Kurdish unity has always been regarded as a threat to western interests in the Middle East. At the peak of support provided to Kurds after the Gulf War of 1991, the U.S. maintained humanitarian attention short of real political recognition of the pledged interests of the Kurdish population. The State Department called the Iraqi Kurds “good Kurds” and deliberately ignored the Kurds of Iran, Syria, and former Soviet Union. Notwithstanding, the Kurds of Turkey were branded “terrorists.” The western allied forces protection flights over Northern Iraq were meant to undermine the authority of Saddam’s regime but not to save the Kurds whenever Turkey launched an impending cross-border operation to pursue Kurdish rebels. The West headed by the U.S. gave Turkey a leading role in the affairs of northern Iraq and that was to substitute the Iraqi control, which was very much needed before the March 1991 but condemned afterwards.

Turkish west-blessed intervention in the Kurdish affairs was not different from that of the old and continuing Saddam’s influence on stability among the different Kurdish factions and coalitions. Turkish policy towards Iraqi Kurds, in secret coordination with Saddam’s regime, was one of the main causes of the fighting between the Kurdish Democratic Party (KDP) and the Patriotic Union of Kurdistan (PUK), which first came to head in April 1994. War among the Kurdish factions gave Turkey and the West an excuse to repeatedly strike in northern Iraq and to undermine Kurdish ambitions for full political authority in the area.

The apparent disunity manifested between the KDP and PUK, as well as by these two groups toward Kurdish political groups in Iran and Turkey, played still further into the hands of the neighboring countries as well as the Western alliance, all of whom work toward denying the Kurds self-rule. The West deliberately overlooks the fact that Kurdish internal politics has many similarities with that of most of third world communities that currently enjoy self-rule. It has comparable ingredients of conflict and lack of proper institutions, yet, the west continues to consider the Kurds as not fit for self-rule.

Politically, there are the two main bitter rivals in Iraqi Kurdistan, the KDP and PUK, in addition to right-wing nationalist parties, Islamic parties, and other small village oriented factions. Recent research and experience in Kurdistan showed that the vast majority of Kurds do not have a strict commitment and allegiance to any of the factions. The Kurdish populations are increasingly becoming more sophisticated politically to think in terms of peace, justice, economic well-being, and freedom. They no more trust the major regional and international powers. They have had a long history of trial and error. This experience shows that irrespective of the political factionalism and geographical dispersion of the Kurds, it is possible to establish a system with a considerable degree of harmony compared to their long history of domestic bloody confrontations.

Despite the absence of any real income or external support, and despite the double imposition of de facto sanctions on Kurdistan, the Kurdish population in Iraq has managed to survive and recently grow in strength. The vast majority of its current problems are due to lack of funds and political security. However, careful consideration clearly must be paid to the kind of support coming from the West because this support usually comes when the West wants to prepare the Kurds to
be involved in bloody clashes against one of the regional powers that ultimately bare its tragic consequences.

Old and recent history has repeatedly proven that in their plight towards the establishment of self-determination, the Kurds, as one of the principal players in Middle Eastern politics, have had horrific results due to manipulation among themselves and with the regional and international powers. This manipulation was established as a trend and a precept in balancing the divergent powers in the Middle East. The 1991 international coalition, orchestrated by the United States to destroy the rising Iraqi military power in the region, openly encouraged the Kurds to participate in the fight against Saddam Hussein. After the destruction of half of Iraq’s military and the re-establishment of the monarchy in Kuwait, President Bush decided it would be unwise to “interfere in the internal affairs” of Iraq. This American attitude encouraged Saddam to retaliate and vandalize the Kurds for their support of the Americans in the 1990-1991 Gulf War.

The American foreign policy towards self-determination of people in repressive regimes did not change with the New World Order. Apparently, the American Administration still believes in international system based entirely on the sovereignty of nation states. Verbal criticism is the limit for handling governments brutalizing people within their borders, even if these people do not identify themselves with the status quo. When Secretary of State, James Baker, was personally investigating, on the ground, the conditions of one million homeless Kurds, he said: “Today, we have witnessed the suffering and despair of the Iraqi people.” The implication of avoiding the use of the word ‘Kurds’ is a clear indication of American stance towards the Kurds. This is not new in the American Iraqi-Kurds relations, especially if we recall the 1972-1975 episode. Henry Kissinger, the Secretary of State then, stated in his White House Years volume:

Nixon agreed also to encourage the Shah in supporting the autonomy of the Kurds in Iraq. The Kurdish affair and its tragic outcome in the 1972-1975 period is, of course, outside the scope of this volume ... I shall explain these in a second volume. (Kissinger ignored the issue completely in his second volume).

As a reference note to this statement, Kissinger added:

The Shah’s decision in 1975 to settle the Kurdish problem with Iraq was based on the judgment, almost certainly correct, that the Kurds were about to be overwhelmed ... The Shah was not willing to commit the former (his military forces) ... If we had sought this escalation of our covert intelligence operation (the emphasis here is on escalation) ... the Kurds’ tragic fate would have probably led the charge against it.

