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A Recent Story of NGOs in Northern Iraqi Kurdistan

Giorgio Francia¹ and Gérard Gautier²

Abstract

In comparison to the other areas of Iraq, Kurdistan Region, in the northern part of the country, witnessed very specific working conditions for NGOs present there, due to its specific political situation as a de facto independent area. This paper tries to describe these conditions, vastly different from the other parts of Iraq.

More specifically, after a short historical background, this paper deals with the period going from the 1991 "Kuwait War" to the present, with a focus on the period from 1996 to the US-UK intervention of March 2003. An important section deals with the United Nations sanctions and the subsequent *Oil for Food* Security Council Resolution. This very unusual international situation had an important impact on the day-to-day life in Kurdistan Region, as well as – paradoxically – a negative one on the funding opportunities open to NGOs working there.

A short list of NGOs is given with some indications about their field of activities and projects at the time, and a scanty evaluation of the presence of International agencies as well as NGOs in this area is proposed.

The presence and activities of NGOs in Northern Iraq should be considered over three separate periods. From 1991 to 1996, that is from the repression of the Kurdish uprising in 1991 to the approval of the Oil for food resolution at the UN ; from 1997 to April 2003 and from April/May 2003 to the present. We will deal with the second period for its peculiarity, yet the context has to be explained.

The context

On the aftermath of the Kurdish uprising, in 1991, and following the massive displacement of people towards the Iranian and Turkish borders, UN Agencies and a number of NGOs, including ICRC, arrived in Kurdistan to bring relief humanitarian aid. They were funded by USAID, ECHO, as well as aid agencies from various countries, notable among which were the Scandinavian countries. The main activities covered were: health assistance (including vaccination), mother and childcare and protection, water and sanitation, and the rehabilitation of schools. In addition to these activities, demining was essential for the Kurdish area. The Iraqi Government had mined intensively the Iranian border, and made extensive use of mining fields against the Kurdish peshmerga (peshmerga is the name of the Kurdish soldiers, used nowadays to indicate overall Kurdish army or militia). After the approval of the oil for food Security Council Resolution (986

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SCR), towards the end of 1996, the situation changed drastically. USAID closed down its activities in North

Iraq, and all American NGOs closed down their operations. Many Kurds working for USAID-funded local NGOs were granted immigrant status in the US, and they also left. The other donors progressively reduced their contribution, on the grounds that humanitarian aid such as food and medical care were provided for free to all Iraqis by the UN resolution. UN Agencies were all integrated in the oil for food program (the 'Iraqi Program') with the exception of UNHCR. Only a handful of NGOs remained, and their funding was progressively less and less each passing year. It is in this period when the humanitarian aid to Kurdistan became both strange and different from other analogous situations all around the world. To understand this point, one has to understand the various views and interpretations by different sources of the single underlying reality. They all substantially rotate around the Kurdish issue. Now what is this?

It will help to start from the opinion expressed by the US Government. From 1991 to December 2002, through the Clinton and Bush Administrations, the position of the Department of State is very clear, as it is expressed in the so called Ricciardone file (DOS official web site). While the US Government is aware of the persecutions the Kurds have gone through, as single people, the US Government does not recognize the existence of a Kurdish issue. There is no Kurdish issue.

This denial brings us back to a previous, historic similar denial. At the end of the first world war a treaty of peace is signed between on one side Turkey, and on the other Italy, France and UK. The treaty was signed in Sevres in 1920. In this treaty it is spelled out that within six months a commission, made by representatives of the four countries, would outline the borders of the future Kurdish State. A map was attached to the treaty. The area called on the official map "Kurdistan" comprises conspicuous areas of present-day Turkey, a corner of Syria, and North Iraq. (See: <http://www.hri.org/docs/sevres/>)

However this treaty was never implemented. One can blame the simple-mindedness of the Kurdish representatives, mixed with the existing divisions among the various Kurdish tribes and chieftains. However it is an idea of Winston Churchill, then Ministry of Colonies of UK, to deny the Kurds their identity as a nation and divide them up among Syria, Turkey and the newly constructed Iraq. A recent book illustrates the making of Iraq in 1921-1923 (Churchill's Folly: How Winston Churchill Created Modern Iraq, by Christopher Catherwood, 2004).

