saddam appointed his cousin, General Ali Hasan al Majid, as Governor of the North and vested him with absolute powers to settle the Kurdish problem once and for all.

Al Majid wasted no time in launching the Anfal campaign—a series of military offensives between 1987 and 1989 against PUK strongholds and civilians. The Anfal campaign, which included the bombing of Halabja, systematically destroyed 4,000 Kurdish villages, killed more than 182,000 Kurds and left 1.4 million homeless. Few managed to escape their deaths by crossing the snow bound mountains to the east.

**GENOCIDE IN KURDISTAN**

According to Middle East Watch, the Anfal campaign was not intended as an exemplary punishment to the Kurd-
ish people for their presumed collaboration with Iran or for supporting Kurdish guerrillas.

“Punishment is not exemplary if there is no one left to witness the lesson, and Anfal was thus not intended as punishment. Anfal was a ‘final solution,’ implemented by the Iraqi government, the Ba’ath Party and the Iraqi army. It was intended to make the Kurds of Iraqi Kurdistan and their rural way of life disappear forever. Only such an intent can explain the precise, neat and thorough destruction of the already empty Kurdish villages, and the fact that Anfal encompassed virtually all Kurdish villages.” According to Middle East Watch.

Through a policy of shoot to kill, the first of Al Majid’s directives was to ban all human existence in the ‘prohibited areas.’ People’s only crime was to have been born Kurdis.

These ethnic cleansing operations started with chemical attacks from the air on both civilian and peshmerga targets. After the initial assault, ground troops and jash surrounded the areas destroying all human habitation in their path, looting household possessions and farm animals and setting fire to homes, before calling in demolition crews. Army trucks transported the villagers to transit camps. Men and women were segregated. Women and children were taken to camps with no facilities, the elderly to abandoned prisons where many died as a result of neglect, starvation and disease. Although the majority of women, children and elderly, who had survived the ordeal, were released after an official amnesty to mark the end of Anfal in September 1988, the men were never seen again. They had been systematically shot by firing squads and buried in mass graves in the desert. According to Middle East Watch, only 6 men survived to tell their own story.

Dr Clyde Snow, a well known US anthropologist, working in Iraq for a human rights organisation found skulls of young men in the mass graves with neck wounds and also the corpses of women who had been strangled.

Zygmunt Bauman in his book Modernity and Holocaust defines mass murder as “a virtual absence of all spontaneity on the one hand, and the prominence of rational, carefully calculated design on the other. The purpose of the modern genocide is a grand vision of a better and radically different society. Here a ‘gardener’s vision is projected upon a society.” He writes. “As in the case of the gardeners, the designers of the perfect society hate the weeds that spoil their design. The weeds surrounding the desired society must be exterminated, it is a problem that has to be solved; the weeds must die not so much because of what they are, but because of what the beautiful, orderly garden ought to be.”

According to researcher Khaled Salih, the Ba’athist rulers of Iraq have always desired to create a conflict-free, harmonious and orderly society, controlled and docile and the Kurds have constituted the main challenge to this vision, based on the rhetoric of pan-Arabism. “The Kurds have been viewed as the weeds disturbing the Ba’athist vision of Arab Iraq...They have never given up their dream. When the dream is embraced by an absolute power able to monopolise rational action, and when the power is totally free from effective social control, genocide follows.”

There is no doubt that Anfal did inflict a deep wound in Iraqi Kurdistan. Apart from systematically destroying Kurdistan, it left thousands of widows and an even greater number of orphans destitute, many of them seriously traumatised by the brutality they had witnessed. Without traditional support structures, many women took years to return to their villages.

Anfal with all its horror, devastation and death was not the end of violence. Following the 1990 Gulf war and military defeat of Iraq, another Kurdish uprising followed. This time initiated by ordinary Kurds and the pro-government Kurdish militia known as jash, who up until that time had been regarded as mercenaries and the enemies of the Kurdish people.

The KDP and PUK, keeping low profiles during the Gulf war, soon succeeded in taking control of the uprising. But after a few weeks of chaotic freedom, Iraq’s elite Republican Guard, aided by Iranian mujahideen, retaliated with such brutality that entire populations were driven out in a panic stampede towards the Turkish and Iranian borders.

One and a half million Kurds attempted to reach safety - only those crossing the Iranian border managed to do so. Turkey, fearing serious destabilisation, refused to admit them and hundreds of thousands spent weeks on the border, in freezing temperatures, exposed to snow and mud.

