

Security for States Versus Refugees: “Operation Provide Comfort” and the April 1991 Mass Influx of Refugees from Northern Iraq into Turkey¹

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Abstract

In April 1991, the massive influx of Iraqi refugees into Turkey precipitated a political process that led to one of the rare examples of humanitarian intervention. Under pressure from the Turkish government and world public opinion, Western allies declared a safe zone above the 36th parallel in northern Iraq and launched “Operation Provide Comfort.” This Operation enabled the extension of relief assistance to almost half a million refugees and their repatriation to northern Iraq within a relatively short period of time. The article tries to establish whether “Operation Provide Comfort” served state security interests or the security of the refugees from Iraq.

Précis

L'afflux massif des réfugiés irakiens en Turquie d'avril 1991 suscite un processus aboutissant à un exemple rare de l'intervention humanitaire. Sous pression du gouvernement turc ainsi que du grand public mondial, les alliés occidentaux déclarèrent une zone de sécurité en Irak septentrional au-dessus du 36e parallèle, tout en lançant l'Opération “Provide Comfort”. Cette Opération facilitait du secours aux quelques centaines de milles de réfugiés qui regagnaient leur rapatriement dans un délai relativement court. Cet article essaie à déterminer ou l'Opération “Provide Comfort” a desservi les intérêts de sécurité de l'état ou plutôt a-t-elle favorisé ceux des réfugiés irakiens.

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Introduction

With the end of the Cold War, the international community has paid growing attention to humanitarian intervention as a potentially effective way of providing protection for refugees. However, in practice, mobilizing international support for humanitarian intervention has been fraught with political problems. Often governments have failed to show the necessary political will to support such operations. Furthermore, governments have tended to give priority to respecting principles of state sovereignty over supporting policies aimed at preventing or stopping massive human rights violations. One exception to this reluctance of the international community to commit itself to humanitarian intervention was the launching of “Operation Provide Comfort” (OPC) in April 1991.

The defeat of the Iraqi military by the Allied coalition forces created an environment conducive to rebellion by the Shia in southern Iraq and Kurds in the north. The Kurdish nationalist uprising seemed to be successful until the Iraqi military turned all its might against the Kurds after having crushed the Shia rebellion in the south. Towards the end of March 1991, it was becoming quite clear that the Kurdish uprising was soon going to collapse. The Kurds had expected that the United States would enforce an earlier ban on Iraqi helicopters and gunships in addition to fixed wing aircrafts. When this did not occur and President Bush instead declared that he did “not want one single soldier or airman shoved into a civil war in Iraq that’s been going on for ages” and that the “Iraqi people must decide their own political future,” the Iraqi authorities

took this as a green light to suppress the Kurdish uprising.²

Until that point there had been considerable optimism among the Kurdish leadership that they would soon be able to enjoy autonomy.³ It is probably this sense of optimism that caught the Kurds by surprise. The euphoria turned very quickly into a massive uprootment as thousands of Iraqi Kurds fled their homes ahead of the advancing Iraqi army and sought refuge in the mountainous region where the frontiers of Iraq, Iran and Turkey meet. According to a US expert on refugee problems this was

a worst-case refugee disaster. In days, more than a million people have gathered on steep, cold mountain sides without any infrastructure. To get food and supplies to them is a challenge which exceeds that of the Berlin Airlift; instead of one city, we must feed people scattered through some of the least accessible, most remote points on earth.⁴

It was in the face of such a humanitarian crisis that the western governments decided to intervene. A safe haven in northern Iraq was created and OPC began. By early summer, most refugees had been repatriated to northern Iraq.

The main aim of this article is to explore whether this rare post-Cold War example of humanitarian intervention to resolve a refugee crisis served the interests of refugees or states. With this question in mind, the article is divided into three sections. The first section examines the decision making process that paved the way for the launching of OPC. The second one looks at the repatriation and resettlement processes of the refugees from Turkey. In the conclusion, I will argue that OPC was launched only partly with the security

and interests of refugees in mind. Instead, the Operation was also aimed at meeting the national security needs of Turkey, a long-standing ally of the western world and member of NATO.

