Appendix 2: An Interview with Massoud Barzani

In August 1989, less than a month after the savage assassination of Dr. Abdulrahman Qasemlu in Vienna, I met with Massoud Barzani, leader of the Democratic Party of Kurdistan. Together with colleagues, then making a film about Kurdistan, I went to meet Barzani’s contact near a busy London Underground station close to the private apartment nominated for the meeting. After Qasemlu’s murder, the Kurdish leadership was particularly nervous and their personal security tight.

Having met our contact, we set off in convoy to the place of rendezvous and were swiftly admitted indoors. We waited for Massoud Barzani and his entourage to arrive.

When the KDP leader (Democratic Party of [Iraqi] Kurdistan) appeared we all relaxed.

This was my first meeting with Massoud Barzani. I was impressed by his warmth and informality, by his air of calm and self-assurance. I sensed the great weight of his political burden, his complicated inheritance of a century’s old liberation struggle.

I also felt what a personal tragedy it must have been for Massoud to have suffered the Iraqi massacre of Halabja, the bombing and erasure of countless Kurdish villages and the wholesale slaughter of his people by the Iraqi forces throughout 1988. The fate of thousands of Kurdish families now depended upon his political decisions.

The following is a transcript of the interview which took place that afternoon in August, exactly a year after 100,000 Peshmerga fled to Turkey and Iran after chemical bombs rained down on Kurdistan.

Q. What are your aims for the future promotion of the Kurdish cause, and your strategy for obtaining the permanent cessation of chemical attacks against the Kurds?

M.B We are working towards mobilizing international opinion against such atrocities as chemical weapons. The one solution is to ban these weapons, to take punitive action, and to see that the international community is involved in taking such steps; that they punish Iraq for its use of chemical weaponry. We were very disillusioned by the fact that when Iraq used such weapons against the Kurdish community the international community did nothing, i.e. no such punitive measures were introduced.

If this continues, other regimes may also follow suit.

There are two ways to stop this: one way is to mobilize an international ban on chemical weapons; the other way would be for the international community to impose economic sanctions now against Iraq.

Q. Do you envision a possible U.N. monitored amnesty for all Iraqi Kurds?

M.B In my view, the West suffers from a misunderstanding of the situation. We are fighting for democratic rights. We don’t need an amnesty. While we have been suffering for many years now, the U.N. has remained silent. This point must therefore remain clear. We haven’t done anything wrong to be amnestied for. We are against this altogether. We regard ourselves as freedom fighters and this must be recognized. We want national democratic rights not forgiveness.

Q. Do you see the Kurdish refugees, and particularly those presently in Eastern Turkey, obtaining official refugee status?

M.B These people constitute an obvious case for official recognition and protection as refugees. They fled across the border into Turkey and across other neighbouring borders. The fact received international attention and was well-publicized. These people fall into a genuine refugee category; they are not economic refugees by any means. Turkey is still insistent upon regarding them as political ‘guests’. It is a political game being played with these Iraqi Kurds. They should be accepted as political refugees. That is the only way to improve their plight. They should be regarded as political refugees and, as such, protected. I have met with many European officials who have said they sent material aid which has not reached its destination. International aid is needed. We are working for U.N. supervision of aid relief. This is the only solution to the present problem. As it is, the international community (America and Europe) has put no pressure on for the Kurds to receive aid nor for access for the distribution of material aid to get into the camps. We have played a low profile with regard to Turkey so as not to endanger the refugees, but if the present ‘no-help’ continues we will adopt another attitude. The U.N. should recognize the Iraqi Kurds held in the camps in Turkey as refugees and direct international aid to them.

Q. What is your strategy for obtaining reparations from the Iraqi government for the destruction of Kurdish towns and villages, industries and agriculture, and for all the other human rights violations carried out against the Kurds?

M.B As part of our political programme, any future settlement will include demands that the Iraqi government pay reparations for physical and

* Author’s note: Had the West paid more attention to the Iraqi opposition group’s concerns at the time, the rape of Kuwait might have been avoided a year later.
human damages that they have inflicted. Depending on developments in the situation involving any change in the government, this would be one of the main points of our demands.

