



An Unforced Error: The Untold Story of the Suleymaniya Hood Incident

Zorunlu Olmayan Bir Hata: Süleymaniye Çuval Hadisesinin Anlatılmamış Hikayesi

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Özet

Yirmi birinci yüzyılda Türk - Amerikan ilişkilerine en fazla zarar veren olaylardan biri, 4 Temmuz 2003 tarihinde yaşanan ve Türkiye’de yaygın olarak “Çuval Hadisesi” olarak anılan Süleymaniye Çuval Hadisesi idi. Ancak o gün yaşananlar, Amerikan savaş tarihi içerisinde dikkat çekici bir biçimde yer almamaktadır. Dönemin ABD Savunma Bakanı Donald Rumsfeld tarafından yapılan bir açıklamaya göre, Türk askerlerinin gözaltına alınması kararı “zaman açısından hassas ve güvenilir istihbarat” temelinde ani olarak alınmıştır. Gerçekte ise durum bundan çok uzaktır ve olayın tüm ayrıntıları hiçbir zaman gün yüzüne çıkmamıştır. O gün aslında yaşanan, Kürdistan Yurtseverler Birliği (KYB) lideri Celal Talabani tarafından Türkleri küçük düşürmek ve Türkiye’nin Kuzey Irak’taki etkisini zayıflatmak amacıyla kasten organize edilmiş bir “tuzak operasyonu”ydü. 173. Hava Tümeni Komutanı Albay William C. Mayville Jr., bu planlamayı desteklemiş ve sürece aktif olarak katılmış; 4. Piyade Tümeni Komutanı Tümgeneral Raymond T. Odierno ise Amerikan katılımına onay vermiştir. Bu metin, önlenabilir bir çatışmaya yol açan ve sonrasında kontrolden çıkarak bugüne kadar Türk-Amerikan stratejik ortaklığını zedelemeye devam eden kararların birinci elden anlatımıdır.

Anahtar Kelimeler: *Süleymaniye Çuval Hadisesi, Irak’ı Özgürleştirme Harekâtı, Türk-Amerikan İlişkileri, Raymond T. Odierno.*

Abstract

One of the most significant events damaging Turkish - American relations in the 21st century was the “Suleymaniya Hood Incident” of July 4, 2003, which is widely recalled in Turkey today as the “Hood Incident” (Çuval Hadisesi). However, what happened that day is conspicuously absent from American histories of the war. According to a contemporary apologia from then-Secretary of Defence Donald Rumsfeld, the decision to apprehend the Turkish soldiers was made suddenly “in view of time-sensitive and credible intelligence.” In fact, nothing could be farther from the truth, and the full story of the incident has never been revealed. What actually happened that day was a deliberate “sting operation” organized by Jelal Talabani, the leader of the Patriotic Union of Kurdistan (PUK), designed to embarrass the Turks and weaken their influence in northern Iraq. Colonel William C. Mayville Jr, commander of the 173rd Airborne Brigade supported and participated in the planning and Major General Raymond T. Odierno, commanding general of the 4th Infantry Division, approved American participation. This is a first-person account of the decisions that led to an avoidable confrontation that escalated out of control which continues to afflict the Turkish - American strategic partnership today.

Key Words: *Suleymaniya Hood Incident, Operation Iraqi Freedom, Turkish-American Relations, Raymond T. Odierno.*

INTRODUCTION

In September 2024 two United States Marines, on shore leave in Izmir, Turkey were assaulted and hoods (head bags) forced over their heads.¹ Ten years earlier, in November 2014, three United States Navy sailors were similarly assaulted in Istanbul.² This might puzzle Americans, but these incidents would not puzzle a Turk. These events demonstrate the continuing legacy of America's unforced error in Turkish - American relations that occurred in Iraq in 2003.

One of the most significant events damaging Turkish-American relations in the 21st century was the “Sulaymaniyah Hood Incident” of July 4, 2003, which is widely recalled in Turkey today as the “Hood Incident” (Çuval Hadisesi).³ However, what happened that day is conspicuously absent from the extant literature of the war.⁴ An incomplete account appears in Joel D. Rayburn and Frank K. Sobchak's *The U.S. Army in the Iraq War – Volume 1: Invasion – Insurgency – Civil War, 2003-2006*, which presents the raid as immediately necessary.⁵ Even the consequences of the incident are lost in the historical record. According to Rayburn and Sobchak, “The debacle was eventually resolved by a joint Turkey-U.S. fact-finding team, which laid out the evidence and rectified discrepancies.”⁶ However, they only cite two newspaper articles to this effect and there is nothing in the available record to support that.⁷