Launching Operation Provide Comfort

Early in April 1991, the Turkish government received with great alarm reports of a growing number of refugees climbing up the mountains on the Iraqi border. The fact that the regions of Turkey bordering Iraq are populated by Kurds and that a Kurdish separatist group, the Workers' Party of Kurdistan (PKK), had been waging war on the government in the same region since 1984 was an additional concern. The salience of the escalating refugee crisis to Turkish national security was very much reflected in the government's decision to call for an emergency meeting of the National Security Council (NSC).⁵ A senior Foreign Ministry offi-

cial argued that "Iraqi refugees (were) forcibly directed toward the Turkish border and that constituted a threat to our security."⁶

moved on to other problems."⁸ The Turkish government's initial emphasis was on securing Turkish national interests rather than the interests of the refugees. Hence, the government decided to keep the border closed until a reaction could be solicited from the United Nations Security Council. A letter was immediately sent to the Security Council calling for a meeting and noting that a situation threatening to peace and security had emerged.⁹

The military, which had been instructed to keep the refugees out of Turkey at all cost short of firing at them, failed to implement the decision and a growing number of refugees continued to pour into Turkey. The fact that the area along the Iraqi frontier is "inhabited by a population that through ethnic and family ties was strongly sympathetic to the plight of the refugees" created mounting domestic pressure on the government to change its policy.¹⁰ Furthermore, the

cial argued that "Iraqi refugees (were) forcibly directed toward the Turkish border and that constituted a threat to our security."⁶

At the NSC meeting there was an attempt to balance conflicting interests. On the one hand, there was a clear recognition that most of these refugees were the kin of Kurds in Turkey, and that it was essential to come to their help for good political, if not humanitarian reasons.⁷ On the other hand, however, there was the fear that allowing the refugees in the mountains to come down into Turkey might have a snowball effect, attracting even larger numbers. As Hale notes, the Turkish government feared that if the refugees gained access to Turkish territory "it would acquire the long-term responsibility for their care and accommodation, with next to no international assistance once the world's attention

moved on to other problems."⁸ The Turkish government's initial emphasis was on securing Turkish national interests rather than the interests of the refugees. Hence, the government decided to keep the border closed until a reaction could be solicited from the United Nations Security Council. A letter was immediately sent to the Security Council calling for a meeting and noting that a situation threatening to peace and security had emerged.⁹

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Dumas' conviction that "just as Germany's murder of Europe's Jews brought about the concept of a 'crime against humanity,' so Mr. Hussein's mistreatment of the Kurds argued for recognition of a 'duty to intervene' to prevent gross violations of human rights."¹¹ It was this attitude that motivated France to call for amendments to the ceasefire Resolution between Coalition allies and Iraq that was being negotiated at the Security Council.¹²

The failure of this attempt and the fact that Resolution 687 establishing a ceasefire between Iraq and the UN Coalition did not make any reference to the refugee crisis forced Turkish diplomacy to become more active. In the morning of April 5, 1991, a critical meeting of Turkish diplomats with their West European counterparts was held in Ankara. During this meeting a draft version of the eventual Resolution 688 seems to have been discussed and agreed upon.¹³ Later in the day, the French submitted this resolution to the Security Council where it was adopted by a vote of 10 for, 3 against (Cuba, Yemen and Zimbabwe) and two abstentions (China and India).¹⁴

From the Turkish government's point of view, this Resolution was important for two reasons. First, the situation resulting from the refugee crisis was defined as a threat to international peace and security. This was to open the way, for the Turkish government and allies, to argue that a need had arisen to establish a safe haven and create a military force to protect it. The second reason was that the Resolution insisted that Iraq allow immediate access to humanitarian assistance for those in need. This enabled the Turkish government to argue its case for bringing the refugees from the mountaintops down to the Iraqi side of the border, which was topographically more suitable for extending relief assistance to the refugees.