Q. How do you regard the establishment of an autonomous Kurdish state?
M.B. My understanding of the ‘autonomy’ issue is that we would constitute an entity within an established state, not a separate state.

Q. What we mean to underline here is your view of the possibility, or desirability, of a separate Kurdish state which incorporates Syrian, Turkish, Iraqi and Iranian Kurds within a single Kurdistan. How do you respond to this?
M.B. We have suffered a historical injustice. We have been denied the right of equality. The Kurdish issue is a single united issue, a whole concept. Every Kurd dreams of one day having a free state of Kurdistan. But this is, in fact, only a wish. We are faced with quite another situation. We have to be realistic. Although we have the right to this dream we have to be objective, to understand international policies — the fact that we have so far been unable to change these false borders. While we require that our rights are respected, the integrity of other countries should also be protected. But that our national and cultural rights should be protected within the established states — this is presently a realistic attitude. If they realize that Kurdish culture and language are respected, the Kurds will respond more positively within the countries in whose borders they live.

Q. Another tragic blow this year to the Kurdish community was the assassination of Dr Abdulrahman Qassemlo. Given the historical friction between various Kurdish political parties in their respective parts of Kurdistan, what are the chances now of Kurdish unification?
M.B. I believe that this is the best time for a Kurdish unification and the most suitable time ever for co-operation, and for understanding internal differences. It is true that there were divisions in the past, and that we even took up arms to settle those differences. Now there is a coalition between the K.D.P. P.U.K and other Kurdish parties. Unification will take time to crystallize and then everything will settle. After the atrocities suffered by the Kurds at the hands of other regimes it will be easy for all to see and understand the need to bypass any internal differences of policy and other difficulties. All Kurds are uniting now as a single entity, and the Iraqi Kurdish front has been formed. Our relations with the Kurds of Syria and of Turkey are also good. This is an ideal time for unification to be practically achieved.

Q. If we could go back to the matter of Qassemlo’s assassination. Is it clear who was behind it. and why it happened?
M.B. The assassination of Dr Qassemlo was tragic. When it happened I issued a condemnation of this terrorist act. I said that the aim of those who committed the crime was to disrupt the rapprochement of the K.D.P. with the Iranian government. Money was a possible factor behind the event. No definitive statement has yet been issued by the Austrian police. This has angered our people. It was a clear-cut political assassination and terrorist act. Qassemlo had been the target of another assassination attempt ten years ago. Two of his bodyguards were shot in 1979.

Q. Who is the K.D.P.’s successor to Dr Qassemlo?
M.B. The new general secretary of the party is Dr Sadeq Sharafkandi. And while I believe that the party will remain intact, no one can fill the vacuum left by Qassemlo.

Q. When the Iraqis carried out their destruction of Kurdish villages and forcibly ‘resettled’ the people, were families separated?
M.B. Yes. Around March/April last year (1988), the army arrested large numbers of Kurdish villagers in Kirkuk and Barada. They were to live in semi-liberated areas. Horrific atrocities were committed: young girls were sexually assaulted in front of their mothers and fathers, others were tortured or killed. The survivors were moved to special ‘camps’ in the south. Of these camps, two are particularly notorious: these are Nukrat Salman and Ar Ar, near the juncture of the Iraqi, Saudi and Jordanian borders.

There are two kinds of camps, the desert ‘death’ camps, well known for the atrocities perpetrated there — internment camps where punishment is dealt out to those in sympathy with the Peshmerga, i.e. those who defy the government. There is great suffering in these places.

The other camps are internment camps in the north, such as in Suleimaniyah and Kirkuk, for those who didn’t escape to Turkey. There has been disturbing news of the outbreak of serious diseases such as typhoid and cholera. I believe these have been deliberately inflicted upon the people through germ warfare.

