

## **A Kurdish view for peace**

**By Asad Gozêh**

It was a quiet spring morning in mid- April 1987. The smoke from all poison gas was still clouding the valley. The only sounds were a few glum voices and the bleating of cows and goats blinded by mustard gas trying to find their young. Suddenly two Gazelle helicopters flew low over the valley. They fired from their 20mm heavy machine guns towards the mountain pass and left. When I reached the scene, five peasants who had survived the Gas attack on their village were now dead. The bullets had ripped through their bodies. A mother was among the dead. Her baby had survived the attack and was still sucking milk from her dead mother's breast. I will never forget that picture.

Three days earlier, on a chilly evening, Saddam's war planes unleashed weapons of mass destruction on five villages in the middle of Balisan Valley in Iraqi Kurdistan. This was the first gas attack on civilians. Over two hundred men, women and children lost their lives in the course of a few hours. The scene was so horrific. Several pregnant women, who were suffering from the symptoms of poison gas, gave birth while trying to escape. New babies were named (Chemya) a Kurdish name for Chemical. Several hundred others, who were affected, sought refuge in the cities for treatment. The next day they were rounded up by Saddam's secret police and buried alive in mass graves.

This was a beginning of Saddam Hussein's Anfal campaign, the first in a series that may occur any time again. Anfal is the name of the fifth Sura (chapter) of Quran. It is also a verse in that Sura, which permits Muslims to kill the infidels, take their belongings, including women and girls, to be used as slaves and kill the men. During the nine-month campaign, Saddam's troops bulldozed and dynamited over 4500 villages, towns and cities. Poison Gases was released over and over again. I personally survived seven direct gas attacks. But I am still suffering from some of the symptoms.

On March 16, 1988 Saddam shelled the city of Halabja with a cocktail of poison gases. Approximately 5000 civilians lost their lives that day. Another 10 000 suffered injuries. Today fourteen years later people are dying of cancer. Many are covered with horrible skin eruptions. Others have gone blind and suffered severe neurological damage. Couples have are infertile or produced children with mental retardation, heart defects and many other malformations. Domesticated and wild animals have also mutated. The poison gases saturated the soil, and continue to poison the crops.

During the campaign, the entire rural Kurdish population in Iraqi Kurdistan was placed in concentration camps surrounded by the military. There was no water, electricity, or sanitation. Tens of thousands of Kurds from the oil rich areas were transported to the southern deserts and buried alive. According to Human Rights Watch over 100.000 Kurds are still missing. After the Gulf war, excavations outside the big cities and inside former Iraqi army's military bases have uncovered mass graves, not oil.

In his campaign Saddam copied the actions of his Arab Muslim ancestors. When Bedouin Arab Muslims invaded Kurdistan 1400 years ago, they named their campaign Anfal. A poem written by a Kurd at that time states " Brutal Arabs turned to debris Ganay Palayee till Sharazoor. (Two vast areas in Kurdistan) Women and young ladies were taken as slaves. Brave men rolled in their blood." I have seen the horror of Saddam's Anfal at the end of the 20th century. Who can imagine how brutal uneducated Arab Muslims were 1400 years ago during the first Anfal?

During the first few weeks after the Gulf War, Kurdistan was abandoned by the rest of the world while Saddam's army assailed us. Millions of us sought refuge in the heavily mined mountain. The icy and muddy borders of Iran and Turkey were teeming with masses of hungry exhausted and terrified Kurds. Thousands of babies and elder Kurds lost their lives in the hunger and cold.

September 11 was another Anfal campaign. We the Kurds understand the pain America is suffering because we have also suffered. Our hearts were deeply hurt by the images on TV. Few other nations can feel the pain of America as we do. We are the ones who went through Anfal campaigns twice. Though unpublicized, on September 24 Kurds rose against Jund al-Islam. (A terrorist group founded and supported by Bin Laden in Iraqi Kurdistan.) We proved to be the first nation fighting terrorists after September 11. The losses on the Kurdish side were heavy, but the terrorists were defeated. Jund Al-Islam Killed 40 Kurdish fighters in the first day and mutilated their bodies. While the population of many Muslim states demonstrate against the US, the Kurds support the war on terrorism.

Since April 1991 the US government has protected part of Iraqi Kurdistan known as the No-Fly Zone. A de facto government had been established following a free election, which is rare in this region. This semi-autonomous area has arguably proven to be the only emerging democratic, secular and civil society in Middle East. Kurdistan always enjoyed freedom of religion. Ethnic and religious minorities study in their own languages. Their figures have been given senior governmental posts. Women are given a great role. Kurdish women have always been granted more freedom than their counterparts in the surrounding countries. Unlike any of its neighbors, Iraqi Kurdistan allows the International Committee of the Red Cross access to its prisons. Kurds have proven that they are a peace-loving nation.

There is no doubt that Iraq is the weakest and the most dangerous link in president Bush's "Axis of Evil". Saddam's crimes are countless but supporting and training terrorists made him even more dangerous. The campaign against terrorism would not be over until Saddam had been toppled. By overthrowing Saddam's regime, the United States will only rid itself, but the whole world from a monster. It may also bring about a regime that will serve as a moderate in Middle East.

The debate on whether to get rid of Saddam is over. President George W. Bush has decided to oust Saddam Hussein from power. It is now a matter of when he will attack Iraq, and how. Any military operations will likely consider Iraqi Kurdistan as a base. What are the ranges of options available to Saddam if he truly believes that he is not going to survive this time? I do not believe that he has the capability to deliver his weapons of mass destruction to the US. Since Saddam is a strong Arab nationalist, he will target Israel and Kurdistan. He sees the threat against Arabs as emanating from these two places, just as Bin Laden does. Israel is well protected and relatively distant. But Saddam still regards Kurdistan as part of his country, and the major cities are within the range of his artillery. I believe that Saddam Hussein will deploy all his weapons of mass destruction against Iraqi Kurdistan. Then the only emerging democracy in Middle East will vanish. Tens of thousands of Kurds will again become victims.

Since the United States is already protecting the Kurds in Iraqi Kurdistan from the air, I urge the American Government to occupy all the military airports and bases in the northern No-fly zone. Deploy patriot missile batteries to protect the Kurdish people. That is how the Kurds see peace in the region. The Kurdish people are friends of the west. They are proud to be protected by America. Without that God knows what will happen to the Kurds again.

Does the war on terrorism review the situation in Middle East? Is US going to live with the problems of that region? Will the Kurds continue to be denied their own homeland? I leave those answers to the policy makers in Washington. As someone who lived under Saddam and barely escaped with my life, I plead the US not to wait long.