“Mothers carrying babies confronted Turkish troops ...begging to be allowed through to seek medical assistance...Others brought grandparents on their backs or carried in makeshift stretchers of blankets. But anyone who tried to cross into Turkey was beaten back with rifle butts,” a journalist from The Independent Newspaper wrote.

Contrary to all predictions President Bush did not want Saddam to lose control of Iraq after all and the Kurdish problem was described as ‘an internal affair’ in which Bush would not interfere. So American troops watched as Kurdish people were killed by Saddam’s troops. However, television images of death, cruelty and distress mobilised public opinion. The United States and its allies, unable to solve the refugee problem, created a safe heaven for the displaced Kurds in northern Iraq, by prohibiting Iraqi planes from flying north of the 36th parallel and by pushing the Iraqi troops southwards.

The refugees on the Turkish border were first relocated to camps inside the safe haven. This was complemented by a massive relief operation organised by NGOs and other agencies under the terms of a Memorandum of Under-

& the Quest for Nationhood
standing agreed by the UN and the Iraqi government in April 1991. By the summer, a large part of Iraqi Kurdistan was controlled by Kurds under international protection.

In the absence of any Coalition intervention the Kurdish National Front agreed to negotiate with the government. Saddam proposed a settlement based on the principle of confederation, but the Front wanted an autonomy pact with Coalition protection. The parties could not agree.

When negotiations failed Saddam decided to punish the Kurds by imposing an economic blockade on Kurdistan. He withdrew its civil administration and separated the region from the rest of Iraq. He imposed an internal embargo that cut Iraqi Kurdistan from the national electricity network, stopped monthly food rations, caused financial losses when the 25-dinar currency note was summarily cancelled and blocked the supply of vital heating and cooking fuels. Saddam also prohibited the sick from seeking specialised medical treatment elsewhere in the country and stopped salaries and pensions of tens of thousands of active civil servants.

He was determined to make life unbearable in the safe haven, particularly during the long and cold winter. A cold and starving population would have no choice but reject the Front and submit to his terms. But the Front declared its intention of replacing the old Legislative Assembly with a democratically elected parliament and a leader. It was time to establish clear leadership and a proper government for Iraqi Kurdistan.

**SELF RULE IN SAFE HAVEN**

For the very first time in the history of Kurdistan, on 19 May 1992, Kurds broke their silence by exercising their democratic rights electing a government of their choice. Calling the election “a farce and a crime organised by their American masters and implemented by Kurdish lackeys” Saddam Hussein tried hard to disrupt them but couldn’t.

“I never believed that one day I would vote in Kurdistan. It’s like a dream come true...” Mumtaz, an Iraqi Kurd living in Britain who had returned for the occasion, said to The Middle East Newspaper.

The main contenders for power were the KDP and PUK who won the elections, receiving almost equal number of votes. Fuad Masum from the PUK was appointed Prime Minister of the newly established Kurdistan Regional Government (KRG).

The elections constituted not only a threat to Saddam but to Turkey and Iran, which refused to recognise the KRG.

Both parties agreed to divide all government positions equally and to have each minister seconded by a deputy of the other party. Barzani and Talabani agreed to stand outside government in order to pursue international diplomacy. Apart from lobbying the international community for recognition, their mission was to reconstruct and revive the destroyed villages, the infrastructure and, most importantly, the economy.

But restoring a devastated economy would prove far too challenging for the newly established, unrecognised de facto government, for Saddam’s economic war and the embargo imposed by the UN made Iraqi Kurdistan totally dependent on external aid and on the existing social infrastructure of the Iraqi regime.

“Before the Kurdish uprising Iraqi society had become dependent on oil money, from the Kurdish area and even basic foods were not produced inside the country. Every-

**For the first time in the Kurdish history, oil money is being used for development rather than destruction Dr Jamal Fuad**

thing was imported. Kurdish farmers in Iraq were prohibited from cultivating the land and were forced to move into big collective towns under military supervision. After the uprising the international aid mechanism just replaced the former Iraqi system. Now the whole economy became dependent on international humanitarian aid,” according to an aid worker quoted in the book *Kurdistan in the Shadow of History.*

Saddam sought to destabilise the area even further by delaying relief trucks from crossing into Iraqi Kurdistan and attacking UN staff. On the other hand international aid agencies refused to consult with the KRG on any matters because it was not internationally recognised.

