Chapter 2

Description of the Situation

A. Background of Refugee Crises of Iraq

1. The Kurds of Iraq

In the first days of April 1991, network TV news programmes came to life with scenes of mass displacement. The screen was dominated by pictures of tens of thousands of Kurds in flight out of Iraq after an armed uprising had failed. A mass exodus of refugees, exposed to the low mountain temperatures common at that time of the year, was building up and moving towards the border regions to Turkey and to Iran.

But if, for spectators, the sight of moving columns of humanity came as a terrible shock, for Iraqi Kurds there was something of a sense of *déjà vu* about the whole situation. Although they were Sunni Muslims and, in that sense, co-religionists of the ruling Sunni elite in the country, their propensity to resort to arms and fight government forces had turned them into a disobedient, troublesome minority and the object of much persecution which, in turn, drove them out of their homes, forcing them to flee to the mountain areas and border zones in their thousands and throw themselves on the mercy of neighbouring countries.

The Kurd minority group constitutes a community of several million people, spread over Iraq, Turkey, Iran and Syria, with small
numbers also residing in Lebanon and Armenia. Their exact number is still a matter of controversy and has been estimated at anything between 11 and 25 million. Statehood has not come their way for many reasons, not the least of them being the fragmentary nature of their own society, beset by contradictions, their propensity to factionalism, the absence of a unified language, even, in fact, of a common ethnic identity. Yet they have never really been integrated in the countries in which they have been born and have intermittently rebelled against central governments, allying themselves to outside powers whenever the opportunity arose. Various governments in the region have, in turn, retaliated by showing little leniency towards their citizens of Kurdish origin after each vanquished attempt to abolish existing territorial boundaries and form a state of their own.

The first Iraqi Kurdish insurgency dates back to British Mandate days. In 1919, then again in 1923, Kurdish leader Shaikh Mahmud Barzinji took up arms against British rule, but his rebellion was cruelly crushed as the British showed no aversion to the use of massive air power to get the better of their adversaries. In 1931, Barjinzi tried a third and final time to set up a united Kurdistan. Once again he was defeated. But a successor stepped almost immediately out of the wings to take over Kurdish insurgency. His name was Mulla Mustafa Barzani and till his death in 1979 he would be connected with each rebellion mounted by Iraqi Kurds. In the process he was imprisoned and amnestied several times, spent long years in the Soviet Union, joined the KDP (Kurdish Democratic Party), fell out with Ahmad Ibrahim and Jalal Talebani, foremost among KDP politburo members and flirted outrageously with the Western powers, Israel and imperial Iran in the hope of furthering his cause. Perpetual war seemed to become a permanent feature of Kurdish life, so much so that “Baghdad’s war against the Kurds became one of the most constant realities of life in Iraq”, writes David Mcdowall.1 In winter 1960–61 Barzani, better known under the name of Mulla Mustafa, led the revolt against General Qasim. In 1964 a ceasefire was declared, but did not hold and fighting recommenced until a truce then a peace agreement was reached in 1970. This, too, was only short-lived.

In the mid-1970s, the Kurds mounted a revolution under Mulla Mustafa which was crushed with quiet efficiency by the armed

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