I knew very little about lobbying when I first joined groups of Kurdish activists in London in 1985. We, a bunch of patriotic enthusiasts, were engaged in a series of low key events, attempting to raise awareness to the plight of the Kurds everywhere, including Iraq, Iran, Turkey, Syria and the Soviet Union. We used to organise pickets, protests and social events; participated in general meetings and, from time to time, met with willing Members of Parliament, invariably from the far left of the Labour Party. We were finding our way into the UK system with little knowledge of, or expertise in, the art and science of lobbying. In those days, the Kurdish community in the UK was extremely small, and smaller still was the critical mass of articulate English-speaking Kurdish activists.

Prior to the Anfal Operations and the holocaust of Halabja, our campaign was nothing less than an uphill struggle. Few in the West had heard of Kurds or Kurdistan, fewer still showed interest in supporting a suppressed minority, or in knowing about events occurring thousands of miles away. We had a strong moral case; however, as is always the case, moral lobbyists are powerless in the face of the all-powerful military-industrial counter-lobbyists. Prior to Halabja, Western media showed little interest, and Western Governments had interest in ignoring Kurdish cries to placate Saddam - their client. Moreover, Saddam’s network of spies and assassins were widespread and effective, therefore, lobbying for the Kurds and
exposing atrocities committed by the regime was a dangerous activity. Furthermore, internally, the Kurdish political parties were too fragmented to have an impact. They were ill-focused, ill-prepared and ill-financed.

Halabja

Iraq, a signatory (on Sept 8th, 1931) of the 1925 Geneva Protocol, which prohibits the use of chemical or biological agents in warfare, built major chemical weapons plants with plenty of assistance from Western countries. The regime, benefiting from the influx of material, financial and intelligence support from Western powers including the USA, UK and France, was allowed to use mustard and nerve gas against Iran, while the World turned a blind eye. Iran’s first allegations of Iraq’s use of chemical weapons were made as early as the beginning of the war but more substantial evidence was presented in February 1984. The chemical-warfare instances reported by Iran during the period from 26 February to 17 March, 1984 (including that of Horul-Huwaizeh on 13 March), were conclusively verified by a United Nations team of specialists. No act of criticism or condemnation followed and, as a consequence, by 1985 the use of chemical weapons on a mass scale became an every day fact of the war, while both East and West watched complacently.

Encouraged by all this, Saddam pushed all limits and, for the first time in history, and much to his Arab and Western sponsors’ embarrassment, he used chemical weapons against internal opposition, including defenseless civilians. The first attacks occurred in early 1987, escalating exponentially during the Anfal Operations over the convening months, and peaked in the Spring 1988.

When Halabja was attacked, on 16th March, 1988, the pictures of thousands of murdered civilians were broadcast by the world media. This should have been alarming enough for the international community, including the Superpowers, to voice concerns. However, Ronald Reagan’s administration chose to distract world attention and help Saddam avoid international condemnation. Fully aware that it was Iraq that was deploying these weapons, George Shultz (then Secretary of State) instructed State Department diplomats to say that Iran was partly to blame. The Government of the Soviet Union called the media coverage “Western propaganda”, and the Arabs called it “Iranian and Israeli conspiracies” against the Arabs: the Kuwaiti and Saudi Governments lobbied the United Nations Security Council on behalf of the Iraqis to discredit those reports and condemn Iran instead.
Lobbying for a stateless nation: By Dlawer Ala’Aldeen

The British Government publicly criticized the Iraqi regime, but did not go further and refused to help the victims. The Chemical and Biological Defence Establishment at Porton Down, UK, refused point blank to provide any advice on how to help the injured or protect civilians from further attacks. The Conservative Government of Margaret Thatcher continued to receive Iraqi dignitaries and promote trade with Iraq. Tony Newton, then Trade and Industry Minister, led a UK delegation to the annual UK-Iraq Joint Commission "to help British companies to benefit from the trade opportunities" arising in Iraq. Newton concluded a deal that doubled Iraq’s credit for the purchase of British arms. By continuing to provide credit to Iraq during the war, the UK thus earned the "Favoured Nation" status from Saddam Hussein. David Mellor visited Iraq and invited Iraqis to visit Britain, with the aim of "improving bilateral trade relations".

Post-Halabja

Halabja transformed the Kurdish lobbying campaign. Despite the harsh circumstances of the late 1980s and the world's overwhelming support to Saddam, the holocaust of Halabja helped the Kurds win the ultimate moral high ground, and face their friends and foes with greater confidence. Our lobbying campaign took a new momentum and support began to increase. We, the lobbyist, played major roles in pushing many Western Governments into publicly denouncing Iraq for further use of chemical weapons against civilians in the convening months of 1988. Our publications were noted and later used by the US and UK Governments, when they needed them during the build-up to ‘Operation Iraq Freedom’. Over the years, we acquired skills, expertise, experience and influential networks of contacts which we later used to maximum effect in the aftermath of Kuwait war and the man-made disaster that followed.

