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In Iraq, Shias turning against Kurds

BY MOHAMAD BAZZI
MIDDLE EAST CORRESPONDENT

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BAGHDAD, Iraq — Omar Nayef swears that the Iraqi soldiers who stopped him at a checkpoint outside the besieged city of Fallujah two weeks ago were Kurdish.

"They were wearing Kurdish hats and they were speaking Kurdish with each other," said Nayef, 34, who fled to stay with relatives in Baghdad. "I know the Kurds are fighting alongside the Americans in Fallujah, no matter how much they deny it."



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Nayef, a Sunni Arab, was traveling with a cousin when they were stopped and interrogated. "They told us that we were terrorists, that everyone in Fallujah was a terrorist," he said, angrily fingering his prayer beads. "They said the Americans would take care of us."

All over Baghdad, stories like Nayef's are circulating about Kurdish militiamen, known as pesh merga, having fought with U.S. Marines who cordoned

off the Sunni city of Fallujah for much of April. Military officials say the Kurds were deployed in the area as part of the new Iraqi army and not as members of the militias controlled by the two largest Kurdish political parties.

Still, the rumors and sightings of Kurdish fighters around Fallujah have inflamed tensions between Arabs and Kurds in Iraq. While Sunni Arabs have long clashed with the Kurdish minority, members of the Shia Arab majority, who once empathized with the Kurds, recently began to turn against them.

Both Shia and Kurds chafed under Saddam Hussein's Sunni-dominated regime, which ruthlessly put down uprisings by the two groups. Hussein used chemical weapons against the Kurds, and he buried several hundred thousand Shia and Kurds in mass graves throughout Iraq.

But now there is a growing rift, with many Shia accusing the Kurds of being too cooperative with the U.S.-led occupation. The anti-Kurdish sentiments have been partly fueled by Shia cleric Muqtada al-Sadr, who has led a revolt against the occupation in Shia areas. Al-Sadr has infused his rebellion with strong themes of Arab and Iraqi nationalism, and he has questioned the Kurds' commitment to an Iraqi identity.

"The Kurdish leaders are American puppets. They are traitors to the Iraqi people," said Sheik Abdel-Hadi al-Derraji, a senior aide to al-Sadr. "We will not work with anyone who betrays his people."

The two main Kurdish leaders - Jalal Talabani, head of the Patriotic Union of Kurdistan, and Massoud Barzani, leader of the Kurdistan Democratic Party - have been condemned in Baghdad's Shia slums, where al-Sadr has strong support. "Death to the American stooges, Talabani and Barzani," a crowd chanted at a recent al-Sadr rally. "Death to all traitors."

Shia animosity toward the Kurds began to intensify in recent months after Kurds demanded that the interim Iraqi constitution include a provision that gives them veto power. Arab Shia and Sunnis also are wary of Kurdish proposals for a federal system in Iraq - and the Kurds' desire to absorb the oil-rich northern city of Kirkuk into

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their autonomous region.

The Shia view the Kurds' alliance with Washington as an attempt to win concessions from the occupation that Arab Iraqis would not be willing to make, analysts say. "Kurdish cooperation with the U.S. is instigating the rest of the Iraqi people," said Saad Jawad, a political science professor at Baghdad University and an expert on the Kurds. "If the Kurds lose the sympathy of the Shia, it will create huge problems."

At the same time, the siege of Fallujah inspired a level of Shia-Sunni cooperation that has not been seen in Iraq since the revolt of 1920, when Arab tribesmen rose up against the British occupation. Last month, Shia mosques throughout Baghdad organized food and blood drives for the people of Fallujah.

These displays of religious unity have dampened fears of a Sunni-Shia clash in Iraq, but they have created worries about a new kind of civil war between the country's two main ethnic groups: Arabs and Kurds.

"The situation in Fallujah has reawakened a sense of Arab nationalism among Shias and Sunnis. The danger is that this will grow to highlight the ethnic difference between Kurds and Arabs," said Falakadeen Kakay, a prominent Baghdad newspaper editor and former minister in the Kurdish self-rule area in northern Iraq. "Kurds are worried about being a minority without rights in the new Iraq. They are afraid of tyrannical rule by the majority."

In Shia neighborhoods of Baghdad, anti-Kurdish sentiments are vitriolic. "The Kurds are traitors ... How can they talk about wanting to be Iraqis when they support the Americans?" said Mohammed al-Musawi, 32, banging his clenched fist on a display case in the perfume store he runs. "How can they fight against other Iraqis in Fallujah - against their Muslim brothers?"

Ali Nabil Jassem interrupted his friend. "The Kurds are not really Iraqis. What did you expect from them?" said Jassem, 43. "We'll never forget what they did."

For the Kurds, who make up a fifth of Iraq's population of 24 million, such strong rhetoric is another reason they are pushing for continued autonomy in northern Iraq.

Kurdish leaders note that the former pesh merga fighters deployed in Fallujah are part of the 36th Battalion of the Iraqi Civil Defense Corps, which includes fighters from three Shia political groups. Despite the presence of Shia recruits in the 600-member battalion, Shia critics are focused exclusively on the Kurds' participation. Some Shia are infuriated that Kurdish leaders are calling for all Iraqi militias to be dissolved, except for their own. They point to statements by Barzani and Talabani endorsing U.S. threats to destroy al-Sadr's Mahdi Army if the cleric refuses to disarm it.

"Why do they say that the Mahdi Army has to be dissolved, but the pesh merga must remain?" asked Ahmad Naim, 36, an engineer who lives in the Shia slum of Hurriya. "The Kurds want special treatment."

Since the end of the 1991 Persian Gulf War, Talabani and Barzani have controlled an autonomous region in northern Iraq that was protected from Hussein's regime by U.S. and British warplanes. The two leaders built up militias totaling about 50,000 fighters.

In the struggle to shape a new Iraq, the Kurdish leaders are demanding continued self-rule for their region. They have proposed a federal system where the north would have autonomy in many areas of governance, and would share common defense, oil and foreign policies with Baghdad.

Kurds insisted on a veto provision in Iraq's temporary constitution, which will go into effect when the United States hands sovereignty to Iraqis on June 30. The provision says that two-thirds of voters in any three of Iraq's 18 provinces can veto the permanent Iraqi constitution, scheduled to be written next year. The Kurds dominate three northern provinces.

The clause has infuriated Shia clerics, who see it as a threat to Shia hopes of assuming political power. "The Kurds must continue declaring that they don't intend to split off from Iraq," Jawad said. "Iraqi Arabs want to know that the Kurds are willing to accept the rule of the majority, provided that the rights of minorities are respected."

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