The peoples’ movements are restricted, they cannot go back to their own villages. The government tells them where they are to settle. Those who accept to do so are issued with a questionnaire which they must sign, to the effect that they have accepted the ‘amnesty’. If you provide any false information, or withhold it, you are executed. You must accept that you will be taken wherever the government wishes you to go.

Men are separated from women, parents from children. Some were released and made their way back to their villages; they didn’t know what had happened to their companions; nothing is known of them at all.

Q. What are conditions like in the Iraqi camps? Is there sufficient food, medicine, and adequate shelter? Would you say there is a high death rate?
M.B. There is a high death-rate in the camps. For example, last September-
October we had a report from a reliable source with sound information to the effect that within a single month 1,300 children died of malnutrition, bad conditions and treatment. This applies equally to the elderly.

Q. Does President Saddam intend to kill these people or is his aim rather to control freedom of movement?

M.B. Let us look at what happened in Halabja. Five thousand Kurdish people perished. Saddam has a bad lack of conscience. He can do it again and again. He may not intend to kill them all, but he has a step-by-step programme of destruction. The government campaign is one of genocide, not only sheer physical elimination but also cultural genocide — destruction of village culture, the way of life, linguistic annihilation, dispersion of the population. It is carried out with the intention of diluting the people for the sake of achieving 100% security. He considers these aspects of culture a challenge to his control. It is with control that he is mainly concerned, with handpicking his team. Those who threaten his regime will be eliminated. His aim is for total control of movement of the population. Around 30-35,000 people are held in camps.

Q. What part does the exploitation of oil and Kurdistan's rich natural resources play in this?

M.B. Indeed, Kurdistan is rich and has mineral and water resources as well as oil. One feels that oil has been the main curse of our people. Oil was first discovered in Kirkuk. Agricultural prospects are also better in the north (the Kurdish areas). This has been used by the central government to carry out repression. In our dealings with the central government we were highly conscious of this factor, the richness of our territories. We were aware of the fact that the government requires it for the entire population. The extraction of minerals is entirely up to the government, we wanted resources to be distributed equally amongst the population, Arabs and Kurds alike.

Q. Despite all the evidence of the outrageous violation of human rights, the international community appears powerless, or unwilling, to intervene in Kurdistan. Do you feel that Kurdish lives are being sacrificed to economic expediency?

M.B. I am personally disappointed at international reactions to the violence, and use of chemical weapons, against the Kurds. There has been a great deal of hypocrisy and double standards. Britain has a historical responsibility in this affair. Were it not for Britain, we might today have been in a better position. Without the technology of the West, Iraq wouldn’t have been able to create these weapons. The Western countries are partners in the crime. Every country has its own trade and political interests — but these must be held in balance with humanitarian concerns. I disapprove of the policy of 'non-interference' which uses as its excuse the fact that the situation of the Kurds in an 'internal matter'. At least, Iraq should have been punished for employing chemical warfare. Instead, honours were awarded to her — awarded via the Baghdad Arms Fair. It is only the blocking by Britain of the recent arms deal to Iraq, cancelling the sale of 60 fighter-planes, that has been seen as a positive move. But it is not numerically significant in itself. Saddam has no need of these 60 planes to destroy the Kurdish population!

What is needed is a joint action against Iraq.

Q. Who has been involved in trade with Iraq?

M.B. The USSR, Germany, France, Britain, the USA, India — everybody has been trading as if all were normal.

Q. You have had the opportunity to speak with politicians in Britain and elsewhere. How have they responded to what you have to say? What excuses do they make for this apparent indifference?

M.B. Most of the European politicians whom I met with on this tour were sympathetic, concerned about what had happened. But they were also very clear about their commitment to carry on business as usual with Iraq. We are not against this, *per se*, but we want them to be aware of the problems and not to help, or condone, such actions on the part of Saddam Hussein's regime. Nice words and verbal sympathy do not heal the wounds. We need positive moves. There is, however, a growing understanding of the problems the Kurds face.