“The Kurdistan Regional Government was by-passed by international aid agencies on the most pressing issue it faced, the rehabilitation of Kurdistan. To deny the Kurds control over their own requirements contradicted the basic principles of relief and development, this was particularly so, given the enormity of the task of recovery.” historian David McDowall writes:

Difficult economic conditions and a lack of power to run a functional democracy led to tensions within the KRG leadership. Ideological clashes led to increased antagonism between Barzani and Talabani who had very different leadership styles. Disagreements over the division of tolls and customs fees levied at the borders led to hostility, to the point that in 1994 an armed conflict broke out between the KDP and the PUK.

Now Iraqi Kurdistan was facing a civil war, supported by Turkey and Iran, that in an effort to extend their influence over the region, donated weapons and money to both parties, but alliances continually shifted.

This wasn’t the first time neighbouring countries had interfered in Kurdish politics. Simko Halmet, PUK representative in Australia says that the Iranian, Iraqi and Turkish governments have always used other Kurds to fight
against their own. “Iraq supports the Kurds from Turkey, not because they like them but because they use them against Kurds in their own country” he says. Attempts at mediation by countries such as Iran, the US and France led to temporary ceasefires but did not prevent the escalation of the civil war which was now further complicated by the intervention of the Islamic Movement of Kurdistan.

Open hostilities reached a peak in 1996 when Barzani’s peshmerga joined the Iraqi army in an attempt to defeat the PUK once and for all. For the first time Saddam’s army penetrated the safe haven and occupied the city of Arbil.

In September 1998 both parties signed a cease accord, brokered by the US, which ended the conflict and set a course for a united Kurdish authority.

The civil war left 1,000 dead, thousands displaced and Iraqi Kurdistan politically and militarily partitioned between the two parties. Many Kurds left the area as they had lost confidence in the leadership that was perceived as being more interested in their own power struggle than in the task of governing.

“Civil war is nothing new, all nations have been through wars and rivalries. Even the US and France had civil wars.” Simko Halmet says. He reflects on the past in his Sydney home. “You have to understand that this is a generation of Kurds educated under the Ba’ath dictatorship. Kurds have been oppressed, treated like animals, poisoned with gas. After all that you can’t expect this generation to be peace-ful and democratic. The PUK for example is now talking about civil and human rights. There has been an evolution in their thinking,” he says.

Simko was a freedom fighter for 5 years. He knows well the mountains of Kurdistan. He joined the peshmerga at the age of 18 and has no regrets for having dedicated an important part of his life to the cause. “We are learning to forgive ourselves” he says. “If we don’t, how are we going to live with each other?”

**AN UNEASY COEXISTANCE**

The Kurdish de facto government has somehow survived the last ten years, in spite of the embargos, the internal conflicts and the constant threat of Saddam Hussein. This represents an achievement in itself.

“Now that we have tasted freedom, there is no way we can be pushed back to the pre Gulf war era by subjecting us once again to the dictatorial rule or any other rule of Baghdad.” Dr Jamal Fuad, Minister of Agriculture and Secretary to the Planning Council of the KRG, said at a recent Kurdish conference in Sydney.

Thanks to the 13 per cent of the share of the public oil revenues that Iraqi Kurdistan receives since 1996 (under the UN Security Council Resolution), the area has come out of poverty. For the very first time the region has received a share of its own resources which has allowed for some development.

“For the first time in the Kurdish history, oil money is being used for development rather than destruction,” Dr Jamal Fuad says. As a result infant mortality rates have declined and 80 percent of destroyed villages have been rehabilitated as well as the infrastructure. There is still a long way to go, though, in terms of economic development and in reviving the agriculture - the very foundation of the Kurdish economy.

“The number one factor for the revival of the agricultural sector is the return of the rural communities to their earlier habitat,” Dr Jamal Fuad says.

But economic and political uncertainty is undermining the potential of this democratic experiment in Iraqi Kurdistan, for Kurds are in constant fear that Iraq may want to regain its control over Kurdistan. In fact, Iraq continues to destabilise the area with its Arabisation policy.

On the other hand the lack of economic opportunities are contributing to people leaving the region. “Without a permanent political solution that includes international guarantees for the safety and security of the region and a share of resources it is unlikely that the needed capital investment and entrepreneurial activity will take place that will result on a stronger economy and more employment opportunities.” Dr Rowsch Shaways, President of the Iraqi Kurdistan National Assembly, writes.

Most Kurds want democracy and freedom from oppression and most importantly, they want to live in peace. Sepa-