As the tragedy of this refugee exodus unfolded on television screens, the late Turgut Özal, the President of Turkey at the time, started to advocate the idea of creating a "safe zone." Adopting a pragmatic approach, he argued

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that it was necessary for the refugees to be brought down from the snow covered mountaintops to the plains on the Iraqi side of the border. He was also aware that in order to extend assistance to the refugees and ensure their return, there was an immediate need to stop Iraqi aggression and create a secure environment. In a critical conversation with US President George Bush, he made it very clear that Turkey was being overwhelmed, and that he expected to see the United States come to the support of a NATO ally that had proved its loyalty during the Gulf War.¹⁵

The 8th of April marked a turning point. President Bush, under intense public opinion pressure, heeded Özal's call and ordered US humanitarian airdrops for the displaced on the mountaintops. At the same time he also dispatched the Secretary of State, James Baker, to Turkey. The visit of Baker to the border area on the 8th of April lasted only 7 minutes. But what he observed was more than enough to convince him that something urgent and out of the ordinary had to be done.¹⁶ In the meantime, the idea for a safe zone was taken by the British Prime Minister, John Major, to a European Community meeting in Brussels, specially convened to discuss this crisis. Özal's initial idea of a safe zone along the border to provide easier delivery of humanitarian aid was found to be somewhat problematic. Western governmental officials feared that this might create a "Gaza Strip-like" situation. Instead, Major pushed for an "enclave" (later changed to a "safe haven") large enough to ensure the return of the refugees to their villages and towns from where they had been uprooted.¹⁷

The European Community's idea of a safe haven coupled with Baker's report, led President Bush to announce his new policy in which he warned Iraq not to operate any aircraft or engage in any military operation above the 36th parallel. At the same time, on April 16, he announced that US troops would enter northern Iraq to create a safe area in the flat lands around Zakhu.¹⁸ In this

way OPC was thus officially launched. Its mission was defined as the conduct of "multinational humanitarian operations to provide immediate relief to displaced Iraqi civilians until international relief agencies and private voluntary organizations can assume overall supervision."¹⁹ By the end of May 1991, the military wing of Provide Comfort had grown to more than 21,000 troops from 11 countries.²⁰ The Operation was also strengthened by an air attachment deployed in Turkey near the Iraqi border to deter Iraq from violating the no-fly ban north of the 36th parallel. OPC, with the accompanying safe haven, generated a strong sense of security that was needed to ensure repatriation of the refugees.

Repatriation, Rehabilitation and Resettlement of the Refugees

A repatriation program was developed and put into place by late April.²¹ The 460,000 refugees were first brought down from the mountains to approximately 20 transit camps along the Turkish-Iraqi frontier.²² As can be seen from Table 1, the repatriation of the refugees to northern Iraq was then completed at an unusually fast speed:

The first wave of voluntary repatriation to Iraq from Turkey started in the last week of April 1991 ... Within five weeks, 95 per cent of Dohuk's more than 400,000 former residents had returned, as had another 60,000 persons who lived beyond its borders in (Iraqi) government controlled territory, but who were unwilling to proceed there."²³

By early June, the last of the border camps was closed and the remaining 13,000 refugees in Turkey were moved

to a camp normally used to house Haj pilgrims near the border with Iraq.²⁴ The repatriation process from Turkey also enabled most of the approximately 1.4 million Kurdish refugees who had fled to Iran to return to northern Iraq.²⁵

Table 1: Repatriation of Refugees from the 1991 Exodus between April 14-June 1, 1991²⁶

Date	Number
April 14	460,000
April 29	439,504
May 10	328,023
May 21	125,658
June 1	12,838

Although the 1991 refugee influx was mainly characterized as a Kurdish exodus, there were also many Arabs, Assyrians, Chaldeans and Turcomans among the Kurdish refugees. However, there are no separate statistics on these groups, and some were moved to a number of separate camps in Turkey while others received residence permits after posting a bond or finding a relative to sponsor them. Eventually, all those in camps were moved to one refugee camp in Eastern Anatolia. By late 1991, there were 1,345 refugees, from five different ethnic groups in this camp.²⁷ They basically did not want to go back to Iraq, and together with the refugees in Silopi, expected to be resettled in third countries.