Q. Can you identify particular factories in Iraq which have been engaged in the production of chemical weapons? Do you know their exact location?

M.B. There have been three main plants in Iraq producing chemical weapons. The plant at Samarra is an important one. This was formerly the site of a pharmaceutical company which produced fertilizers. It became the main centre for chemical weaponry production. Other plants were established at Khaim near the Syrian border, and at Akashat, also south of Mosul in Badoush. These three have been specifically producing chemicals.

Q. Do you know of any particular foreign companies involved in the trade of chemicals for the manufacture of weapons in Iraq?

M.B. We have solid information about a number of European companies which have been directly involved. These are German, Dutch and Italian companies.

Q. Are their names known to you?

M.B. Yes, we know some names. We do not wish to cause international embarrassment by giving these out publicly.

Q. Of all the victims of this tragedy, the plight of Kurdish children must be...
particularly distressing to you. How might the Baathist regime’s attempts at ‘de-Kurdification’ affect the future of the younger generations?

M.B Our enemies are not just fighting us with gas or weapons, they are fighting against our culture, our language, and robbing our children of their future and identity, of the basic necessities for a decent life. The recent tragedies in Kurdistan will certainly have an affect on future generations.

In the 1920s, for example, bloodshed itself was less conspicuous because communications were less effective and the internal affairs of countries perhaps escaped international notice. Now the international community is very compact in terms of access to up-to-the-minute information. People are more aware. It will not be possible to ‘de-kurdify’ our people.

For our part, we have never resorted to illegal violence. But the younger generation may grow out of control...

Q. Are you optimistic about sustaining your fight?

M.B Without hope, you can do nothing; you can neither fight nor struggle. But I am well aware of the difficulties in the situation. Even so, I am a great believer that the Kurds will attain their rights and will go on by adapting to new situations. Yes, I am optimistic.

Q. Has it been possible to keep military operations going since Saddam carried out his chemical attacks on Kurdistan?

M.B Yes it has, but the conditions under which the Peshmerga have been operating were extremely difficult. There are no villages left, no food, nor ready supplies. Communications are also a problem. But the campaign, as such, is unhindered. We can practise classical guerrilla warfare, partisan warfare. In both physical and economic defence terms we have more space to manoeuvre.

Q. Do you hold out hopes for an international solution to the Kurdish problem?

M.B Basically, we believe that it is the Kurds who should do the work at home. The international community should offer us its support. The main burden of the struggle is really on our shoulders, but we still won’t lose hope of a wider campaign to help the Kurdish situation.

Q. Going back to the refugee situation — is it likely that the Iraqi Kurds still in the camps in Turkey will be repatriated to Iraq?

M.B The root cause of the refugee problem is a political one. I cannot conceive of an overall long-term solution to it without also asking how they have come to be there. They will continue to remain in Turkey until it is safe to return. We want an international sign, practical guarantees for their safety from the U.N., or from the Red Cross and have encouraged this all along.

There is a problem in Iran with overpopulation in the camps there. And we haven’t encouraged any of the inhabitants to seek political asylum in Europe. Meanwhile Turkish attitudes have sorely deteriorated. Inhabitants of the camps in Turkey have been beaten up, harassed, followed constantly by Turkish security agents, and their movements are solely restricted both within and outside the camps. External aid has not been reaching the refugees in its entirety. Additionally, the Turkish authorities have told the refugees that they must adopt Turkish citizenship if they decide to stay. This is abhorrent to us. It is not the solution. There has been no improvement in the conditions of the camps in Turkey since they were first set up as temporary settlements in September 1988. Only 400 were accepted by France, after the visit of Mme Mitterand to the camps earlier in 1989.

Q. Have you been able to communicate regularly, and explicitly, with your people in the various camps?

M.B Yes, we are in regular contact, discreetly of course, and I am aware of their daily life and movements. We also know of all foreign visits to the camps by overseas officials and government representatives. We are awaiting positive developments in Iraq which will enable them all to return and rebuild their lives and their homes in a truly democratic Kurdistan.