¹ Murat Yetkin, “Sack action against US soldiers in Izmir: Is it anti-imperialism or what?, “ The Yetkin Report, September 3, 2024. <https://yetkinreport.com/2024/09/03/izmirde-abd-askerine-cuval-eylemi-anti-emperyalizm-mi-degilse-ne/>. See also https://www.nbcnews.com/news/us-news/two-marines-are-safe-assault-turkey-officials-say-rcna169260?utm_source=sailthru&utm_medium=email&utm_campaign=mil-ebb

² Jacob Poushter, “The Turkish people don't look favorably upon the U.S., or any other country, really,” The Pew Research Center, October 31, 2014. <https://www.cnn.com/2014/11/12/politics/turkey-navy-sailors-bags-over-heards/index.html>

³ The Sulaymaniyah Hood Incident is sometime referred in America as the Headbag Incident. See Ali Uygur Aydogdu, “The Sack Incident: A Crisis in Turkish-American Relations and Its Strategic Consequences,” The Center for Intelligence and Security Research (IGAM), Ankara, Turkey, December 9, 2024.

⁴ See for example, Robert O. Babcock, *Operation Iraqi Freedom I: A Year in the Sunni Triangle, The History of the 4th Infantry Division and task Force Ironhorse in Iraq, April 2003 to April 2004*, (Tuscaloosa, AL: St. John's Press, 2005); Kevin C.M. Benson, *Expectation of Valor, Planning for the Iraqi War*, (Havertown, PA: Casement Publishers, 2024); James A. Baker III, Lee H. Hamilton et.al., *The Iraq Study Group Report*, (New York: Vintage Books, 2006 reprint of the GPO publication); Peter W. Connors, *The US Army in Kirkuk: Governance Operations along the Fault Lines of Iraqi Society, 2003-2009*, (Fort Leavenworth, KS: CSI Press, 2011); Gregory Fontenot, EJ Degan, David Tohn, *On Point: The United States Army in Operation Iraqi Freedom*, (Fort Leavenworth, KS: CSI Press, 2004); John J. McGrath (ed.), *Between the Rivers, Combat Action in Iraq, 2003-2005*, (Fort Leavenworth, KS: CSI Press, 2013); Harry D. Tunnell IV, *Red Devils, Tactical Perspectives from Iraq*, (Fort Leavenworth, KS: CSI Press, undated).

⁵ Joel D. Rayburn COL and Frank K. Sobchak COL, *The U.S. Army in the Iraq War – Volume 1: Invasion – Insurgency – Civil War, 2003-2006*, (US Army War College Press, 2019), 158-159. This book contains the best American summary of the raid, but it does not provide the details of the advanced planning conducted by the Americans or Jelal Talabani's intent.

⁶ Ibid. 159.

⁷ An extensive search of the operational records contained in U.S. Army Heritage and Education Center (USAHEC) digital archives as well as the Department of State's data base revealed no record of the Sulaymaniyah Hood Incident.

Conveniently forgotten by the United States government the Sulaymaniyah Hood Incident is scarcely remembered in America today. Unfortunately, the incident continues to linger and fester in the Turkish public's consciousness.⁸ Embarrassing iconic images of zip-tied Turkish special forces soldiers, with their heads covered by bagged hoods and escorted by heavily armed American soldiers, reappear periodically in Turkish newspapers. The incident immediately rose to diplomatic and presidential levels but, in the end, was chalked up by the Americans to Turkish intransigence and troublesome meddling in Iraqi internal affairs.

According to a contemporary apologia from then-Secretary of Defense Donald Rumsfeld, the decision to apprehend the Turkish soldiers was made suddenly “in view of time-sensitive and credible intelligence.”⁹ In fact, nothing could be farther from the truth, and the full story of the incident has never been revealed. What actually happened that day was a premeditated deliberate “sting operation” organized by Jelal Talabani, the leader of the Patriotic Union of Kurdistan (PUK), designed to embarrass the Turks and weaken their influence in northern Iraq. Colonel William C. “Bill” Mayville Jr, commander of the 173rd Airborne Brigade supported and participated in the plan and Major General Raymond T. Odierno, commanding general of the 4th Infantry Division, approved American participation. This is a first-person account of the decisions that led to an avoidable confrontation that escalated out of control, and which continues to afflict the Turkish - American strategic partnership today.

GENERAL ODIERNO AND ME

I served as Major General Raymond T. “Ray” Odierno’s Political Advisor during the invasion and occupation of Iraq in 2003. Our service together went back to 1990 as majors when Ray served as the Executive Officer (XO) and I as the Operations Officer (S3) of an artillery battalion in the 3rd Armored Division. When we returned from the First Gulf War, Ray became the XO of the 42nd Field Artillery Brigade and I became the brigade S3. We became good friends along the way. I retired a lieutenant colonel in 1997 as a Turkish Foreign Area Officer (48G). In retirement, I became a historian specializing in Turkish military history and I maintained exceptionally strong connections with the senior leadership in the Turkish General Staff (TGS).