The Kurdish British Scientific and Medical Support Group

As a young training medical doctor, I found myself spending all my spare time lobbying for Kurdish human rights. Apart from my ethnic, patriotic and political reasons for being an activist, I had a very personal reason too. My parents and siblings escaped to the liberated mountain areas of Kurdistan during the Anfal campaigns and they were subjected, along with Peshmargas and their families, to numerous chemical attacks. My aging parents were severely injured in several of these attacks and, in one of these, my mother almost died of severe mustard gas burns. My mother bares the scars of those injuries to this day.

As a non-partisan (independent) member of the Kurdish community, I supported the objectives of the Kurdistan Front and contributed to the
collective campaign as a scientist, medic and human rights activist. Several colleagues and I were for a long time debating issues relating to lack of reliable information, solid data and essential scientific and medical advice to underpin our lobbying campaign.

In recognition of this critical niche we, a dozen or so Kurdish and British academics, met in March 1988 and formed the “Kurdish-British Scientific and Medical Support Group” (KBSMSG). The Group’s initial objective was to “set up a systematic framework for the development of practical medical, scientific and educational aid” for the Kurdish people. It also aimed to reach and win over a much wider audience internationally for the “just cause of a peaceful settlement of the Kurdish struggle”. The mission of the KBSMSG was to provide, as part of the campaign, scientific advice and information to those who needed it, including victims, the media, politicians, NGO’s and the wider public. We formed a steering committee consisting of six volunteers. I was asked to play to role of the main coordinator (Secretary) for the Group.

We, KBSMSG, soon established a wide network of contacts within the UK and invited potential members to join the Group. Elizabeth Sigmund, a founder and coordinator of the British academic group, the “Working Party on Chemical and Biological Weapons” (WPCBW), later invited me to join her organization. The WPCBW’s mission was to lobby for a global ban on the production, possession and use of chemical and biological weapons. This influential and highly experienced Working Party had within its membership world authorities such as Professor Stephen Rose of the Open University, Professor Julian Parry-Robinson of Brighton University and Professor Alistair Hay of Leeds University. The KBSMSG benefited immensely from WPCBW’s advice and overall support. Their key members’ contributions were invaluable in terms of helping us with academic publications, seminars, media interviews, annual commemorations of Halabja and more. The two organizations coordinated lobbying and humanitarian efforts, and were highly effective in putting pressure on the UK and European Governments in support of the victims of chemical warfare and reviewing the UN convention on such weapons.

The Kurdish Scientific and Medical Association (KSMA)

The KBSMSG rapidly occupied a critical niche that could not be filled by other Kurdish organizations. It became a focal point for a broad network of interested professional, intellectual and academic Kurds who had in common their desire to serve the common cause. The Group provided reliable data on the Anfal Operations and Saddam’s use of chemical weapons in Kurdistan to the media, politicians and other interested parties. It coordinated efforts to help the victims of chemical weapons and displaced populations.
Twelve months after its creation, the Group held its first inaugural conference on 18th March, 1989, adopted a constitution and changed its name to the “Kurdish Scientific and Medical Association” (KSMA). Seven members were elected for the offices of the Executive Committee, and I continued in the role of the organisation’s Secretary until 2000, when I was elected Chairman for a two year term before stepping down from the committee.

Over the years, the KSMA played historical roles in lobbying in the United Kingdom against all odds. We kept a high profile, published extensively in various scientific journals and newspapers (examples are reproduced in this book) and presented data at numerous conferences. The KSMA also adopted the tasks of offering medical advice to Kurdish refugees and career advice to postgraduate refugee students, as well as supporting the institutions of higher educations in Kurdistan. Since its foundation, the KSMA has organised regular seminars and international conferences for public and specialized audiences, and created a platform where Kurdish and non-Kurdish scholars could meet and exchange views. We also published the KSMA Newsletter in English, which reported the organisation’s activities and relevant news and information from Kurdistan and the Kurdish Diaspora.

**Success stories**

In this book, a number of key articles and booklets, which were published in English, are reproduced. These demonstrate our collective efforts and achievements that we obtained in the most difficult circumstances of the 1980s to early 1990s. For example, in 1989, we coordinated a scientific investigation that produced solid scientific data, confirming the use of a nerve gas agent to poison some 2,070 Kurdish refugees in Mardin, Turkey, by anti-Kurdish agents. This was a dangerous mission with high risks of being targeted by Turkish and/or Iraqi secret agents. Dr John Foran (a General Practitioner and human right activist) and Mr Gwynne Roberts (an accomplished journalist) traveled, at great personal risk, to Mardin, obtained blood samples from the poisoned victims and returned with the material to UK, where we coordinated the scientific analysis of these samples. The data was sufficiently convincing to be published in The Lancet, one of the most prestigious international scientific journals.

In the same year, I started a painstaking search to gather topographic and demographic data on Saddam’s 1987-1988 chemical attacks against the Kurds. I published the complete data before the Kuwait war in the booklet *Death Clouds*. This was the first comprehensive collection of data on the numbers of victims and survivors, and their locations with dates. The
booklet and the data were used by various authors in publications and human right investigations.