Twenty years later Kissinger wrote a 21-page long chapter on the Kurds. In it, he re-examines what the U.S. and its international tool, the CIA, had done with his acknowledgment to the Kurds. After indicating that “the Kurdish tragedy was imposed largely by history and geography, but it was also exacerbated by our own national divisions,” Kissinger maintains that the United States, despite its pronouncements on self-determination, showed no interest at all in the case of the Kurds. The American priority, during the final months of the 1972-75 war and in its aftermath, was to reinforce central authority in Iran and block Soviet influence. The Kurds tried to obtain the sponsorship of the western powers but were rebuffed. However, it must still be admitted that in opting for the backing of the U.S. which had no inherent interest in their cause, and was merely engaged in a great power game, they made a historic mistake.

Kissinger goes on to say, “even from the perspectives of two decades, I like the alternatives to the course we pursued even less,” although he admitted, “for the Kurdish people,
perennial victims of history, this is, of course, no consolation.”

Indirectly, Kissinger explained that saving the Kurds would have been too expensive for the U.S. because it would have required the opening of a new front in inhospitable mountains close to the Soviet border. Thus, we did not have the option of overt support in a war so logistically difficult, so remote, and so incomprehensible to the American taxpayer. Moreover, “the Shah had made the decision, and we had neither the plausible arguments nor strategies to dissuade him.” Now that he is not in office, Kissinger feels at liberty to say: “As a case study, the Kurdish tragedy provides material for a variety of conclusions: the need to clarify objectives at the outset; the importance of relating goals to available means; the need to review an operation periodically; and the importance of coherence among allies.” In short, the Iraqi Kurds had played the role of dispensable pawns for U.S. foreign policy.

The Americans have failed in two episodes to protect Iraqi Kurds from devastation after instigating them against the regime. In both cases intervention, whether covert as in the last years of the 1961-1975 Kurdish war or overt as in the 1991 war, took place only to preserve international stability and the de facto regional balance of power. This purpose undermines the fate of 30 million Kurds struggling for the last 75 years to have their own independent state.

KURDS’ HISTORY IN BRIEF

The Kurds have had a long historical struggle to sustain an identity of their own. They are one of the oldest communities in the Middle East yet, still without their own state. Because of their intrinsic readiness to revolt against chastisement, they have been exploited habitually by regional and international powers to assume a militaristic role in destabilizing regional regimes. Their history jets back to the days of the ancient Gutis some four thousand years ago. Of an Aryan stock, their language is Indo-European of the Iranian group, with the majority being followers of Islam. Ever since their ancient days, the Kurds have been trenching a historic and strategic triangle of 400,000 square km.

In 1516, the Kurdish inhabited regions were divided between the Sunni Ottoman Empire and the Shi’ite Safavid Empire of Persia. Being frontiers’ protectors of two contending empires, the Kurds managed to preserve relative autonomy. The Sykes-Picot plan of 1916 and its implementation after World War I dispersed the Kurds. Population estimates in the late 1990’s indicate a division of 30 million Kurds among Turkey (51%), Iran (24%), Iraq (16%), Syria (5%), Europe (3%), and former Soviet Union (1%).

The Kurds were, in majority, tribal communities constrained by their ethnic origin. They reproduced themselves along an intrinsic agrarian mode of production. Their allegiance in large was to their petty principalities controlled by Aghas and/or religious leaders. At the end of the Nineteenth Century, Kurdish nationalism began to entertain the minds of the Kurdish elite after being a romantic endeavor among few urban intellectuals. Kurdish nationalism as a new political trend became an additional mobilizing force to perpetuate the authority of the established elite, and assist them in withstanding the assimilation attempts mainly by the modern governments of Turkey, Iran and Iraq. As an ethnic community, the Kurds were discriminated against for at least, two of their characteristics. To the Shiite Iranians the Kurds are Sunni. To the Arabs the Kurds are non-Arabs and to the Turks, the Kurds belong to a different racial and ethnic civilization. The Kurds felt alienated by the societies surrounding them. Their alienation bred in them a force to resist assimilation. Being disjunctioned in their region and marginal in the international system makes them a stump easy to manipulate especially by major powers. The Kurd’s ongoing struggle towards some form of autonomy is a natural result of their cultural rehabilitation development in a hostile environment. Their endeavor of becoming autonomous has become the contrivance to all powers interested in the region to use, scheme and exploit. That is why they are often labeled as pawns of the

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Middle East political playhouse. In the 1920s, the British enticed them to rebel against Turkey to balance Turkish-Iraqi account. The Americans insinuated flawed promises to instigate them against Iraq to bolster their ally the Shah during the 1970s Iran-Iraq disputes. Syria, Iraq and Iran have nonetheless manipulated the Kurds of one another as a mean to score points in their political contention. In all instances however, the Kurds were abandoned to their miserable fate to face the bloody retrieval of their own local authorities.