Ray went on to division command and, ultimately, became the United States Army’s 38th chief of staff.

⁸ Henri J. Barkey, *Turkey and Iraq: The Perils (and Prospects) of Proximity*, (Washington, DC: U.S. Institute of Peace, July 2005), 10.

⁹ See <http://www.hurriyetdailynews.com/default.aspx?pageid=438&n=abundance-of-rumsfeld-letters-in-turkish-press-2003-07-20>.

It was widely reported in the winter of 2003 that Major General Ray Odierno's 4th Infantry Division would deploy through Turkey for the expected invasion of Iraq. In early February 2003, I was in Ankara, Turkey and I talked informally with serving and retired Turkish generals about this. To a man, they directly responded that Turkey would never allow this to happen. I then arranged with the Defense Attaché Office in the American Embassy for an office call with the senior attaché. The DAO was a US Air Force colonel, who had not only never served in Turkey but had never served even a single tour in Europe. Of course, he did not speak Turkish. I reported that my contacts in the TGS told me that the Turks would not allow an American invasion from Turkey under any circumstances. I will never forget the moment the DAO looked at me and said, "We're up to 13 billion dollars and they'll cave soon."¹⁰ To my consternation, not only the DAO, but the embassy staff believed that Turkey's compliance could be bought with American dollars.

I had remained in contact with Ray after my retirement, so when I returned to the states, I called Ray and told him what I had observed in Ankara. Ray had been briefed and concurred with the embassy's assessment, so he told me that it was a done deal. But, in late February 2003, Ray reached back to tell me that things were not going well for the 1st Infantry Division's task force already preparing the logistics infrastructure in Turkey and his own 4th Division advance party in Incirlik Air Base was having difficulty with the Turks. He asked me if I would return to active duty as his Political Advisor (POLAD) to help sort things out in Turkey. I agreed and I reported to Fort Hood on March 9th. So, after five years I was back in the army. The division G1 told me that I was first regular army officer recalled to active duty after 9/11. On March 13th, I was invited to a private dinner with Linda and Ray at their quarters. We argued about whether the Turks would change their minds and whether Saddam really did have WMDs. The next day, I left for Turkey. A week later the Turks informed the Bush administration that they would not allow the Americans to invade northern Iraq from Turkey. I left Turkey and met my division in Kuwait.

TURKISH - AMERICAN MIL-TO-MIL RELATIONS IN 2003

It is important to recognize the changing Turkish - American Military-to-Military relationship (Mil-to-Mil) between the 1991 Gulf War and 2003 increasingly positioned anti-American sentiment in Turkey. The literature about the deterioration of Turkish - American relations in the late twentieth century and the situation as it existed in 2003 focuses on diplomacy, terrorism, and Turkish public

¹⁰ I quote this amount from memory, but by March 2003, the amount offered by the United States rose to \$25 billion. See Edward J. Erickson, "Turkey as regional hegemon—2014: Strategic implications for the United States," *Turkish Studies*, Vol. 5, No. 3, Autumn 2004, pp.25–45, 39.

opinion.¹¹ The lack of American support for the 1974 Cyprus intervention and the subsequent American arms embargoes inflicted a punishing blow to Turkish - American Mil-to-Mil relations, but this worsened as American missteps accumulated.

The 1991 Gulf War further damaged the partially recovering relationship when America threw its support to protect the Iraqi Kurds in Operation Provide Comfort.¹² Operation Provide Comfort II followed and lasted until 31 December 1996. While Turkey initially favored the United States and NATO controlling the influx of Iraqi Kurdish refugees, over time the Turks became concerned about the militarization of the Iraqi Kurds and their connections with the Turkish Kurd insurgent group and terrorist organization called the Kurdistan Workers Party (PKK). The official American position today is that military support to the Iraqi Kurds was “indirect” (the Northern Watch No-Fly Zone protected the rise of autonomous Kurdish state in Northern Iraq giving the Iraqi Kurds time to build a small army). However, there is unresolved speculation that the CIA and American Special Forces provided arms and military training to the Iraqi Kurds.¹³

During the annual NATO Exercise Display Determination in 1992 another unfortunate rupture of relations occurred. On October 1, the USS *Saratoga* unintentionally launched two live Sea Sparrow anti-ship missile targeting a Turkish Navy destroyer, the TCG *Muavenet*. Both missiles struck the ship, killing five sailors and wounding twenty-two.¹⁴ The *Muavenet* barely avoided sinking and was scrapped in 1993. The American sailors responsible for launching the missiles were never punished while the officers responsible for oversight received light administrative punishment.

On April 14, 1994, United States Air Force F-15 fighters mistakenly shot down two American Black Hawk helicopters over Northern Iraq, killing twenty-six including three Turkish officers (a colonel and two first lieutenants). The American officer responsible was courts-martialed but essentially acquitted.¹⁵ While none of these incidents were the result of deliberate American policies or actions, when viewed through the lens of Turkish public opinion, the American military appeared predisposed toward the careless disregard for its Turkish counterpart.

