

Letter: The Silent Countdown

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In the final moments, Kurds are moving back from the front line, remembering past fiascos and hoping this time will be different.

It is around 12.30 a.m. on March 19, and I am writing from Pirmam.

Salaheddine is the name the Iraqi government uses, if you want to find me

on a map. Less than 30 hours are left in President Bush's ultimatum.

Tonight the weather is very windy. The Kurds believe that wind is the best

protection against chemical and biological weapons, especially if it comes

with rain. It is like that tonight. Are the Kurds to be lucky this time? I

hope so, because we don't have masks or vaccines.

Every year on March 21, the Kurds celebrate Newroz, the beginning of the

Kurdish year. The most important thing to do at Newroz is to light a fire.

There is a Kurdish legend that says thousands of years ago, an evil king

named Zohak made a pact with the devil in order to maintain his rule. To

keep his power, the devil told the king to drink the blood of two children

every day. One day, the people decided to stop what has happened to their

children. They rose up behind a local blacksmith named Kawa, who killed

Zohak and liberated his people. We Kurds celebrate this victory of good

over evil on Newroz.

I am not going to judge which part of this story is true and which is imagination, but I know for sure that today there is a Zohak in Baghdad.

In his speech on Monday night, President Bush mentioned that the day for Iraqis to be liberated is very close. I am an Iraqi and I hope it will be soon.

Here in Iraqi Kurdistan it is silent. Although Kurds have evacuated cities near the front lines with Saddam's troops - half of the families in this town have already left - they are generally optimistic. The expectation, and the news, is that the war will be short. Fifteen years ago this month, weapons of mass destruction were used against the Kurds and the world just watched. Now people here decided to evacuate the big cities as a precautionary measure since even now we have no prevention against chemical attack. Hopefully Saddam will not have the chance to use anything.

For now security in the region is completely under control. In Erbil, a city of around one million, up to 40 per cent of population has left. But not a single theft was recorded during the last 24 hours, according to the police chief, who is a friend of mine. Despite the fear and the confusion about what might happen in the next few days and hours, the evacuation is

not a mess. Iraqi Kurds are experts in this issue. There is no one of my age and above who has not experienced leaving his home at least once.

I remember the evacuation of 1991, after the Kuwait war. It was at exactly this time of year - twelve years ago, but it seems like yesterday! I was single then and two years out of medical school. Kurds were fleeing toward the borders followed by Saddam's troops and helicopters, which we believe got a green light from the United States. The Iranian and Turkish borders were closed and two million people were waiting on the borders. I am not exaggerating. Those who give a smaller figure are underestimating because of the embarrassment the true figures mean for those responsible.

My parents, sisters, brother and relatives were all among the two million.

I saw children and old people dying from diarrhoea and malnutrition in front of my eyes. As a newly graduated, enthusiastic medical doctor I could do nothing. Instead of treating people, I helped to bury them.

Today the situation is different. Helped by the "safe haven" protection provided by the United States and Britain over the past 10 years, the Kurds have reconstructed their region. Nearly half the 4,000 villages destroyed during the 1980s have been rebuilt and inhabited. The 2,000

villages in the mountainous regions provide good strategic depth for a withdrawal if and when necessary. Remembering the experience of 1991, the Kurds have decided to die this time rather than go toward Turkey or Iran.

After a decade of self-rule, the Kurds are more organised and better prepared. Today US interests match Kurdish interests - a change of rule in Baghdad, the opposite of what seemed to be the aim in 1991. While all the surrounding countries including Kuwait, where most US troops are based, are announcing that their troops won't participate in the war, the Kurds will participate and are ready to be on the front line.

Stories and rumours about the war are beginning to reach us from the Iraqi side. One of these stories says that a poor man started cheering a group of Iraqi soldiers wearing American uniform - a plan, the story says, by the Iraqi government to confuse the American troops. The man thought Americans had arrived. He was hurrahing President Bush. But the "Americans" were Republican Guards. They arrested him.

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Location: [Turkey](#)
[Iraqi Kurdistan](#)
[Iran](#)