KURDS IN IRAQ

The Iraqi-Kurdish predicament dates back to the creation of the state in 1920. Iraq was designed by the British to comprise three provinces, each contained different sectarian and ethnic group: the Baghdad province in the Middle mainly of Sunni Arabs and the Mosul province to the North dominant by Kurds. The incorporation of the resource affluent area of the Kurds in the North to Iraq served two essential British objectives: First, it was cardinal for a viable Iraq and, second, it partitioned the Kurdish people thus decreasing future possibility of constituting a Kurdish national state. This state-design, as the case in most newly independent countries, had neither respect nor a future vision for the well-being of minorities and the potential internal strife that could be generated from such inceptions. The Kurds rebelled against this measure demanding autonomy but they were brutally suppressed by the British.

The deposing of the monarchy on July 14, 1958 by General Qassim depicted a turning point in the fate of the Iraqi Kurds. It enticed the fortification of the Kurdish nationalist movement as manifested mainly in the Kurdish wars of 1961-1975 and 1991, both of which were intervened by the U.S. The Americans had two basic objectives behind their direct intervention in these two wars. In both wars, the U.S., first, wanted to preserve the balance of power in the region; and, second, to assist its friends the Shah in the former war, and Turkey and Saudi Arabia in the later war. The United States in both times established contacts with the Kurdish leaders—covertly in the 1972-1975 period and overtly in 1991—promising military support and encouraging their plight for autonomy. These American promises of support boosted the moral of the Kurds to fight vigorously suffering in the processes tens of thousands of casualties and a total devastation of their pilot cities and villages. The American timing to use the stooges Kurds in both cases came at a point when the Iraqi government was militarily eager to destroy the Kurds. The enigmatic questions in this respect are the following:

What was the crux of the American-Kurdish connections? Did the Americans achieve their objectives in both times? How did the Iraqi Kurds serve the political interests of the United States? Were the Americans aware from the first beginning that their long term objectives are in conflict with those of the Kurds? Why the Kurds were abandoned and betrayed in 1975 and 1991? These questions could only be answered within a study framework of American foreign policy; its goals, formulation, tools and implementation.

U.S. FOREIGN POLICY AND SELF-DETERMINATION MOVEMENTS

There appear to be a number of aspects pertinent to American Foreign policy with respect to self-determination in the Third World and more broadly, with respect to separatists in their plight for independence or relative autonomy. These aspects are widely shared in both the policy-making and academic worlds. Hans Morgenthau, Henry Kissinger and the realists have asserted that, dominant American perspectives on Third World politics have displayed little sympathy for, and often considerable resistance to objectives basic to radical conceptions of the national liberation process. The overt policy of the United States has been that self-determination is a universal right of subject peoples. However, there is little clarity on whom this right pertains to. This policy has always been exploited not to further the aspiration of liberation movements but to promote American

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national and vital interests. The contention prevailing between the USA and the USSR during the Cold War forced the former to pursue a covert policy with regard to all national movements in the Third World, and especially with regard to supporting the autonomy of the Kurds in Iraq. However, after the disintegration of the Soviet Union, the United States started to follow an overt policy with regard to such movements as the case with Iraqi Kurds in 1991.

Arnold Wolfers asserts that the United States has an ambiguous set of principles to guide their foreign policy. This ambiguity combined with their enormous resources allows them to be flexible in their national goal poignant with the changing circumstances. Realists argue that foreign policy of superpowers is tested only by their ability to manipulate their national security interest which include; protecting and supporting friends and allies, preserving a benevolent balance of power among the different contenders and protecting citizens abroad. Moralists, on the other hand, criticize the realists for giving moral norms secondary attention in their studies of how and why policy decisions are made. They argue that the term “national security interest” in itself implies a selfish and unprincipled approach the conduct of foreign relations. It implies a nation’s concern with its geopolitical and economic advantage without regard for morality, law, or the welfare of others, except insofar as these serve as instruments for the nation’s own advantage. Moralists have often criticized the foreign policy adopted by the United States in pursuing its self-interest at the expense of principles. They assert that this lead the U.S. to immoral political behavior.

Morgenthau justifies the call for self-interest as being the ultimate goal of every nation and that “survival” is the highest moral principle of a state. The state has no right to risk its national interest for the sake of certain moral principles. National interest overpowers morality. The fact that all governments pursue the same foreign policy goals implies that the desire for self-interest is ethically justifiable and the calling for ideals only leads to self destruction. The problem is that goals as such cannot be secured except at the expense of other nations’ interests. As Holsti puts it “regardless of reasons of conscience, prestige, and self-interest, governments in most cases conduct their relations with each other in accordance with the commonly accepted rules of the game.”

With the emerging of the new world order, many ethnic groups thought that the United States may have entered a new cycle of foreign policy assessment, however, American foreign policy remained “generally hard-headed, pragmatic and at times ruthless.” The United States’ rhetoric of principles and aspirations are only a brood to its reality. Some of these principles are democracy and freedom for all peoples, eliminating hunger and poverty, maintaining friendship with all nations.

A strenuous predicament has faced the American policy makers between the early 1960s and the mid 1970s. There has been a clash between the administration and Congress over the role of each in the formulation

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For further discussion on this issue, see Arnold Wolfers, “National, Security’ as an Ambiguous Symbol,” Political Science Quarterly 67 (December 1952): 481-502.