¹¹ See for example Nur Bilgi Criss, “A Short History of Anti-Americanism and Terrorism: The Turkish Case” *The Journal of American History*, Vol. 89, No. 2, History and September 11: A Special Issue (Sep., 2002), 472-484

¹² The best history of the military operation is Gordon W. Rudd, *Humanitarian Intervention, Assisting the Iraqi Kurds in Operation Provide Comfort, 1991*, (Washington, DC: Department of the Army, 2006).

¹³ See for example, Bryan R. Gibson, “The Secret Origins of the U.S.-Kurdish Relationship Explain Today’s Disaster,” *The Kurdish Institute of Paris*, October 14, 2019 and Andrew L., Mick Mulroy, Kenneth Tovo, “Irregular Warfare: A Case Study in CIA and US Army Special Forces Operations in Northern Iraq, 2002-03,” *Middle East Institute*, August 12, 2021.

¹⁴ Report of Court of Inquiry of 23 Oct 1992 (unclassified), United States Atlantic Fleet, 18 November 1992.

¹⁵ *Operation Provide Comfort, Review of U.S. Air Force Investigation of Black Hawk Fratricide Incident*, (Washington, DC: Government Accounting Office, November 1997).

SULAYMANIYAH - THE PREQUEL

By mid-April 2003, the 4th Division occupied the Sunni Triangle from Tikrit south to Balad and Baqubah, and east beyond Kirkuk to the Iranian border. To centralize command, the V Corps assigned the independent 173rd Airborne Brigade in Kirkuk to Major General Odierno. The brigade and its youthful and charismatic commander, Colonel Bill Mayville, had jumped into Kirkuk and worked closely with the Iraqi Kurds thereafter.



Figure 1. Major General Raymond T. Odierno (left), Lieutenant Colonel Ed Erickson, Political Advisor (background), Colonel William Mayville, CO, 173rd Airborne Brigade (foreground) in Kirkuk, Iraq, May 2003. Author's collection.

General Odierno visited both his soldiers and local Iraqi leaders on a nearly daily basis. As his POLAD, I was a part of his personal command group and when he visited the Iraqis, he always brought me along. On April 24th, because Mosul had a significant Turkmen population, I was seconded to the 101st Airborne Division to assist Major General David Petraeus with the first local provincial elections in Iraq, which were so successful they became the model for the remainder of the provinces. I returned to the 4th Division on May 9th, accompanying Odierno to Kirkuk the next day, where I spent a week assisting with the provincial elections in Kirkuk. Over the next few weeks, we had meetings with key Iraqis in Tikrit, Kirkuk, and Baqubah, we met multiple times with Kurdistan Democratic Party (KDP) leader Masoud Barzani in Irbil and Patriotic Union of

Kurdistan (PUK) leader Jelal Talabani in Sulaymaniyah. My personal journals are full of daily records of conversations Odierno had with the Iraqis and the Iraqi Kurds.¹⁶

Because of our ten-year friendship Odierno never hesitated to encourage me to speak my mind to him. But we differed many times on key issues. One of these disagreements involved the role of the Iraqi Turkmen and their support by the Turkish Army in northern Iraq.¹⁷ In my view, Odierno held the Turks accountable for his division being denied an opportunity to show what it could do in large-scale conventional offensive operations. While he was not overtly anti-Turk, he was inclined to weigh the Iraqi Kurds interests more heavily than those of the minority Turkmen. Odierno certainly distrusted the Turks. This was a result of three circumstances, Turkey's refusal to allow the 4th Division's northern invasion, the obvious normalcy and rule of law in the autonomous Kurdish regions compared to the Sunni Triangle, and the enthusiasm of Colonel Mayville for advancing Kurdish interests.

SULAYMANIYAH – FINDING OUT ABOUT “THE STING”

Jelal Talabani invited Odierno to visit Sulaymaniyah on June 27, 2003. It was our second trip there and Talabani also invited Colonel Mayville to come along. On the UH-60 helicopter flight from Kirkuk to Sulaymaniyah, Mayville brought up a new subject that he had not shared previously with Odierno. I listened as Mayville casually mentioned that Talabani's Kurds planned a raid on a Turkish Army special forces team in Sulaymaniyah.¹⁸ He explained that Talabani wanted to embarrass and discredit the Kirkuk Turkmen. My take on this news was the Kurds had set up what charitably could be called a sting operation. Odierno was taken by surprise and expressed reservations. We landed in Sulaymaniyah and went to Talabani's isolated private villa overlooking a lake. Odierno, Mayville, and Talabani then had an extended meeting focusing on how the Peshmerga (the Kurds' private army) might be integrated, rather than disarmed and dissolved, into a future Iraqi Army. Talabani went on to discuss how he wanted to nullify the risk to Kurdish interests posed by the interventions of the Turkish government by exposing it publicly. He argued explicitly that he wanted to isolate the influence of the Turkish General Staff in the Kurdish areas of northern Iraq.