Most of these refugees have in the meantime been resettled in many Western countries, including Australia and New Zealand. Table 2 shows the breakdown of resettled refugees by regions within the Western world. By the end of 1994, there were 6,156 such

Table 2: Number of Refugees from the 1991 Mass Exodus by Region of Resettlement²⁸

	1991	1992	1993	1994	1995
European Community	6	237	96	12	—
North America	1	682	2,680	478	59
Oceania	—	654	88	221	74
Scandinavia	55	23	40	4	11
Others	—	19	6	—	—
Total	62	2,315	2,910	725	144 =6,156

refugees resettled out of Turkey. However, these statistics only include resettlement cases that UNHCR has been either involved in or informed about. There are also cases where countries have taken refugees without the knowledge of UNHCR. A good case in point is Australia which took 2,000 refugees in 1992 in addition to the ones reported in Table 2.

There were factors other than the creation of a safe haven above the 36th parallel and the launching of OPC that facilitated the return of refugees. The involvement and presence of the UN on the ground in northern Iraq was also critical to the success of the repatriation program. The political will

but also assisted the reconstruction of more than 1,200 villages.²⁹

The cost of the relief assistance brought to the refugees, together with the cost of their repatriation and reintegration to Iraq, made this operation one of the most expensive of its kind. The figure offered by the European Union for the cost of international assistance provided for the various programs by the end of the summer of 1991, stood at more than one billion dollars.³⁰ The cost of the assistance provided by the US government and the UNHCR for the refugees during the Fiscal Year 1991, was US\$583 and US\$152 million, respectively.³¹ The Turkish government for its part spent

lic solidarity with the plight of the Kurdish refugees were important factors that bore heavily on the eventual decision to declare a safe haven and launch OPC. However, the diplomatic efforts of Turkish officials (especially Turkish President, Turgut Özal, who had supported UN decisions against Iraq and had developed a close relationship with George Bush during the course of the Gulf crisis) to convince their Western counterparts to help Turkey appears to have also played a critical, if not determining, role. The importance that Western government officials gave to solidarity with the security needs of a NATO ally is demonstrated by the fact that there was little or no assistance extended to Iran which faced a much bigger refugee influx. As Frelick notes, "[i]n effect, the refugees for whom Iran was the nearest border were penalized for their hosts' poor relations with the US."³³ Furthermore, the choice of the 36th parallel, north of which Iraq was effectively banned from any military activity, appears to have been influenced, at least to some extent, by the fact that most of the refugees that had fled to Turkey came from areas above the 36th parallel. Therefore, the special circumstances that surround the launching of OPC seems to suggest that it may have been a unique humanitarian intervention that came about "as much to shore up political alliances with friendly governments as to assist the refugees."³⁴ ■

Clearly, Western public opinion pressure and a powerful sense of public solidarity with the plight of the Kurdish refugees were important factors that bore heavily on the eventual decision to declare a safe haven and launch Operation Provide Comfort.

demonstrated particularly by the US and the French governments to intervene in support of the refugees in turn enabled the United Nations to negotiate a critical deal with the Iraqi authorities, to bring assistance to returning refugees as well as to internally displaced persons within Iraq. On 18 April 1991, the UN signed a Memorandum of Understanding authorizing the United Nations to run humanitarian assistance and relief programs in Iraq. In May, an additional agreement was signed enabling the UN to deploy up to 500 guards to protect its humanitarian centres.