Ibid, p. 595

Seth P. Tillman, The United States in the Middle East: Interests and Obstacles (Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 1982), p. 43.
of foreign policy. Observers attested this clash as a result to “chronic tension” between the democratic political system and its snobbish national security system. The President being in control of the Department of State, the National Security Council (NSC), and the Central Intelligence Agency (CIA) in addition to his constitutional powers plays a dominant role in foreign policy and manipulates the congress. He is often tagged as the imperial president. This has been the case at least until the mid-1970s when some of the presidential powers procured impediments by the Congress. The Vietnam War, Watergate, and the illegal U.S. involvement in covert activities in Third World enticed the Congress to claim restrictions on the President’s freedom of action.

This procedure adopted by the Congress was crucial to avoid; first, “future Vietnams” by making debates on national security open rather than closed within the circle of presidents and their immediate staff. Second, to check on the excessive powers that characterized the national security bureaucratic elites headed by an “imperial president” who circumvented the authority of Congress and the courts. Presidents have perceived themselves as being above the law, particularly in foreign policy matters, and used secrecy and distortion to deceive Congress and the public in order to score high in foreign policy.

Some of the Third World regions were relegated to play the role of pawns in the East-West conflict. Mike Bowker argues that superpower relationship went through three stages since the end of World War II: The first is between 1945 and 1962, a period of high East-West tension with the possibility of direct superpower conflict. The second is between 1962 and 1989, a period of competitive coexistence in which the level of direct conflict between the two superpowers decreased, however, “found expression through the arms race and proxy wars in the Third World. The third is after 1989, a period of cooperative coexistence in which U.S. policy toward self-determination claims remained skeptic with a far easier atmosphere for intervention in the internal affairs of states as long as it serves the vital interests of the United States.

**U.S. INTERVENTION IN THE THIRD WORLD**

Schraeder defines interventions as “the purposeful and calculated use of political, economic, and military instruments by one country to influence the domestic politics or the foreign policy of another country.” Intervention could ensue two divergent temperaments; it is either covert or overt. Because U.S. intervention in the Iraqi-Kurdish war of

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18Schraeder, pp. 222-223; and Wilson, p. 550. For further information, see Wilson, pp. 551-552.

19Wilson, p. 551.

20Schraeder, pp. 222-223; and Wilson, p. 550. For further information, see Wilson, pp. 551-552.


1961-1975 was of a covert paramilitary nature, we need first to delineate its distinctive characteristics. The CIA defines covert intervention as “special activity conducted abroad in support of the United States foreign policy objectives and executed so that the role of the United States government is not apparent or acknowledged publicly.” In matters of core national security the CIA reports directly to the president through the National Security Council (NSC). It has been given by the National Security Act of 1947 five specific authorities: first, advise the NSC on intelligence activities related to national security; second, make recommendations to the NSC for the coordination of such activities; third, correlate, evaluate and disseminate intelligence within the government; fourth, carry out services for existing agencies that the NSC decides might be best done centrally; and fifth, perform such other functions and duties related to intelligence affecting the national security as the NSC may from time to time direct. The first four authorities are of a pure intelligence nature while the last is intended for a “wide range of covert actions around the world.” Truman’s Doctrine which was designed to contain the threat of communism towards areas of vital interests to the United States, namely, Greece, Turkey and other Middle Eastern newly emerging or established governments further enhanced this fifth authority. But how would containment be achieved? Johnson argues that, in addition to traditional governmental instruments, containment could be achieved also through CIA covert action which is of four kinds: propaganda, political, economic, and paramilitary means. Paramilitary covert action often involves large-scale secret wars in which the U.S. provides economic as well as military aid to rebels intending to overthrow or undermine an anti-American government. In such actions the rebels are used as proxies to avoid counterproductive direct U.S. intervention. This partly explains why a clash exists between the administration and Congress concerning the foreign policy making process in the field of covert actions. Two set of arguments result from this clash: one in favor of covert action and another against it. Advocates of covert action provide the following justifications: (1) The Soviet Union strongly supports the secret activities of the KGB; (2) The U.S. has an obligation of credibility to support its allies and friends, often this obligation requires covert actions to save a friend from regional or international embarrassment; (3) Speed and secrecy are of vital importance for success in critical situation, thus the CIA should be able to avoid informing the public ahead of time; and (4) Covert action is the best tool at the disposal of the administration to safeguard national security. Such actions are prospectively affective only if tagged as classified information.

