

## A big mess in Kurdistan

By Wendell Steavenson,  
Created 2003-02-27 00:00

Mam Rostum has a heavily-set weather-tanned face, a thick squat body wrapped in the folds of a khaki peshmerga [1] semi-uniform of baggy pantaloons, a wide sash round his stomach and a pistol in a holster on his hip. He talks, as he thinks, simply, with wild gesticulations, moving his big strong hands in circles, chopping the surface of the table, jabbing a fleshy index finger. There is an old jagged scar on his left palm.

“Six times wounded!” he says pointing at his chest, then me. “This one was a bullet, 1984, or 3 – when we were in the mountains.” Mam Rostum has been fighting since 1967, a year before the Ba’ath Party came to power in Iraq.

Mam Rostum has only a fourth-grade education and cannot read very well. “He is a very good man, a strong fighter; but politics – you should not take him so seriously,” said Simko Dzai, commander of the Patriotic Union of Kurdistan (PUK [2]) peshmerga in Sulaimaniya.

Mam Rostum is the PUK’s representative to the peshmerga and he says he is the parliamentary representative for Kirkuk, which is a 90-minute drive down the road from Sulaimaniya, across the front line [3] dividing Kurdish-controlled from Saddam-controlled Iraq.

### The Kurds dream of Kirkuk

Kirkuk [4] is an oil town, guarded by Saddam’s Republican Guard. It is highly mixed: Arab, Kurd, Turcoman, Assyrian. Over the past decades it has been systematically Arabised, as Kurds have been harassed, beaten, imprisoned, disappeared and deported into Free Kurdistan [5]. For Kurds, Kirkuk is their capital, their missing metropolis. Officially, the Kurdish parties say they will not make a mad dash to seize Kirkuk in the event of an American attack, as they did during the 1991 uprising.

Mam Rostum says, “Even if the Americans and the British put a knife to my throat I will fight for Kirkuk.” Jalal Talabani [6], the PUK’s commander, says he will not allow it. “It’s not Talabani’s concern,” said Mam Rostum, swiping all this politics away with the back of his hand. “I am from Kirkuk. It is my business.” Mam Rustam thinks that if the Americans attack, Saddam falls and the Kurds still do not get Kirkuk, nothing will have changed, nothing will have been gained.

We sat in the restaurant at the top of the comfortable Sulaimaniya Palace Hotel, a few of us gathered around a table full of kebabs and whisky bottles. Mam Rostum’s meaty face crumpled and creased, from solemn Kurdish suffering to a burst of bombast and a sudden grin of warm, bellicose jollity. He repeated the recent mantra of the Kurds and the Iraqi opposition: federalism yes, democracy yes.

We talked about the problems of bringing democracy to Kirkuk, with all the ethnic differences, the advances of Arabisation, the question of Kurds returning to confiscated homes. “There is no problem in Kirkuk,” he declaimed. “The Kurds are the majority there!”

Afterwards, he wouldn't let me get into a taxi to go home. “The drivers could be Muslim fundamentalists, anything – it's dangerous.” He pushed me into the back of his vehicle. “They can pull a gun, anything!” and he whipped his pistol out of its holster and pointed it at me, I think, to illustrate this point.

### **On the way to Halabja**

Mam Rostum said he would take me to Halabja. After a breakfast of chicken, eggs, bread and yoghurt, we climbed into his pick-up truck – behind us, four *peshmerga* with grenades strapped to their belts, kalashnikovs, RPGs.

We drove through the early wheat fields of the Sharazour plain beneath the Souren mountains along the Iranian border, past hillsides filled with PUK positions facing the itinerant *jihadi* of *Ansar al-Islam* [7], dug into caves behind minefields.

The wheat was low and glossy green, the mountains high and white. Mam Rostum waved at the checkpoints; the *peshmerga* manning them waved back, smiling, their free hand on their hearts. The checkpoints were marked with old shell casings circled by yellow dogs with their ears cut off. “We'll take the Islamic Association road to Halabja,” said Mam Rostum. “It is more of an adventure!”

Mam Rostum spoke about his heroes from history: Mao Tse Tung (“good in the struggle”); Churchill (“a strong man”), despite his record in bombing the Kurds in the 1920s; Rommel. He declared a liking also for George Bush (W not H) and Tony Blair.

Villages are on either side, low and mean, mud and concrete breezeblock, roofs covered with grass turf, muddy streams and rivulets, chickens. Mam Rostum pointed out the village of Galmesh Tapa, where his friend Showkat Haji Moushir was killed a week ago. Showkat had gone to meet an *Ansar* leader who seemed to be about to defect.

“He was my friend for twenty-seven years,” said Mam Rostum. “They killed seven people, including two boys, and took hostages. *Ansar* could kill the hostages; they are monsters and could do anything.”

When we arrived in Halabja [8] we had lunch with Sheikh Jafar, the PUK commander of the Halabja front. His briefing was emphatic. *Ansar* is backed by al-Qaida, the Iraqi *mukhabarat* (security agency) and Iran. The infamous al-Zaqawi is now in *Ansar* territory (a claim impossible to verify – in any case, no one has actually seen the Arabs supposed to be there). Iran gives weapons to *Ansar* (this is illustrated by shell casings with Republican Guard markings and the familiar words *Marg Bar Amrika – Death to America* – in white stencil).

There was more. *Ansar* has increased from about 500 to almost 1,000 fighters over the past six months; only a couple of days ago a bus was hijacked by twenty-three Arabs posing as Kurds in baggy trousers trying to get across PUK territory to *Ansar*. (This turned out to be entirely unconfirmed rumour; in fact, some Kurdish villagers around twenty kilometres from Halabja had seen six or seven men loitering suspiciously on their hillside. A *peshmerga* security man went to look, saw nothing but was shot at on the road on the way home.)

### **The Afghan precedent**

Colin Powell told the United Nations that *Ansar* not only has al-Qaida links, but that they have a poison factory making ingredients for chemical weapons. The PUK are hoping the Americans will come and bomb *Ansar* soon, as they have promised.

“Tora Bora [9]!” said Sheikh Jafar.

The PUK is not alone in this area. Behind them are *Ansar*; the Islamic Association *peshmerga* are, if not yet against, then to the side; 3,000 leftover Kurdish Workers’ Party (PKK [10]) guerrillas, commanded by Abdullah Ocalan’s brother, are further up the Iranian border; Iran is manoeuvring, Turkey deploying.

Mam Rostum is fed up with all this, but knows there is very little the PUK can do about it. “The PKK are the same as *Ansar*! Our area is not Turk and if they are the opposition they should go to Turkey. Now they are just paralysis movement they can’t do anything, but they help the neighbouring countries to make noise in the region.”

Asked if the PUK will fight the Turks if the latter cross the border ostensibly to flush out the PKK, Mam Rostum is brutally frank: “They are part of Nato! What can we do against the Turks with small weapons?”

So this war is going to be a big mess? “Yes.”

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