The conversation drifted into some details of what I increasingly came to understand as a sting operation.¹⁹ Talabani told us that he had provided documents through the Peshmerga to the

¹⁶ I will refer to my contemporaneous daily journal as Erickson POLAD Notes, followed by the date.

¹⁷ For further commentary see Frederic Lorenz and Edward J. Erickson, *Strategic Water; Iraq and Security Planning in the Euphrates-Tigris Basin, Expanded Second Edition*, (Quantico, VA: Marine Corps University Press, July 2023), 58-60.

¹⁸ Erickson POLAD Notes, 11:20 am, July 27, 2003.

¹⁹ Erickson POLAD Notes, 11:20 am, July 27, 2003.

Turkish Liaison Officer located in Sulaymaniyah. Mayville asked about how the documents would be used to which Talabani's eldest son, who attended the meeting, replied that it depended on how the Coalition Provisional Authority's weapons policy applied to the Iraqi Turkmen Front (ITF). I didn't understand the weapons connection at the time, and I know Odierno did not either. Colonel Mayville then explained the Kurds were looking for an incident "to use the stability and security card to embed the Peshmerga into the successor national army."²⁰ Talabani further explained that he needed to keep the ITF, the Islamic fronts, and the Expats (Ahmed Chalabi's Free Iraqi Fighters) out of Kirkuk. My personal key takeaway concerned Talabani's intentionality to use the act to embarrass Turkey by deliberately involving the Americans in apprehending Turkish soldiers.

We broke for an elaborate lunch after which Odierno and Talabani withdrew for a long private one-on-one meeting and smoking cigars. I never knew what they talked about, but I am of the opinion that the details and objectives of the raid were sorted out. On the flight back to Tikrit, Odierno visited Kurdish tribal leaders in Halabja to discuss de-Baathification and policing.

Over the course of the day, I had become very concerned about American involvement in the sting and its potential impact on the Turks. I only had bits and pieces of the plan. After dark, it was Odierno's habit to sit in a camp chair on the tailgate of his sleeper van and enjoy a cigar. I often stopped by to chat about old times and the day's business. I approached him that night and expressed my strongest reservations about what Talabani was planning to do. I suggested that it was critical Odierno brief the new commanding general in Baghdad about American participation in the Kurdish operation.²¹ Odierno said he would think about it, and I left him with the thought that he was picking Kurds over Turks. He never mentioned it again and I did not hear the subject raised in any daily divisional command briefings. I do not know whether anyone on the division staff knew the details. Subsequently, I have come to believe that Odierno did not alert our new higher headquarters in a meaningful way about Talabani's plans and the details of the operation remained very much close hold between Odierno and Mayville.

It is important to understand that a new headquarters assumed command in Iraq on June 15, 2003.²² It was titled Combined Joint Task Force-7 (CJTF-7) commanded by Lieutenant General Ricardo Sanchez. The subordinate divisions were reorganized as well with the 101st Airborne transitioning to become Multinational Division-N and the 4th Infantry Division transitioning to become Multinational Division-NC. The Kurdish areas had previously outside the American

²⁰ Erickson POLAD Notes, 11:20 am, July 27, 2003.

²¹ I did not record this conversation in my notes but I have a vivid recollection of that night.

²² The merging of the CFLCC and V Corps headquarters began on May 1, 2003, but was not effective until June 15th. See Rayburn and Sobchak, *The U.S. Army in the Iraq War – Volume 1*, 135-137.

sectors, but CJTF-7 assigned Dahuk, Erbil, and Sulaymaniyah to Multinational Division-N.²³ Therefore, anything that happened in Sulaymaniyah in late June and July 2003 technically belonged to General Petraeus and the 101st Airborne.

THE SULAYMANIYAH INCIDENT

To fully comprehend what happened on July 4, 2003 it is important to understand the architecture of the Turkish Army's presence in northern Iraq.²⁴ There were two groups of regular Turkish Army soldiers authorized by the defunct Baathist regime, the PUK and KDP, and the CPA to operate inside northern Iraq.²⁵ The first group dated back to the early 1990's when Saddam Hussein allowed Turkish Army outposts to monitor and target the Kurdistan Workers Party (PKK), a Kurdish insurgent and terrorist organization using Iraq as a sanctuary. The second group consisted of Turkish peacekeepers emplaced in May 1997 to maintain the cease fire ending a bitter internecine PUK-KDP civil war. A third group, composed of Turkish commandos (referred to as special forces by the Americans), were authorized by the Americans themselves in April 2003 as liaison officers (LNO) with American forces. Their headquarters in Erbil, commanded by Lieutenant Colonel Yaşar Yıldız, supervised LNO teams in Tal Afar, Mosul, and Sulaymaniyah. There were no Turkish LNOs stationed at the 4th Division's headquarters in Tikrit or with the 173rd in Kirkuk.

