State Department cable details ethnic cleansing by US-backed forces in Iraq

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US-backed Kurdish police and security units have kidnapped hundreds of minority Arabs and Turkmen in the northern Iraqi city of Kirkuk, according to a confidential State Department cable leaked to the *Washington Post*.

Quoting from the cable, the *Post* on Wednesday reported that the kidnappings, accompanied in some cases by torture and ransom demands, were part of a "concerted and widespread initiative" by the two leading Kurdish parties "to exercise authority in Kirkuk in an increasingly provocative manner."

The cable, drafted by the US Embassy's regional coordinator in the area and dated June 5, was addressed to the White House, the Pentagon and the US Embassy in Baghdad. It warned that the kidnappings—in which hundreds have been taken from Kirkuk to prisons in the Kurdish cities of Sulamaniyah and Irbil—"greatly exacerbated tensions along purely ethnic lines" and discredited the US government. "Turkmen in Kirkuk tell us they perceive a US tolerance for the practice while Arabs in Kirkuk believe Coalition Forces are directly responsible," the cable said.

The cable warned that the kidnappings would "seriously undermine...Coalition efforts in the region unless procedures are established to enforce Iraqi laws with regard to the transfer of detainees."

Kirkuk has been the flashpoint for growing political and ethnic tensions. The city sits adjacent to one of the world's largest oilfields, which Kurdish leaders hope will provide the resource base for a future independent Kurdish state. Kurds, however, make up only a plurality of the population of the province, being slightly outnumbered by Arabs and Turkmen.

The revelations in the *Post* article were confirmed by reporting from Reuters News Agency, citing Arab community leaders in Kirkuk. Ahmed al-Obeidi, head of a small Arab political party, said that the arrests had begun after the US occupation, but accelerated after the January 30 election in which the two US-backed Kurdish nationalist parties, the Kurdistan Democratic Party (KDP) and the Patriotic Union of Kurdistan (PUK), won control of the Kirkuk provincial council.

The KDP and the PUK maintain large and heavily armed militia forces that exercise effective control over the Kurdish-populated region. Jalal Talabani, leader of the PUK, is now president of Iraq, while Massoud Barzani, leader of the KDP, heads the regional government that unites the three predominantly Kurdish provinces north of Kirkuk.

Obeidi estimated the total detained at 250 people, of whom 40 had so far been released. The *Post* cited other estimates of the number kidnapped as 600 or more. US military officials said they had logged 180 cases.

According to the *Post* account, citing US and Iraqi officials as well as the State Department cable, the anti-Arab and anti-Turkmen campaign is "being orchestrated and carried out by the Kurdish intelligence agency, known as Asayesh, and the Kurdish-led Emergency Services Unit, a 500-member anti-terrorism squad within the Kirkuk police force. Both are closely allied with the US military."

In some cases, the Kurdish security services have cloaked their kidnappings as arrests related to the investigation of past crimes of the Hussein regime, such as the chemical weapons attack on the Kurdish city of Halabja in 1988 and the repression of a Kurdish uprising after the 1991 Persian Gulf War.

US military officials in Kirkuk acknowledged that many prisoners had been detained there and removed to Sulamaniyah and Irbil. They claimed that this was necessary because of overcrowding in Kirkuk's jails, although they admitted there had been no judicial authorization for the transfers.

Maj. Darren Blagburn, intelligence officer for the 116th

Brigade Combat Team in Kirkuk, told the *Post* he had learned of the detentions a month ago and was "pretty sure" they had now stopped. But other military and Iraqi sources reported more than a dozen arrests in Kirkuk last week alone.

Blagburn confirmed that the detainees transferred to Sulamaniyah and Irbil were being held, not in regular state facilities, but in prisons operated by the intelligence arms of the two Kurdish political parties, which are headquartered in those cities (the PUK in Sulamaniyah, the KDP in Irbil). Several prisoners released from those facilities described conditions of overcrowding—up to 50 men in a 19x9-foot cell—violence, physical abuse and outright torture.

The *Post* quoted Abu Abdullah Jabbouri, who was abducted and released last week from the prison in Irbil, describing a fellow prisoner who had scars from whippings inflicted with a wire cable. On some occasions, the cable was first heated over a fire.

Other Kirkuk residents were interviewed who said virtually their entire families had been arrested and taken away. According to the *Post,* many of the arrests were carried out with the participation of American troops.

"When we go to the Americans, they send us to the police," said Osama Danouk. "When we go to the police, they send us to the Americans, and so on, and so on."

Maj. Blagburn described one Kurdish unit involved in the kidnappings as "very cooperative, coalition-friendly," and said they continued to provide valuable assistance to US military efforts against Iraqi insurgents. "That's basically the unit we can trust the most," he told the *Post*.

Lt. Col. Anthony Wickham, who heads a team of US military advisers to the provincial government, contradicted Blagburn's statements minimizing the scope of the extra-judicial arrests. By mid-April, he said, complaints of abductions and disappearances "became a flood."

The revelations about what is taking place in Kirkuk are another shattering blow to the pretense that the purpose of the US invasion and occupation of Iraq was to overturn the tyranny and oppression of Saddam Hussein and replace it with democracy. The US occupation regime is using the same methods of mass repression and divide-and-rule practiced by the former Iraqi dictator.

Under Hussein, the Iraqi central government deliberately encouraged migration of Arabs from further south into Kirkuk and expelled thousands of Kurds from their homes, aiming to cement Baghdad's control over the oilfield. Now the Kurdish parties are responding in kind, using intimidation and repression to drive out Arabs and Turkmen and create a Kurdish majority in Kirkuk.

The Kurdish parties are playing a role analogous to that of the Kosovo Liberation Army (KLA) during the US and NATO military assault on Serbia in 1999. The Clinton administration intervened in the former Yugoslavia using the abuses of the Milosevic government in Serbia as a pretext.

The US government claimed that Serb forces were engaged in ethnic cleansing in Kosovo against the majority Albanian population of the province. Once NATO forces had occupied Kosovo, the KLA went on the rampage against the Serbs and Gypsies, driving most of the minority population out of the province. The Kurdish forces in Kirkuk appear bent on a similar campaign of ethnic cleansing in reverse.

The American media has thus far chosen to ignore the reports of US-backed ethnic cleansing against the Arab and Turkmen population in Kirkuk. Although the *Post* article was prominently displayed on the front page of the newspaper, and undoubtedly provoked widespread discussion in official media and political circles, there was little coverage Wednesday on the cable news channels and no mention of the *Post* report on the broadcast networks' evening news programs.

The cavalier treatment of the systematic kidnapping of hundreds of people in Kirkuk is in sharp contrast to the coverage given to the kidnappings of individual Westerners in Baghdad, either by Islamic fundamentalists or criminal gangs seeking ransom. According to figures released Tuesday, some 200 foreigners have been kidnapped in Iraq since the US invaded the country in March 2003—many fewer than the number of people kidnapped in the single city of Kirkuk in the last few months.