**THE WAR OF 1961-1975**

After Qassim’s coup of July 14,1958, the established leader of the Kurdish national movement, Mullah Mustapha Barzani, was permitted to return to Iraq after thirteen-years of exile in the Soviet Union. He supported Qassim against his foes. In return, the Kurds were to be given relative autonomy within the Iraqi state. Qassim declined his promise and eventually had to face a harsh Kurdish rebellion. During the ongoing revolt that started in 1961, Barzani conducted on-and-off negotiations with the consequent Iraqi authorities proposing an end to the revolt in exchange for relative autonomy. His first approach was with Premier Abdul-Rahman al-Bazzaz in

25Johnson, pp. 16-17.
29Ransom, pp. 112-113.
1965. The later declared that the government’s intention is to establish a “centralized constitutional system” and to preserve Iraq’s unity.\textsuperscript{31} The revolt continued until the mid-1966. In the process, the Iraqi army was debilitated in attempting to curb the Kurdish rebels. This failure raised many questions concerning the wisdom of depleting the Iraqi’s resources in a never ending Iraqi-Kurdish warfare.\textsuperscript{32} Al-Bazzaz offered a peace settlement program composed of 12 points that met Barzani’s demands for relative autonomy. The military elites within the Iraqi government accused al-Bazzaz of betrayal the constitution. Al-Bazzaz government was ousted right after the agreement with the Kurds. The revolt continued with the return of the al-Ba’th party to power in 1968.\textsuperscript{33}

Al-Ba’th party, in principle, was committed to the unification of Iraq.\textsuperscript{34} However, newly returning to power, they considered their own establishment and consolidation of strength as top priority. They decided to relax their relation with the Kurds, and endorse a mutual agreement conferred in March 1970. It attended to the following:

1. Recognition of Kurdish as the official language in those areas where Kurds constitute a majority. Kurdistan and Arabic would be taught together in all schools;
2. Participation of Kurds in government, including the appointment of Kurds to key posts in the state;
3. Furtherance of Kurdish education and culture;
4. Requirement that officials in the Kurdish areas speak Kurdish;
5. Right to establish Kurdish student, youth, women’s, and teachers’ organizations;
6. Economic development of the Kurdish area;
7. Return of Kurds to their villages or financial compensation;
8. Agrarian reform;
9. Amendment of the constitution to read ‘the Iraqi people consist of two main nationalities: The Arab and Kurdish nationalities;’
10. Return of the clandestine radio stations and heavy weapons to the government;
11. Appointment of a Kurdish vice-president;
12. Amendment of provincial laws in accordance with this declaration; and
13. Formations of a Kurdish area with self-government.\textsuperscript{35}

This Agreement promised Barzani that those regions in which the Kurds constituted a majority were to be granted self-governing status within four years from the date of its signature. Barzani went along with this solution, even though he was aware that it would not be totally implemented. His own forces were exhausted after nine years of non stop fighting, and there was no way he could convince his forces to fight after being exposed to the propaganda of the government crediting itself in the alleged Agreement.\textsuperscript{36} The Ba’th party failed to carry out a census of the Kurdish inhabited regions, especially Kirkuk—the oil-rich region of Iraqi Kurdistan. No genuine representation was offered to the Kurds. The five ministerial posts given to the Kurds were symbolic. Barzani and some of his sons were targets of the regime’s assassination plots. At the end of the four-year period, in March 1974, the al-Ba’th party, having generated military strength and supported by the Soviets, unilaterally promulgated its Law for Autonomy in the Area of Kurdistan. The Kurds being supported by the U.S. viewed the Autonomy Law as an insufficient implementation of the 1970 Agreement. Eventually, they rejected it proclaiming that not only the Ba’thists failed to implement their promises, but had also not granted the Autonomous Administration of Kurdistan any real power. In the wake of this rejection, the war intensified between the Kurdish forces and the Iraqi army.\textsuperscript{37}

\textsuperscript{36}Ibid, pp. 88-89.
\textsuperscript{37}McDowall, pp. 92-94; Vanly, pp. 170-173; Lee C. Buchheit, Secession: The Legitimacy of Self-Determination (New Haven: Yale University Press,
AMERICAN INVOLVEMENT, 1972-1975

After the death of Nasser in 1970 and the British withdrawal from the Persian Gulf in 1971, Iran coveted to fill the power vacuum in the region. Their first objective was to weaken Iraq economically and militarily. They decided to instigate the Kurds to refuse the Iraqi concessions and to continue with their military struggle to attain a better deal. Nonetheless, the Ba'th party in Iraq was ambitious to assume Nasser’s leadership of the Arab World and to deter Iran from exerting its hegemony on the Arabian Gulf. For the fulfillment of its ambitions, the Iraqi regime signed the Treaty of Friendship and Cooperation with the Soviet Union in 1972. In return the Soviets supplied Iraq with sophisticated military weapons.

The increased Soviet influence in Iraq and the increased Iraqi expenditure on military preparedness alarmed the Iranians, Israel and the United States. The Iranians intensified their contacts with the Kurds to encourage the aggravation of their revolt against the Iraqis. Barzani, being fearful of the Iraqi newly purchased sophisticated weapons, an afraid of future betrayal by the: Iranians, requested an international guarantee that he will not be abandoned and left victim to the retribution of the Iraqis. When Nixon and Kissinger visited Tehran on May 30, 1972 on their way back from a summit conference with Brezhnev, the Shah displayed the Kurdish conditions: The Kurds have sublime confidence in the U.S. and wants to be armed by you. Nixon accepted the Kurdish demands.38 “Anything for a friend and loyal ally said Nixon.”39

The U.S., with Richard Nixon in office (his era was labeled as the “imperial presidency”) and Henry Kissinger as adviser of the National Security Council, set up the American apparatus for the Kurdish secret war.40 They assured Barzani of their goodwill. This attestation was classified and emanated from Nixon’s own office, because he had no trust in the bureaucracy of the State Department. The American-Kurdish deal was a timely betrayal of the statement of principles that had already been signed in Moscow. In his news conference in Moscow, Kissinger had stated that both the United States and the Soviet Union were in agreement on the need to defuse tension in the Middle East and:

to contribute what they can to bringing about a general settlement... such a settlement would also contribute to the relaxation of the armaments race in that area... Speaking for our side, I can say we will attempt to implement these principles in the spirit in which they were promulgated.