These agreements greatly enhanced the ability of the UN and other international agencies to operate in Iraq. The growing presence of personnel from international governmental and non-governmental agencies provided a psychologically important additional sense of security for returning refugees. More importantly, the UN introduced programs to rebuild and rehabilitate villages destroyed by the Iraqi military. UNHCR, as the UN lead agency in northern Iraq, not only managed the repatriation of the refugees

another US\$257 million on relief and assistance operations.³² These figures do not include the cost of the military portion of OPC.

Conclusion

OPC can be considered a successful example of a rare occasion of humanitarian intervention. Once it became operational it effectively facilitated the provision of humanitarian relief assistance to almost half a million refugees. It provided a protective shield for not only the refugees but also the internally displaced in northern Iraq, by constituting a credible military deterrent against the Iraqi military. Lastly, it created a conducive environment for the repatriation of refugees in an exceptionally short period of time. Yet, was it an overwhelming concern to ensure the security of the refugees, or was it Western governmental solidarity to assist a political and military ally, which paved the way to this almost unprecedented case of humanitarian intervention? This is a difficult question to answer.

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Notes

1. The research for this article was made possible by a grant from the Bogaziçi University Research Fund.
2. J. Yang, "Bush Defends Non-Intervention," *Guardian Weekly*, April 21, 1991.
3. *Time*, April 15, 1991, p.17. Similar views can also be seen in "Kurds Gaining, US Says," *International Herald Tribune*, March 19, 1991.
4. L. Rosenblatt, Executive Director of Refugees International, testifying before the Immigration and Refugee Affairs Subcommittee of the Committee on the Judiciary, US Senate, April 15, 1991.
5. The Turkish National Security Council, in which the military is strongly represented, was originally set up in 1961 to

- improve coordination between civilian authorities and the military on issues concerning Turkish security. Although its decisions are only meant to be *recommendatory*, the Council is recognized to have growing influence on issues directly concerning security issues.
6. *Turkish Daily News*, April 6/7, 1991.
 7. The opposition leader at that time of the True Path Party, Süleyman Demirel, and various Kurdish deputies from the Turkish Parliament called for the opening of the borders, *Milliyet*, April 4, 1991.
 8. W. Hale, "Turkey's time: Turkey, the Middle East and the Gulf Crisis," *International Affairs*, Vol. 68, No. 4 (1992), p. 688.
 9. *United Nations Security Council Document S/22435*, April 3, 1991.
 10. *Asylum Under Attack*, (A Report of the Lawyers Committee for Human Rights, April 1992), p. 36.
 11. *The Economist*, April 13, 1991, p. 53.
 12. *Time*, April 15, 1991, p. 22.
 13. *Turkish Daily News*, April 6/7, 1991. A draft copy of the Resolution leaked to the newspaper is very similar to Resolution 688 except for some minor changes.
 14. *S/RES/688(1991)*, April 5, 1991.
 15. *Newsweek*, April 29, 1991.
 16. *Ibid.*
 17. *Time*, April 22, 1991; *The Economist*, April 13, 1991, p. 14, and *Newsweek*, April 29, 1991, p. 11.
 18. "Update on Iraqi Refugees and Displaced Persons," statement by N. Lyman, Director of the Bureau for Refugee Programs *US Department of State Dispatch*, May 27, 1991, p. 379.
 19. Quoted in J. Finkel, *Liberation, Occupation, and Rescue: War Termination and Desert Storm* (Carlisle Barracks PE: Strategic Studies Institute, U.S. Army War College, August 1992), p. 55.
 20. *Ibid.*, p. 57.
 21. For details on the humanitarian assistance and the repatriation program in its early stages see *Refugees*, No. 86, June 1991.
 22. *US Department of State Dispatch*, May 27, 1991, p. 380.
 23. *UNHCR Report on Northern Iraq: April 1991–May 1992*, (Geneva: United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees, 1992), p. 5.
 24. *Keesings Archives*, 38308. At the end of June, the numbers were down to 6,600, and eventually down to 4,000 by the end of the year. Figures were obtained from Turkish Ministry of Foreign Affairs and the UNHCR Office in Ankara.
 25. *World Refugee Survey 1992*, (Washington DC: U.S. Committee for Refugees, 1992), pp. 96–97.
 26. This table was compiled from figures in M. Kaynak (ed.) *The Iraqi Asylum Seekers and Türkiye*, (Ankara: Tanmak Publications, 1992), p. 70.
 27. These figures were obtained from the UNHCR Office in Ankara.
 28. The figures were obtained from the UNHCR Office in Ankara. The European Community includes Belgium, Denmark, France, Germany, Holland and Spain. North America includes Canada and the United States. Oceania includes Australia and New Zealand. Scandinavia includes Finland and Sweden. Others include Austria and Switzerland.
 29. *UNHCR Report on Northern Iraq: April 1991–May 1992*, op. cit., p. 4.
 30. *EC News*, September 28, 1991.
 31. *OFDA Annual Report FY 1991*, p. 125.
 32. Kaynak M. (ed.), op. cit., p. 121.
 33. B. Frelick, "Troubled Waters in the Middle East: 1990–91." in *World Refugee Survey 1991*, (Washington DC: U.S. Committee for Refugees, 1991), p. 93.
 34. B. Frelick, "Closing Ranks to Deny Access to Asylum," *Immigration Newsletter*, Vol. 20, No. 3 (1991), p. 6.