An official US Army history asserted that "although the 101st Airborne Division, 4th Infantry Division, and 173d Airborne Brigade were all aware that Turkish officials were working with the Iraqi Turkoman Front (ITF) in northern Iraq, they were unaware of the type and quantity of Turkish military units operating inside Iraq."²⁶ This is incorrect. I had a detailed conversation about the Turkish Army groups with Lieutenant Colonel Yıldız on April 25 in Mosul after which I briefed General Petraeus.²⁷ I briefed General Odierno about the three groups of Turkish Army personnel authorized in his area of responsibility after I returned to Tikrit.

The first direct American - Turkish confrontation occurred on April 22, 2003 involving 173rd Airborne Brigade soldiers arresting Turkish commandos in civilian clothing using a truck in an aid convoy to bring weapons into Kirkuk. According to Colonel Mayville, interviewed by the press two days later, the weapons (AK-46, M4s, grenades, explosives, armored vests, and night vision

²³ Rayburn and Sobchak, *The U.S. Army in the Iraq War – Volume 1*, 147-149.

²⁴ For commentary on the origins of the Turkish military presence in Northern Iraq see Erickson, "Turkey as Regional Hegemon - 2014, Strategic Implications for the United States."

²⁵ Henri J. Barkey, *Turkey and Iraq: The Perils (and Prospects) of Proximity*, Washington, DC: U.S. Institute of Peace, July 2005, 4.

²⁶ Rayburn and Sobchak, *The U.S. Army in the Iraq War – Volume 1*, 158.

²⁷ Erickson POLAD Notes, 12.30 pm, April 25, 2003.

goggles) were to be used to wreak havoc and destabilize Kirkuk.²⁸ There is no question that the Turkish General Staff was organizing and equipping several Ankara aligned Turkmen organizations in the Kurdish regions of northern Iraq. To what actual purpose I don't know. I do know from numerous personal conversations with Iraqi Turkmen that they were gravely concerned about the threat posed by the Kurdish Peshmerga.²⁹

Public accounts of what happened in Sulaymaniyah on July 4, 2003, vary.³⁰ Perhaps as many as 150 Americans participated in the raid. We know that soldiers from the 173rd Airborne Brigade working with the PUK-Peshmerga raided what the Kurds said was an ITF safe house in Sulaymaniyah around 2 pm. However, according to American participant Specialist 4 Daniel Monk, some sixty American soldiers from Company A, 1st Battalion, 508th Infantry (Airborne) under the command of Captain Ned Ritzmann, divided into two groups prepared to enter two buildings thought to be a Turkish headquarters.³¹

At least eleven uniformed Turkish commandos, one of whom was a major, were taken prisoner, zip tied and hooded with head bags.³² Several ITF members were also apprehended. Fortunately, there were no casualties on either side. Small quantities of weapons and explosives were seized, including 6 M-240 machine guns, 6 Javelin AT missiles, 4-6 MK-19 grenade launchers, and quantities of ammunition.³³ Over the next few days, the American press was briefed that actionable intelligence had been discovered of a plot to assassinate the newly elected Iraqi Kurdish governor of Kirkuk. The Kurds further claimed to have seized documents outlining the plot. The captured commandos were brought to Baghdad, interrogated, and released after 60 hours.

Unlike standard American tactical procedures in Iraq, the Kurds alerted the media that the ITF safe house in Sulaymaniyah was going to be raided. More to the point, Jelal Talabani's son was present during the raid and took photos with his camera.³⁴ The press covered the seizure in real time and photographed hooded and zip-tied Turkish commandos, on their knees like terrorists,

²⁸ See <http://www.time.com/time/world/article/0%2C8599%2C446392%2C00.html> and <https://www.defense-aerospace.com/military-incidents-in-iraq-dog-us-turkish-ties/>

²⁹ I had several conversations about the Peshmerga threat with General Secretary Ahmet Güneş and Muayet İlhanlı of the Iraqi Turkmen Democratic Party. Political Bureau Member William Warda of the Assyrian Democratic Movement also expressed concerns about the Peshmerga threat.

³⁰ For the Turkish view of these events see Kılıç Buğra Kanat, Serra Diptaş, Jackson Hannon, Lesley K. Dudden, *US-Turkey Relations under the AK Party, An Almanac*, (Istanbul, SETA Publications, 2017), 26-28. For the American army's view see Rayburn and Sobchak, *The U.S. Army in the Iraq War – Volume 1*, op.cit.