By accepting the Iranian-Kurdish deal, the American “spirit” lasted one day.41 For Nixon and Kissinger the deal was extremely inducive to be refuted for the following reasons:

1. They were bewildered by the nationalization of the Iraqi Petroleum Company;
2. They viewed Iraq as a Soviet delinquent towards the encroachment of the Gulf region;
3. An internal Iraqi strife could enhance the bargaining positions of U.S. allies and friends; Iran’s role as the policeman of the Gulf region, the Kuwaitis contrasting to any Iraqi territorial claims of their estate. Israel could be better off

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38 John Prados, Presidents’ Secret Wars: CIA and Pentagon Covert Operations Since World War II (New York: William Morrow and Company, Inc., 1986), p. 298. It is debated that U.S. contacts with Iraqi Kurds started long before 1972, however, there are no reliable sources. The primary source of information for this secret war is the Staff Report of the Secret Committee on Intelligence; U.S. House of Representatives, based on hearings held during 1975. Publication of the report was suppressed by the full House until the White House could censor it. But portions of the uncensored report, which came to be known as The Pike Report after the Committee’s chairman Representative Otis G. Pike, were leaked to the press, in particular The Village Voice of New York which published much of it in its issues of 16th and 23rd of February 1976. Hence, The Village Voice will be referred to in following footnotes.


40 Prados, pp. 297-314.

in its military strategic balance with the Arab World; and

4. This deal will undermine the leftist tendencies among some of the Kurdish factions.

American military and financial furtherance to the Kurds began in August 1972. The operation was entrusted to the CIA. The State Department was not involved. Barzani was unaware of this actuality. He thought that dealing with the President and his Secretary is dealing, with all of the USA. In a short period of time, Barzani raised 100,000 fighters to engage against the Iraqi forces. Over the next three years, $16 million in CIA funds were funneled to the Kurds. A sum that is far less than how much the confrontation required to be successful ($300 million according to Kissinger). The Shah tried to make up for the shortage. By time, the American aid proved to be basically symbolic. Being trapped in the war and in order to induce more U.S. support, Barzani frequently stated that “he trusted no other major power” than the United States, “ready to become the 51st state of the USA” to make the oil fields at the disposal of the U.S. and that “the U.S. could rely on a friend in OPEC once the oil-rich Kurdistan achieve its independence.” The Kurds trusted the Americans’ pledge that they will not be abandoned neither by them nor by the Shah in their fierce war against Iraq. Later, it was discovered that “neither the Shah nor the President and Kissinger desired victory for the Kurds. They merely hoped to ensure that the insurgents would be capable of sustaining a level of hostility just high enough to sap the resources of Iraq.” A CIA report of March 22, 1974 depicted the Iranian and the U.S. foreign policy towards this issue:

We would think that Iran would not look with favor on the establishment of a formalized (Kurdish) autonomous government. Iran, like ourselves, has seen benefit in a stalemate situation... in which Iraq is intrinsically weakened by the Kurd’s refusal to relinquish its semi-autonomy. Neither Iran nor ourselves wish to see the matter resolved one way or the other.50

This policy, as stated by the same report “was not imparted to our clients [Kurds], who were encouraged to continue fighting... Even in the context of covert action... this was a cynical enterprise.”51 The Pike report (Congressional Investigating Team Report) is supportive of this assessment at least in as much as it explains the “no win” policy of the United States and Iran.

In the heat of the October 1973 war between the Arabs and Israel, the Iraqis dispatched a battalion to take part in the confrontation. Induced by Israel, the Kurds were planning on propelling major attacks on the Iraqi forces. Kissinger, observed the drawback of American interests if the Kurds are to gain military improvement against the Iraqis. He ordered the CIA on October 16 of the same year to send this message to the Kurds: “We do not consider it advisable for you to undertake the offensive military actions that Israel has suggested to you.” Having faith in the Americans, the Kurds considered the content of this message in their best interest and complied.52 The Kurds’ faith in American foreign policy proved to be hazardous. The CIA had all along facts suggesting that the Shah would abandon the Kurds the minute he comes to an agreement with Iraq over border disputes.53 The Shah viewed the Kurds as instruments and not as people in his dispute with Iraq. The CIA was not any different. It characterized the Kurds as a “uniquely useful tool for weakening Iraq’s potential for regional adventurism.”54

