

KERKUK TINDERBOX

By Gilles Munier

Since Massoud Barzani and Jalal Talabani, the two Kurdish feudal lords, decided to make Kerkuk the capital of the autonomous Region of Kurdistan – *or of a future Kurdish state* – the situation is dangerously getting worse in the north of Irak. Their decision is perceived as an intolerable “coup de force” by the majority of the Iraqis who do not accept to be dispossessed of their oil-wealth nor to assist to the expulsion of the city's Arabs and Turkmen.

In the background, the US is pulling the strings and blowing on the embers. After the fall of Baghdad, in April 2003, they delivered the town to the Kurdish militias. For the Texan and Israeli oil lobby, what is at stake is the putting back in service of the old Kerkuk-Haifa pipeline, closed since the creation of the Hebrew state in 1948.

Kerkuk has never been Kurdish. Those who pretend the contrary are lying shamelessly. Testimonies of travellers who passed through the region during the course of the centuries all converge on one point: the town was inhabited mainly by Turkmen and Arabs. Now, last week, the Iraqi “government” has given the authorization to 100.000 Kurdish voters to cast their votes in the 30th January elections, ¾ among them having no doubt never been expelled to the autonomous Region. The result is foreseeable: Kerkuk today is on the brink of civil war.

Historical Revisionism

One knows that Kurds are indo-europeans and descendants from the Medes (612 B.C.). Some Kurdish nationalists go further. To justify their right to create a “*Great Kurdistan*”, they remake history, pretending that their ancestors migrated from Scandinavia during the ice age to Mesopotamia and the Iranian plateau. They even revendicate as being Kurds: the emperors Darius and Xerxes, 28 kings of the Persian Sassanid Dynasty (226-636), the founder of the Pahlavi Dynasty and...Abraham.

What is certain – “*may it please the Kurdish revisionist historians*” – is that during the Sumerian era, Kerkuk was called Arrapha. The remains of this city – *capital of a kingdom subjected to the hurrite kings of the Mitanni (15th – 14th century BC)* – lie under the *Qalâa*, the artificial tell overlooking Kerkuk. Later Arrapha became Karkha, then Karkh Yasdin in honour of one of its inhabitants, who was the Chancellor of Chosroes II (590-628).

Naphta (oil), which is today in great part at the origin of the misfortune of Kerkuk's inhabitants, has been known in Mesopotamia since the mists of time. It was used to illuminate, to seal the street paving stones and the bricks of palaces, to manufacture incendiary weapons. One says that it even made possible the caulking of Noah's Ark and was used – *according to Plutarch* – by the Mesopotamians to put fire to a street in order to impress Alexander the Great. It is said that the flames of the Eternal Fire, which have been burning since the beginning of times, just two steps away, are those of the Fiery Furnace which is mentioned in the Bible and in the Koran, in which prophet Abraham was thrown on order of Memrod.

The Rights of the Turkmen

No one disputes the presence of a Kurdish minority in Kerkuk. But, it needs a great deal of dishonesty to deny the Turkmen's ancestral rights in this region and in that of Tell Afar. They came in the 9th century to enrol in the Abbassid Califs' army. Their presence increased under the Seljuk Dynasty (1117-1194) and with Tamerlane who settled 100.000 Turkish slaves in Kerkuk around 1392. Finally, in the 15th century, the invasion of Iraq by Turkmen hordes of the Black Sheep (*Qara-Koyunlu*) then by the White Sheep (*Aq-Koyunlu*), followed 30 years later by that of the Ottomans (1534-1915) established them permanently in the region. The arrival and settlement of Kurdish population in Kerkuk is relatively recent. It goes back to the 1930s, when the English of the *Iraq Petroleum Company (IPC)* preferred to hire Kurdish workers whom they found to be more docile than the Arabs and Turkmen.

The under-estimation of the number of Turkmen began at the end of the First World War for economic and strategic reasons. In 1923, at the Conference of Lausanne, the British did not want to hear about important Turkish speaking populations in order to prevent Turkey from taking possession of the potentially oil-rich Mosul Wilayet. Their situation and that of the Arabs have continued to deteriorate after the 15th October, when at 3 a.m. a formidable roar announced to the world the gushing of oil fields at Baba Gurgur, a few kilometers from the city.

But, as far as demography is concerned, facts are stubborn. Despite these manoeuvres, the 1957 census – *published after the fall of the monarchy in 1958* – counted one million Kurds and 600.000 Turkmen on the Iraqi territory (*10% of the population*). Kerkuk had a Turkmen majority.

During the 1970s, following Molla Barzani's refusal to recognize the "*Irakness*" of Kerkuk, a great number of Kurds – *and some Turkmen* – were expelled from the region and were replaced by peasants from the south of the country, which means that today no reliable figures are available regarding the number of Turkmen, however, one can evaluate the Turkmen inhabitants to be between 2 and 3,5 millions.

One pipeline may hide another

Since the First World War, the strategic importance of Iraqi oil has not ceased to grow. Times have not changed since the Sykes-Picot (*16th May 1916*) agreement which excluded the Americans from the distribution of Mesopotamian oil. The oil magnates ruling as masters. Georges Clémenceau was quick to notice it. In 1917, he almost had to beg the American President Woodrow Wilson to force J.D. Rockefeller's *Standard Oil Company* to supply the French troops with fuel. A famous sentence resumed the "*Tiger's*" thought: "*One drop of oil is worth one drop of blood...*" Barzani and Talabani should ponder over it.