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World Refugee Survey. 1992. Washington DC: U.S. Committee for Refugees, pp.96–97.

Yang J. 1991. "Bush Defends Non-Intervention." *Guardian Weekly*, April 21. □

- Serb origin. For example, approximately 15,000 Serbs remain in the Tuzla region from a prewar population of 82,235 Serbs. For the Zenica region, UNHCR estimates that 16,000 Serbs remain from a prewar population of 79,355 Serbs. Around Bihac, 28,300 Serbs have been forced to flee while 1,600 Serbs remain. Together with the Serbs who have fled their homes during the Croat and Muslim offensives of mid 1995 and the Serbs presently evacuating Serb sectors of Sarajevo which have been given to the Muslims according to the Dayton peace plan, we see that the forced displacement of all sides is comparable in this latest Balkan war which was fought in order to create "ethnically pure" territories. See Office of the Special Envoy for former Yugoslavia (UNHCR), *Briefing Kit*, December 1992, p. 3 and UNHCR, *Information Notes on former Yugoslavia*, no. 8/95, August 1995, p. 9.
28. "It is a remarkable achievement of Bosnian diplomacy, and one reinforced by the government's rhetoric after the fall of Srebrenica, that the Muslims have been able to gain significant military parity with the Serbs, while nonetheless maintaining the image of hapless victims in the eyes of much of the world community. It is all the more remarkable since, before the Srebrenica attack, the Muslims had been on the strategic offensive for more than a year." Boyd, p. 31. Information on military matters in Bosnia-Herzegovina was communicated during a conference featuring former UNPROFOR General Lewis MacKenzie (Toronto, September 1993).
 29. *The Economist*, "The covert arms trade," February 12, 1994, p. 21.
 30. Adam Clymer, "Dole-Helms Bill Asks \$100 Million in Arms for Bosnia," *The New York Times*, August 11, 1995, p. A3.
 31. "More than two months after it was unveiled as the answer to more fully enforce United Nations resolutions in Bosnia, the Rapid Reaction Force remains substantially crippled by restrictions imposed by the Bosnian Government ... A United Nations official said the Bosnian Government wants final authority on how the Rapid Reaction Force is used on its territory. That would, said the official, make the international force essentially an adjunct to the Bosnian Army." Mike O'Conner, "Bosnian Government Said to Hamper New, Stronger U.N. Force," *The New York Times*, August 17, 1995, p. A11.
 32. Statute of the Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees, UN General Assembly (December 14, 1950), art. 2. □