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43Vanly, p. 184.
44Prados, p. 314.
45Ibid; Blum, p. 276; and Vanly, p. 184.
49Vanly, pp. 184-185.
51Ibid.
52Ibid.
53Blum, p. 277.
54The Village Voice, p. 87. Cited in Blum, p. 277.
Being weakened by the Kurdish war and fearing its continuation, the Iraqis accepted an Iranian proposal to confer territorial concessions at their common borders in return for Iranian cessation of support to the Kurds. The agreement was concluded on March 6, 1975 during the OPEC Conference held in Algiers. Immediately after signing the Agreement, Iran sealed its borders to the Iraqi Kurds. In the following days the Iraqi army launched its enormous brutal offensive. The Kurds, being abandoned by the Shah and the Americans were unable to withstand the Iraqi killing-machine. Their military power was crushed for several years to come. During the Iraqi transgression, the bewildered Kurds sent a desperate message to the CIA: “There is confusion and dismay among our people and forces. Our people’s fate is in unprecedented danger. Complete destruction hanging over our head. No explanation for all this. We appeal to you and to the United States government to intervene as you have promised...”

Another message was sent to Kissinger:

Your Excellency, having always believed in the peaceful solution of disputes including those between Iran and Iraq, we are pleased to see that these two countries have come to some agreement... However, our hearts bleed to see that an immediate byproduct of their agreement is the destruction of our defenseless people... All are silent. Your Excellency, we feel that the United States has a commitment to defend us and has a moral and political responsibility towards our people... 

The Kurds did not receive any direct attention and nothing was done to salvage the over 200,000 displaced people. When Kissinger was interviewed by the staff of the Pike Committee about the United States involvement in the Kurdish misfortune, he responded: “Covert action should not be confused with missionary work.”

George Lenczowski, spoke volumes when he said that the Algiers Agreement blessed by the Americans is a sort of Yalta for the Kurdish nationalists. Arthur Turner’s comments have taken this issue further when he implied that the Algiers Agreement was a textbook example of how underprivileged people would be sacrificed by larger states for the sake of their own interests.

AMERICAN INVOLVEMENT, 1991

History is full of astonishments, some of them are tragic and treacherous. Immediately after the end of the military operations in February 1991, and following the defeat of the Iraqi forces, the U.S. president called on the Iraqi people to revolt and bring down Saddam’s regime. This statement has trapped the U.S. in an international and regional political and security dilemma, caused a geopolitical shock and is still causing waves of instability in the balance of power of the region. Both the Shiite South and the Kurdish North were more than eager to respond to this call. While the Shiites did not fare well in the South, the Kurds with the help of the United Nations and the allied Poised Hammer forces stationed in Southeastern Turkey, were able to establish a chaotic independent Kurdish enclave.

Stability in the region, as president Bush argued it, could only be achieved after the ousting of Saddam Hussein. He exerted much diplomatic effort on the United Nations Security Council to pass Resolution 678 on November 29, 1990. Article 2, of this Resolution was intentionally ambiguous to allow for different interpretations and actions. It authorizes the member-states cooperating with Kuwait to use “... all means necessary to restore international peace and security in the area...”

The consequences of Bush’s unwise statement did not lead to the ousting of Saddam but to the dangerous prospect of frag-
menting the republic of Iraq into three separate entities; Shiite to the South, Sunni to the Center and Kurdish to the North. Potentially, this prospect disturbs the erstwhile shivering balance of power in the region. The same Kurdish-Iraqi experience of 1972-75 was repeated. After being encouraged by the United States to rebel against Saddam, the Kurds were left to bear the bloody consequences alone with no help from the Americans. Facing accusations of irresponsibility, Bush responded with anger:

Do I think that the United States should bear guilt because of suggesting that the Iraqi people take matters into their hands, with implication being given that the United States would be there to support them militarily? That was not true. We never implied that.61

The gradual withdrawal of American rhetorical support for the Iraqi opposition was first expressed by Colin Powel when he warned Saddam... to be a little careful how he goes about suppressing the various insurrections that are taking place (to be a little careful does not mean to stop). Then on March 26, it was made clear that the administration decided not to intervene in support of the rebels. By this time the American commander of the allied forces general Norman Schwartzkopf and his Iraqi counterpart were in agreement to allow the Iraqi military to use helicopter gunships and armored cars to crush the rebels.62 A few days later a major offensive on Kurdish positions began. Major cities fell to government forces and thousands of fearful Kurds began fleeing to the mountains in a desperate attempt to escape genocide. By the end of April, over 2 million refugees were driven along the Iranian and Turkish borders. Having resolved the Kuwaiti problem and restored the regional balance of power, the U.S. created a new dimensional problem of major security implications that was left hanging for the contending powers of the region to struggle with.

Saddam surprised observers with his speedy brutal repressive ability to control the Iraqi heartland and sustain his authority. Brent Scowcroft replied “we did not expect the severity of the attacks on the Kurds.”64 This reaction of brutal force triggered the Security Council on April 5, 1991 to issue resolution 688 that condemned the repression of the Iraqi civilian population especially in the Kurdish populated areas and allow for the creation of a Safe Haven, which has now for all practical purposes become a separate Iraqi enclave altogether.

