

## **Rifles and Radios Across the Front Line**

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Kurdish sources in Northern Iraq report increasing defections from the Iraqi military.

As allied bombing of the oil towns of Kirkuk and Mosul intensifies, more and more Iraqi soldiers - and, in recent days, officers - are defying death squads operating in government-controlled areas in order to defect to the "liberated" Kurdish area of northern Iraq.

In the last 24 hours alone, more than 100 soldiers including a number of junior officers have succeeded in reaching safety in areas under the control of the Kurdistan Democratic Party. Many others are reaching areas controlled by the other main Kurdish party, the Patriotic Union of Kurdistan.

This is no easy thing: regular Iraqi soldiers have a whole chain of command above them and are controlled by two or even three different groups including the Ba'ath Party militia; the Fedayeen of Saddam, a ruthless commando unit under the nominal command of Saddam Hussein's oldest son, Odey; and pro-government tribal militias whose loyalty is bought with huge sums of money.

The Fedayeen are not monitoring the war; they are monitoring their own side. They have authority to override the regular army and anyone suspected of being not loyal is immediately executed.

In the Mosul area this week, on the western side of the northern front, a Fedayeen unit killed 12 of a group of 16 soldiers who were attempting to desert. The 12 were captured on a main road, tied up and shot dead. The remaining four made it to safety.

A second group of defectors was killed in the Kalak region, and a third while trying to escape from Kirkuk to Erbil.

In addition to strengthening its repressive apparatus in front-line areas, the regime is rotating military units continuously. The aim is to prevent contacts developing between the army and the opposition and to discourage soldiers from defecting by separating them from their families. In the last two weeks, units from the northern front have been moved to central Iraq while troops from Mosul have been redeployed to Nasiriyah in southern Iraq.

The soldiers surrendering to the Kurdish authorities report that towns and cities in Saddam-controlled northern Iraq are under tight curfew. One member of each family is issued with a special identity card that allows him to leave the house to go shopping. Everyone else must stay at home. All radios in the cities have been confiscated in an attempt to prevent Iraqis getting news of the war - a clear sign of nervousness within the regime.

Kurdish officials believe the Iraqi people will sooner or later rise up. Kurds and Iraqis in government-controlled areas are discontented and short of food. In 1991, after the Iraqi army was driven out of Kuwait, it was only after five or six weeks of continuous bombardment reduced the army to tatters that a popular uprising began. For the moment, the atmosphere is not conducive to uprising.

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**Location:** Iraqi Kurdistan  
Iraq

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