The Lausanne treaty of 1923 sees the birth of Iraq, based on the joining together of the Bassra Vilayet (Vilayet is a Turkish word meaning Province), with the Baghdad Vilayet and the Southern Eastern part of the Mosul Vilayet. All three Vilayet had tried unsuccessfully to maintain their independence against British occupation (1920). The uprising was however defeated, and the Shiite of Bassra were placed, as their northern counterpart the Kurds, under the control of the Sunni Arabs which inhabited the area between Baghdad and Mosul in the center of present day Iraq because King Feisal was Sunni. Kuwait was kept as a British base.

Kurds in Northern Iraq started a series of small revolts against the Baghdad central power in 1924, and this status of affairs continued until the last uprising of 1991. Why did the US Government so pointedly refuse to recognize the existence of a Kurdish issue? It is fair to assume that before 1991 the US Government had never heard about anything termed a Kurd, or of Kurdistan. Truth be told the only area in the world map officially called Kurdistan is the area of western Iran that bore that name. In actual fact, the Kurds are an ancient autochthonous ethnic group, with a language belonging to the Iranian family of languages, who probably intermixed with the ancient Iranian people called the Medes. Back in the dark ages, the Kurds were split between

the Ottoman domination and the Persian domination. Yet the language spoken in Iranian Kurdistan is the same as the one spoken in Iraqi Kurdistan.

Be it as it may, Kurdistan was not an issue for anyone in Europe or in the US until 1991. And, even after 1991, the US did not intend to let it become an issue, as we have seen. The specific reason of this denial is Turkey, and in particular the Turkish Army. One has to keep in mind that in the Ottoman Empire, the cultural and historical identity of the Kurds was well recognized, if anything else because even against the Ottomans many Kurdish tribes and chieftains were often in war. Kurdish identity was even expressed in geopolitical terms since Kurdistan was in fact the Vilayet of Mosul. Regarding this area we first hear about it in Marco Polo's "The Million" (1271). It is in this book that the first mention in modern times of the name "Kurds" was made.

Things changed drastically after Mustafa Kemal Atatürk's rise to power (1919-1923) and the proclamation of the Turkish Republic in 1923. The Kurdish part of Turkey can be appreciated from the mentioned official map attached to the Sevres treaty. Is about one third of the whole Turkish territory. Atatürk embarked on an ambitious plan of modernization. To ensure that such a conspicuous part of Turkey would not be lost, modernization in Turkish Kurdistan was synonymous with Turkization. With the abandonment of the Arabic alphabet in favor of the Latin one, the Kurdish language was in fact forbidden in schools. Kurdish newspapers were closed down. In the Turkish constitution, it was made a crime for Kurds to proclaim their identity. This situation continued until last year (2004), when the new Turkish Government, under pressure from the EU member states, began a limited reparation of its repressive policies. It is too early to judge how this apparent change of stance by the Turkish Government will develop. What is clear is that the denial of the existence of a Kurdish issue by the US Government in the period 1991-2002 was, I believe, requested by Turkey on the base of its long-time membership of NATO, etc.

The situation changed in December 2002 when at a London conference of all forces opposed to the Saddam regime, including the mainstream Shia leaders, recognized the principle of federalism in a future democratic Iraq. Specifically this amounted to the recognition of the existence of a Kurdish issue. At this point the Bush Administration, which was preparing to go to war in Iraq, finally recognized the existence of a Kurdish issue.

In the period 1997-2003, the period covered by the oil for food resolution, the Baghdad Government was also unhappy about the existence of a separate North Iraqi Kurdistan. Aside with the sharp reduction of donors availability for NGOs operating in the North, there was a specific detail in the UN resolution acting in the same direction. The UN resolution, while entrusting money to the UN administration, was giving a say to the Baghdad Government. The resolution established a compulsory 13% of the revenues from oil sales to be used in North of Iraq, in Iraqi Kurdistan, but the Iraq Government had a say on how the money was spent. This meant that UN Agencies were not allowed to sub-contract NGOs in the North to carry out their activities. To this Baghdad was opposed. In conclusion two factors were involved in the progressive reduction of NGOs presence and activity in Iraqi Kurdistan in the period 1997 – March 2003.