The Iranians were burdened with the one million Iraqi Kurds arriving along their border who joined the already 600,000 refugees stationed in Iran from previous expulsions. Turkey also received another million Kurd as refugees. However, having been a major participant in the Second Gulf War and having enough problems with its own Kurds, Turkey was allowed by the West to play the decisive role in handling the Kurdish enigma. It imposed from the first beginning its own logic of the longer-term policy of how to deal with the refugee crisis. Refugees as asserted by its leaders have to be moved out of Turkish soil as soon as possible. However, they should not return to a separate Kurdish state. They should be given safety within an integrated Iraqi state.65 Further undermining of Iraq and the establishment of an independent Kurdish state will shift the balance of power in favor of the Iran-Syrian tacit coalition. On April 7, President Ozal said “We have to put those people (Kurds) in the Iraqi territory and take care of them” (the emphasis is on the term Iraqi territories.) James Baker being sympathetic to

64The U.S. Administration was aware of the Consequences of leaving the Kurds to their fate. They have pr-positioned supplies in Turkey to cope with the anticipated refugee problem. They predicted a number of 20,000—one hundred times less than the actual number of refugees. See International Herald Tribune (April 15, 1991).
the Turkish interests and in order to convey to the Kurds American reluctance to support their fight against the government of Iraq, announced in Turkey “The United States would not go down the slippery slope of being sucked into a civil war.” The implication was that however brutal, the Saddam government is still the legal authority in Iraq. The setting of international relief centers on Iraqi soil without Iraq’s consent is the maximum interference the U.S. could extend against the sovereignty of an internationally recognized state. The justification for respecting the integrity of Iraq is drawn from the same principle that the coalition had just fought a ferocious war in Kuwait.

CONCLUSION

In the words of Gur-Arieh: “No nation in the 20th century has been made the pawn of regional and global powers as often as the Kurds.” U.S. policy towards the Iraqi Kurds is a significant subject of various interpretations. Its involvement in the Iraqi internal affairs contains all the makings of Machiavellian literature. The encouragement to resort to war, that the Kurds had received from the Americans, has twice eliminated all possible opportunities for them to live peacefully within a united Iraqi state.

The U.S. Administration in both cases considered the Kurdish people as a tool defying by that all moral and humanistic principles that the USA have set up as a foundation for its foreign policy. In the 1972-1975 case, to make sure that the operation would succeed without any objection and criticism, the president suspended the normal ‘watchdog’ procedures for an intelligence operation. The level of secrecy associated with that venture was extremely high. The Congress, the Department of State, and even the U.S. Ambassador in Iraq had all denied allegations of being informed about the project. The President and his Secretary made sure that there will be no official leak of information that would endanger the plan. A plan that was aware of its drastic end. A plan that could not have been approved had it been displayed for discussion through the established procedures of foreign policy decision-making process.

Also, in the 1991 case, the Americans failed to meet their implied promises of creating a state under circumstances that could hardly be more favorable: Bush’s brace to the Kurds was limited to the degree of sustaining an opposition against Saddam but short of enabling them to be successful in breaking up Iraq. The overture of recent international events is reinforcing the U.S. realist foreign policy. Balance of power is its first thought and solid postulate. Bush was very concerned that, although Iraq had to be defeated, it should not be destroyed as a country. The destruction of Iraq will enduringly disrupt the Balance of power in the Middle East and the surrounding regions. Until a duplicate replacement of Saddam is accessible, someone who could hold down the always rebellious Kurds in the North and the Shiite Muslims in the South who prefer to be part of Iran, better Saddam Hussein in power than chaos in Iraq and the destabilization of the region. If the Kurds are to take chunks out of Iraq, or create an independent Kurdistan, the traditional balance of power will be transformed. The perplexity of how the Americans are dealing with the Iraqi and the Kurdish problems defies any assured line of human rights conception. One thing is for sure, in dealing with both problems, the internal situations and the intra-relations of the different regional powers in the Middle East are cautiously calculated. In short, the U.S. has a vital interest in the region that goes beyond assurances of minority and ethnic human rights.

Throughout its revolts, the Kurdish leadership had been hoping to achieve their national rights through foreign support; however, it did not realize that it was only fighting a proxy war on behalf of the United States and its allies. It is argued that the Kurdish leaders assume part of the blame for lacking international political insight. Their ignorance encouraged the CIA and the Administration to exploit the Kurds’ enigma and to “toss them aside like broken toys.” It is puzzling whom should we blame; the CIA, the Administration

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or the American system as a whole for the unhappy chapter of U.S. intervention in the Kurdish-Iraqi conflicts. The surprising reality emanating from these disappointing episodes is that the Kurds never learned to restrain themselves from being pawns of interests for superpower manipulation. They repeatedly immolated themselves as forfeitures for the dictates of geopolitics, and twice the sacrifice of the U.S. and its allies.
Kurds refute this, stating these were isolated incidents linked to security measures. These tensions will likely continue after ISIL is expelled from Mosul... As it stands the current system, with its regional variations will always make it a fight between the two biggest parties with the third party getting the crumbs from the table, and sometimes less than that. People can pronounce all they like on new parties, or new coalitions as some people in the Labour Party have suggested recently, but unless electoral reform takes place nothing will radically change.