³¹ Daniel Monk email to Faruk Zabcı, 3 March 2006, quoted in Michael Todd, *Çuval!* (Istanbul: Doğan Kitapçılık AŞ, 2007), 287-288.

³² See <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2003/jul/08/turkey.michaelhoward>

³³ Daniel Monk, quoted in Todd, *Çuval!*, 287.

³⁴ Ibid.

closely guarded by heavily armed American soldiers. The optics played out immediately in Turkey portraying Turks as victims and Americans as perpetrators. I do not know whether Talabani intended to use the press to rupture Turkish - American relations or, as he told us at his villa, simply use the media to embarrass TGS and reduce its influence in the Kurdish areas. Contrary to Secretary Rumsfeld's explanation, if there had been an immediate threat to the mayor of Kirkuk, the supposed plot was easily interrupted as early as June 27th. I suspect that Colonel Mayville's soldiers were unprepared for the press and probably surprised being photographed in the act of capturing prisoners. There is no doubt that the 173rd Airborne Brigade deployed American soldiers well outside its assigned area of responsibility on a prearranged and deliberate raid that exceeded the brigade's assigned mission.

One of the strangest episodes of the July 4th raid is the story of British citizen Michael Albert Todd, a street performer known as Michael Mime, from Bishophill, York. Todd was in Sulaymaniyah on his way to Bagdad searching for his estranged girlfriend and daughter.³⁵ About 3:30 pm, the Peshmerga apprehended Todd, who had been in the nearby Leven Internet Kafe, and had come out to watch the commotion. It was a bad decision; Todd was turned over to the Americans. The Coalition Provisional Authority Forces Apprehension Form (4 July 03) outlining the incident stated Todd was "Behaving suspiciously outside operation against Turkish special forces at Sulaymaniyah. Suspected: Commander of Turkish Special Forces/Al Qaeda/Ansar al Islam/Mercenary."³⁶ Although he carried his British passport and plane tickets, the Americans were immune to his explanations. Todd was head bagged, zip tied, and treated as a terrorist. He was held by the Americans for three weeks, under bleak and punitive conditions, before being released into British custody in Baghdad. Conspiracy theories about Todd's connections to British intelligence and the SAS continue to persist in Turkey today.³⁷ Todd's story has not been published in English, but his book *Çuval* was published in Turkey in 2007.

THE AFTERMATH

The incident enraged the TGS, the Turkish government, and the Turkish people. The Turkish military threatened immediate retaliatory actions including closing Turkish airspace to the United States, closing Incirlik Air Base, and even occupying northern Iraq. The Turkish government

³⁵ "Arrest in Iraq 'a shock,'" The Press, York, UK, 31 July 2003, <https://www.yorkpress.co.uk/news/7901819.arrest-in-iraq-a-shock/>

³⁶ CPAF Apprehension Form with DA Form 4137, signed by SFC Kevin Oakes, reproduced in Todd, *Çuval*, 143.

³⁷ Omur Celikdonmez, "How was British Intelligence involved in the 'Sack Incident' in Northern Iraq?" *Dikgazete*, 12 July, 2022, https://www.dikgazete.com/yazi/kuzey-irak-taki-cuval-olayi-na-ingiliz-istihbarati-nasil-dahil-oldu-4744.html#google_vignette

threatened to freeze diplomatic relations which were only salvaged by Vice President Dick Cheney's personal calls to the Turkish prime minister. Arguably, the Sulaymaniyah Hood Incident was the worst moment in Turkish - American relations between the July 1974 Turkish invasion of Cyprus and the cancellation of the F-35 fighter contract in 2019. Back in the 4th Division headquarters in Tikrit, Iraq there was a general feeling that the Turks had received their comeuppance for refusing to allow an American invasion of Iraq from Turkish soil. I was attending a Fourth of July headquarters BBQ when I heard the news. I asked Odierno about it, but he refused to comment.

What about Rumsfeld's time-sensitive and credible intelligence? There was nothing time sensitive about the deliberate plan hatched by Jalal Talabani to entrap the Turks. Colonel Mayville certainly knew about it well before Odierno's second trip to Sulaymaniyah and, after June 27th, Odierno knew enough about it to stop it or to let it continue. He had nine days to consider the wisdom of deploying American soldiers and tactical assets to Sulaymaniyah which was outside of the 4th Division's tactical area of operations.³⁸

On July 10th, Odierno received word that he was required to attend a meeting, chaired by US Army Lieutenant General John B. Sylvester, chief of staff of the United States European Command (EUCOM), in the 173rd Airborne Brigade's Kirkuk headquarters at 8 am the following day. Because she is a member of NATO, Turkey falls within the American European Geographic Combatant Command rather than America's Central Command (CENTCOM). Iraq and Kuwait lie in CENTCOM. Direct communications between the two combatant commands have always been problematic, EUCOM is in Stuttgart, Germany, and CENTCOM is in Tampa, Florida and forward in Doha, Qatar. The two commands coordinate minor activities but serious matters flow upwards from one through the Pentagon and back down to the other. This impedes and slows any important information or decision which involves the neighboring command.