One was the consideration that substantial amounts of money were available to the Kurds through the *Oil for food* resolution. A conservative estimation of the money available to the Iraqi Kurdistan was 13% of 25 to 75 million US Dollars per day during the six to seven years of the program. (The whole account of the UN Iraqi program is not yet available, but it is estimated at several billions of US Dollars, perhaps hundreds of billions. Even halving this number amounts to some 50 billion dollars. 13% of fifty billion is roughly at least six and a half billion). Donors confronted with a variety of complex emergencies in those years, such as Burundi, Angola,

Liberia, and notably former Yugoslavia, were understandably not available for one area perceived to be protected by such a large amount of money.

The second factor was the factual impossibility of UN Agencies to sub-contract NGOs in North Iraqi Kurdistan due to the opposition of the Baghdad Government. The Baghdad government's reason was that those NGOs operating in Kurdistan were there illegally. Constant pressure was applied on the UN staff by Baghdad to ignore and even isolate the presence of such NGOs.

Consequently, the following small list of NGOs remained in Kurdistan:

- ♦ *Qandil*, a Swedish NGO funded by SIDA (Swedish International Development Agency), involved in health, water and sanitation, and the construction of houses (for IDP's), road, dams etc.
- ♦ *Peace Winds*, a Japanese NGO doing health and water and sanitation, funded by Japan.
- ♦ *MAG*, a British NGO funded by the UK, SIDA, Dutch Refugees Committee and others, involved in demining and mine awareness.
- ♦ *NPA*, Norwegian People Aid, funded by Norway, involved in health and demining
- ♦ *Emergency*, an Italian NGO, doing surgery and limb prosthesis for mine victims, funded by ECHO in 1996-1999.
- ♦ *Handicap International*, Belgium, doing physiotherapy and health assistance for mine victims.
- ♦ *Help Age*, UK, taking care of the elderly, funded by the UK.
- ♦ *Acorn*, a community oriented NGO funded by UK, providing health, social and educational assistance to handicapped children.
- ♦ *Save the Children*, UK, funded by the UK, health and social assistance to children.
- ♦ *Dutch Consortium*, a Dutch NGO funded by Holland, with health assistance and houses constructions for IDP's.
- ♦ *France Libertés*, initially present with educational assistance programs (building of schools, institutes, etc) and later (1998-2003) with an Institute of languages teaching English and French, the *Institut français des Langues* (an original project that was actually an educational joint venture between the NGO and the Kurdish authorities).
- ♦ *Sodeil*, a small French NGO assisting schools, most notably in the field of computing aids.
- ♦ *Wadi*, a German NGO focused on females honor killing.
- ♦ *4 Rs*, a small British NGO working with underprivileged people (widows).
- ♦ *North Western Medical Team* and *MEDS*, British NGOs, doing health and schooling.
- ♦ *Diaconia*, a Swedish NGO working with abandoned children in Dohuk Governorate. Funded by SIDA.
- ♦ *Service Group International*. The only American NGO remaining, community oriented, providing specific health assistance (dental care training) in Dohuk Governorate, funded by charity.
- ♦ *STEP*, a German NGO working since 2001 in the area of child protection and education.
- ♦ The ICRC has been present as well, and there has been a Prosthetic center providing lower limbs prosthesis to mine victims active in Erbil up to 1999. At the same time the main, and after the closure of the center, the only activity was the traditional monitoring of prisoners.

Most or even all, at one time or one other, of the above listed NGOs were supported by ECHO, in addition to the listed donors. However ECHO closed down in Iraqi Kurdistan in 1999. Only two NGOs of those listed succeeded in getting permission to be sub-contracted by UN Agencies, *Emergency* (1999-2003) and *Handicap International* (Belgium). It can be appreciated that donors were also few, notably the Swedish, Norwegian UK, and Holland Governments through their development agencies. NGOs from other countries received either ECHO or private charity funding.

The input given by the NGOs was diminishing each year, their presence also made difficult by the fact that after 1996 the expatriates for these NGOs were forbidden from coming through Turkey and had to get across through Syria. The Syrian route was nice and comfortable, but it was extremely difficult to get permission from the Syrian authorities in a predictable and continuous way. In addition no heavy equipment was allowed through Syria, which was one other hampering factor.