In April 1991, in the aftermath of the Kuwait War, the KSMA and other London-based Kurdish activists played key roles in extracting support from the reluctant British Government for the Kurdish refugees who were fleeing for their lives from Saddam’s forces. The UK’s Kurdish community closely monitored the events leading up to the mass exodus of displaced Kurds in Iraqi Kurdistan. To raise public awareness and Government support in the UK, the Kurdish activists carried out media-attracting protests, including vigils and hunger strikes in front of the American Embassy in London, and the dramatic occupation of the Iraqi Embassy.

My focus at the time was on finding ways of communicating our requests to the then British Prime Minister, John Major, and the President of United States, George Bush Sr. With the aid of friends, including John Foran, Oliver Morse (British Journalist) and Denis Cameron (American Journalist), I was able to communicate with, and later head a Kurdish delegation to meet, Margaret Thatcher, the former British Prime Minister. Recently removed from power, Mrs Thatcher agreed to offer her moral and political support to the humanitarian need of the Kurds. She communicated our plight, and her advice, directly to John Major. Two days later, my wife Sundis and I met Dr George Carey, the then Archbishop of Canterbury, who also publicly supported our demand. He encouraged the British public and charity organizations to help the displaced Kurds.

Mrs Thatcher and Dr Carey’s private and public interventions persuaded the Prime Minister to demonstrate commitment to the Kurdish refugees and to offer a lasting solution to reassure and repatriate them. Mr Major came out of the woods and initiated a series of political debates that lead to the creation of the no-fly zone north of 36th parallel. He made it clear to President Bush that the British Government, along with willing European partners, would go ahead with establishing the Safe Haven for the Kurds, with or without US participation. However, the initially reluctant President Bush Sr. jumped onto the lead wagon to drive Operation Provide Comfort which successive US administrations maintained for 12 continuous years until Saddam was removed from power in 2003.

Within days of meeting Mrs Thatcher and Dr Carey, I was on a long flight to Iran, accompanied by Mrs Anne Clwyde MP and a number of journalists and aid workers from British charities. We arrived at the Iran/Iraq border at Piranshahr (Khane) to meet fleeing refugees. I was there helping the British Save the Children Fund to establish its foothold on the Iranian border towns for the first time, to deliver aid to the desperate refugees. Subsequently, I
went to Kurdistan on a number of occasions supporting the work of various British charities, including the Save the Children Fund and Christian Aid, which provided basic and skilled aid to refugees, the Kurdistan Regional Government and the institutes of higher education in Kurdistan.

Supporting higher education in Kurdistan

From 1989 onwards, we at the KSMA became increasingly engaged in helping postgraduate refugee students wishing to study in the UK. After the 1992 elections, we concerted efforts to support the University of Salahaddin (Erbil) and other institutes of higher education in Kurdistan. We raised substantial funds, books and equipment and sent them on trucks or with traveling volunteers to Kurdistan. When the Kurdish Regional Government (KRG) established two new Universities (at Dahok and Suleimani), the demand for help increased exponentially.

Returning together from a visit to Kurdistan in 1992, Fuad Henary (then President of KSMA) and I debated the best way of helping the Universities of Kurdistan. By the time we arrived in the UK, we had agreed a plan of action that lead to the creation of a dedicated “Support Committee for the University of Salahaddin”. Dr Henary spearheaded our efforts and brought together a number of volunteers who selflessly contributed to the rapid and significant success of the new committee, which later changed its name to ‘Support Committee for Higher Education Institutions in Iraqi Kurdistan’ (SCHEIK).

From the mid 1990s, the role of the KSMA in political lobbying diminished significantly. This was partly because that the KRG was now expected to take the centre stage and coordinate all lobbying efforts, and also because Kurdish infighting between 1994 and 1998 made it extremely difficult for independent volunteer enthusiasts to continue our collaborations with the two major parties. Corruption in the Kurdish administrations was another cause for concern and disappointment to Kurdish intellectuals in the Diaspora.

After the regime change

In April, 2003, two weeks after the fall of Saddam’s statue, I was in Baghdad helping the British Save the Children Fund deliver aid to the people and institutions of Baghdad. This was not an easy task, due to mainly to lack of government, authority, safety, security or access to materials. Nevertheless, we moved around, initiated project and delivered on objectives. However, Baghdad soon became a dangerous place and virtually all charity organizations eventually pulled out of the city and/or the country.
I maintained interest in supporting Iraqi universities and joined UK-based academic colleagues in organizing three international conferences on higher education in Iraq. We have been successful in helping Iraqi universities establish academic links with international counterparts. I have worked closely with the International Office of Nottingham University to help deliver four capacity-building courses for Iraqi academic leaders; and secured scholarships for Iraqi students.

Finally

I have recently developed a special interest in monitoring local, regional and international strategic developments, and analysing their impacts on the future of Kurdistan. I have published my analysis and recommendations, in Kurdish, in some of Kurdistan’s most popular newspapers. I have had tremendous feedback, with numerous readers specifically encouraging me to put my old and new publications in a book. Taking their advice, I decided to do just that, and combine the articles with my memoirs of the pre- and post-Halabje lobbying campaigns.

Ala’Aldeen DAA

15 August, 2007