This archaic command architecture, dating to the Second World War, has been a persistent problem in coordinating American combat operations in northern Iraq since 1991. EUCOM had commanded Operations Provide Comfort I and II as well as Operation Northern Watch (all of which were in CENTCOM's geographical area), while CENTCOM commanded Operation Southern Watch.³⁹ CENTCOM and its subordinate units had no communications with the Turkish military whatsoever. Unlikely as it may seem, the American Combatant Command most affected by the Sulaymaniyah incident was EUCOM.

³⁸ Rayburn and Sobchak, *The U.S. Army in the Iraq War – Volume 1*, see divisional boundaries Map 11. Operation IRAQI FREEDOM: Combined Joint Task Force-7, June 2003-May 2004, 148.

³⁹ Email, Gordon Rudd to author, Provide Comfort command architecture, June 15, 2025.

We flew up early the next morning. General Sylvester arrived as did Major General Petraeus from Mosul. In his opening remarks, General Sylvester said that “the United States needs to repair the damage to its strategic relationship with Turkey.”⁴⁰ He continued by telling us his mission was “to find out what had happened and when it had happened.” At that moment, he directed everyone other than Odierno, Petraeus, and Mayville to leave the room. To this day, I do not know what transpired but I will never forget the chastened looks on their faces when they came out of that room.

Since Odierno and Mayville went on to distinguished careers in the army, what happened in Sulaymaniyah did not hurt them. A tough war broke out in Iraq that summer and both went on to become well-known fighting generals. I don’t know whether Talabani was justified in his fears regarding the dangers of Turkish influence in the Kurdish areas of northern Iraq. Reciprocally, I don’t know whether the Iraqi Turkmen were endangered by the newly liberated and empowered Iraqi Kurds. I do know, based on General Sylvester’s opening remarks in Kirkuk, that American commanders in the CENTCOM area withheld advanced knowledge from the adjacent EUCOM commander of a deliberate combined American-Kurdish sting operation against Turkey.

In retrospect, a contributing factor to the July crisis was the absence of Turkish LNO teams in Tikrit and Kirkuk. Dealing directly with a Turkish Army officer might have given Odierno and Mayville, who were inexperienced in Turkish - American affairs, greater understanding about what was happening in Sulaymaniyah.⁴¹ A further contributing factor was the CJTF-7 transfer of responsibility of the PUK and KDP Kurdish areas to General Petraeus. This left Colonel Mayville, who was responsible for Kirkuk, without direct contact with the 101st Airborne Division in Mosul regarding Talabani and Sulaymaniyah. Lastly, I believe that Ray Odierno came to regard me as overly Turk-friendly and sympathetic to the policies of the Republic of Turkey regarding the Turkmen of northern Iraq. I know that by July 1, 2003, I became excluded from discussions about what was going on in Sulaymaniyah.

CONCLUSION - TWENTY YEARS ON

It is hard to remember today just how uninformed we Americans, who were on the ground there, were about anything in Iraq in 2003. I am certain that General Odierno and Colonel Mayville were predisposed to buying in to Jelal Talabani’s persuasive arguments about Kurdish interests. But we should keep in mind, in mid-June, Lieutenant General Ricardo Sanchez assumed command in

⁴⁰ Erickson POLAD Notes, 8 am, July 11, 2003.

⁴¹ See Barkey, *Turkey and Iraq, The Perils (and Prospects) of Proximity*, 10 for commentary about senior American commander’s inexperience with Turkey.

Baghdad and our tactical priorities shifted into high gear aimed at capturing Saddam Hussein, discovering hidden WMDs, and rounding up Baathists. All of the American commanders involved were far too busy with the new missions to step back and consider the consequences of a seemingly small event in Sulaymaniyah.

The legacies of the *Muavenet*, the 1994 shoot down, and Sulaymaniyah inflamed anti-American sentiment in Turkey. A year after the incident, capitalizing on the Sulaymaniyah incident, Orkun Uçar and Burak Turna published a runaway bestselling novel (over 500,000 copies have been sold) titled *Metal Fırtına (The Metal Storm)* about an American invasion of Turkey. In 2006, a Turkish film titled *Valley of the Wolves: Iraq (Kurtlar Vadisi: Irak)* was released. The internationally acclaimed film is about Turkish special operators in northern Iraq, closely mirroring the events in Sulaymaniyah. Clearly, the memory of the sting operation in Sulaymaniyah still haunts nationalist and right-wing political sentiment in Turkey. The assaults on and head bagging of American military personnel in Turkish ports of call continues to this day. It lingers yet in the Turkish public's consciousness and I regret that I was not more persuasive in arguing against the operation.

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