Peace in Iraq and in the region may depend on the viability of the autonomous Region of Kurdistan, but it does not necessarily depend on the possession of Kerkuk oil fields. On the contrary, when trampling on the Arabs and Turkmen's rights, the Kurds are heading straight into a new bloody conflict. Is the reconstruction of the Kerkuk-Haifa pipeline worth it? Of course not, but the American oil magnates do not ask themselves this kind of question.

In August 2003, the Pentagon sent a telegram to the Israeli Ministry of Foreign Affairs to propose to the Hebrew state to restart this disastrous project. Officially, the Israeli Prime Minister saw a "*bonus*" in this offer, destined to reward Israel for its "*unconditional support*" of the American aggression against Iraq. The pipeline would reduce the Israeli energy bill by more than 20%. Joseph Paritzky, Israeli Infrastructure Minister, went to Washington to suggest to increase the diameter of the pipeline, assuring that Jordan agreed to let it pass through its territory. But, whatever the Minister says, Haifa is still far from becoming a "*new Rotterdam*".

What is less known, is that in the backstage zionist circles are studying the American offer under a different angle. To protect the pipeline from acts of sabotage, they recommend the creation of a special military corps, to build a road alongside the pipe, and eventually build a fence all along... Soon they will speak of necessary infrastructure for the security and well-being of the soldiers. The question which should be asked to the advocates of an "*Israel from the Nile to the Euphrates*" is quite simple: "*Why don't you say right away that a few settlement colonies established here and there are the logical continuation of your wanderings ?*"

At the Pentagon, Donald Rumsfeld is more pragmatical. When he suggested this project, he gave the Israelis and the Evangelists a bone to gnaw. He is waiting for everyone to recognize that the Kerkuk-Haifa itinerary is a financial abyss. Then he will pull out his joker: a pipeline Kerkuk-Aqaba to be built by Bechtel Company. He knows the subject well: in the 1980s, under President Reagan, he already participated in the planning of this project and was active in organizing its financing. He also tried to convince President Saddam Hussein to accept the idea of this pipeline.

An evil wind, with strong sulphur whiffs, is blowing over Kerkuk. The annexation of the city by the autonomous Region of Kurdistan – *eventually by a future Kurdish state* – has been put in motion. Sixty thousand Kurds are camping at the city's gates. Fifty thousand Iraqis, mainly Arabs and Turkmen, have been expelled from the city. The ethnic balance inherited from the past has been reduced to nought. While one can understand that people who were unfairly treated recuperate their properties and their rights, one can only condemn the unbridled kurdification of the oil-rich city. In Iraq, no Arab, no Turkmen will tolerate the Kurdish *hold up* on a land which they do not possess in their own right and under which lies 40% of the country's oil wealth. In Ankara, Prime Minister Recep Erdogan follows the evolution of the situation in Kerkuk closely. A rapid deployment force of 40.000 Turkish soldiers is ready to intervene. Just in case...

Ancient prophecies

In 1999, not far from Kerkuk, near the tomb of prophet Daniel (*Nabi Danyal*), I had started a conversation with some Iraqis who were visiting the tomb of prophet Daniel. We spoke of one his prophetic visions which occurred after Nabuchadnezzar had ordered the erection of a huge golden statue and had asked his people to adore it. Daniel had the vision of four monstrous beasts raised above the world, coming one by one to die at the feet of the idol. The prophet had interpreted his vision as announcing the inevitable fall of the four great empires of Antiquity: Babylonian, Medo-Persian, Greek, Roman. For these Iraqis, Daniel's prophecy is still valid today. After the Second World War, they told me, the influence of the four great powers had been cut down little by little. Great Britain and France no longer have a colonial empire. The Soviet Union has split up. The "*fourth beast...different from all others*" the one which in the prophecy meditates "*to change the time and the law*" is it called the United States? My Iraqi interlocutors had no doubts about that. The election of an American President speaking of "*Crusade*", of "*Axis of Evil*", of "*Bad ones and Good ones*", and the influence in Washington and Tel Aviv of religious fanatics dreaming of nuclear Armagedon, seem to prove them right.

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Source: Guide of Iraq, by Gilles Munier (*Jean Picollec Editeur, 2001*) – US checking possibility of pumping oil from northern Iraq to Haifa, via Jordan, by Amiram Cohen (*Ha'aretz – 25/8/03*) – Israel seeks pipeline for Iraqi oil (*The Observer – 20/4/03*) - Israeli Minister dream of Iraqi oil, by Akiva Eldar (*Counter Punch, 1/4/03*) - Iraq-to-Haifa pipeline could spur economic rebirth, by Matthew Gutman (*Jerusalem Post Service – 18/4/03*) - The opening moves to a greater, expanded Israel?, by Xymphora (<http://www.uruknet.info/?s1=2&P=5641&s2=16>) - Infokurd: <http://www.infokurd.com/origines.htm> - The Kerkuk tinderbox, by Gajendra Singh (*Asia Times – 22/6/05*).