The Kurdish civil war, in 1994-1996, complicated further the situation. Largely unnoticed, this bitter war increased the number of IDPs and the precarious situation of the very people assisted by the NGOs. Yet this deterioration coincided with actual fatigue of the donors, as specified above, and of course delays in the benefits to be derived from the oil for food resolution. However, though small, the continuing presence of the handful of NGOs was extremely useful in their respective field of action. Moreover it was distinctly appreciated by the Kurdish people and authorities.

The NGOs had been for those years the only existing tie with the outside world. Kurds were considered by the rest of the world Iraqi citizens. Yet they could not have an Iraqi passport, therefore they could not travel abroad. Their currency was not recognized. NGOs could not use banks to get money to Kurdistan. While Syria had an agreement by which foreign NGOs expatriates were allowed through their border with Kurdistan, this was not possible through Baghdad, (with the exception for ICRC) nor through Iran. Nor through Turkey. Kurdistan was a land locked enclave in those years. Technically speaking the Kurdistan experience is a chronic complex emergency with the flare-up of the civil war and such an unusual situation of UN Agencies having so much money and, at times, apparently not knowing how to spend it. But if things were as described, why did these NGOs remain ? Well, some of them (MAG, *Emergency*, NPA and *Handicap International*) because of the continuous tragedy of land mines. It is estimated that a decade of clearing activity is still required, during which many civilians will keep on losing their limbs.

For others, notably *Qandil*, it has to do on the one hand with the existence of a relatively large Kurdish community in Sweden, and on the other with the continuing Swedish Government's position in relation to the Kurdish issue. Or, as is the case for *France Libertés*, for the ties established traditionally by its chairman, Mme Danielle Mitterrand, with the Kurdish leaders.

Generally speaking there were gaps in UN Agencies' activity, a tragic example being the serious shortages of availability of health care drugs and the enormous problem of their timely delivery. Both issues were not resolved or improved in this seven years period. Furthermore, the Iraqi Government was opposed to demining near the Iranian border, where the UN was consequently inoperative. Protein or vitamin deficiencies in food rations also created dietary deficiencies in pregnant women and young children in the areas with displaced populations. And so on. These gaps, and delays, provided most NGOs, and their funding bodies, the rationale for their continuous presence. But for how long ?

It must be noted that, before the terrorist attack in the US on September 2001, the opinion of the UN people was that the *Oil for food* program would continue indefinitely. The Iraqi Government was counting on a collapse of the sanctions, in that more and more countries would ignore the sanctions even though they would officially stand. The position of the Iraqi government was that a firmer grip on UN personnel was all that mattered to get more and more control of the oil revenue. However the Kurdish issue, the very one denied by the US Government, was of exceeding importance for Baghdad. Because while time was working for Baghdad regarding the long queue of countries wishing to do business with Iraq, sanctions or no sanctions, in Kurdistan time was working for the Kurds and their autonomy or independence. So even the small presence of a handful of NGOs was, on the eyes of Baghdad, a significant part of the problem. Therefore, willingly or unwillingly, for the whole NGOs community their presence in Kurdistan became politicized. This was yet one other reason for their reduction in number and activity, which was clearly ongoing until the drums of war started to echo.

Despite all has been said, what about the standard evaluation of relevance, effectiveness, efficiency and impact, not to speak about coordination etc, in the evaluation of NGOs in Northern Iraq ? Clearly there was an overall intention by donors to reduce both their presence and funding. For example ECHO decided to close down (as did the Dutch), and effectively did so in mid 1999, regardless of the evaluations of the funded NGOs.

On the other hand the local Kurdish authorities probably overevaluated the NGOs presence, regardless of their performance. Although they could do little to fund or encourage such NGOs to stay, they appreciated how their presence facilitated the Kurdish opposition to the Baghdad government.

Part of the American pragmatism is the guiding principle that a problem ought to be fixed. Ignoring or denying an existing problem is never helpful, even in international affairs. Recent humanitarian crises, from Yugoslavia to East Timor, serve as examples, as did Rwanda, Sudan, Congo, etc. Specifically the denial and the ignoring of the Kurdish issue, by US and UN alike, has been unhelpful to the Kurds and to all the surrounding people and countries. Moreover the definition of humanitarian intervention should, in all probability, not be limited to water and sanitation, shelter, food, and health provision. This appears etymologically and ethically wrong. The case of NGOs presence in North Iraqi Kurdistan in the 1997-2003 period should be also seen as an indication of the need and benefit of UN and NGOs re-discussing this important issue.