Kissinger's Strategy in the Iraqi Kurdish Rebellion of 1972-75: False Start or Foundation of American-Kurdish Partnership?

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Introduction: An Obscure War Reconsidered

Who cares about the Iraqi Kurdish rebellion of 1972-75? For a few years during the Cold War, the US joined Iran and Israel in providing covert aid to Kurds waging an insurgency against Baathist Iraq. When the Iranian Shah, Reza Pahlavi, received a territorial concession from Baghdad, he immediately cut off support and left the Kurds to be crushed. The American role in this war is now largely forgotten, as is the war itself. From many angles, the Kurds' 1972-75 rebellion appears as a minor episode overshadowed by events before and after.

For Henry Kissinger, aid to the Kurds was a small piece of the United States' broader relationships with two key allies – Iran and Israel – that formed the heart of its Middle East policy. This policy in turn fit within America's global Cold War strategy. For Kissinger's dovish critics, the Kurdish gambit is dwarfed in infamy by the bombing of Indochina and the Pakistani atrocities in Bangladesh. As a story of Central Intelligence Agency (CIA) meddling in the Third World, support for the Kurds pales in comparison to the overthrow of Iranian Prime Minister Mohammad Mossadegh (1953) and Chilean President Salvador Allende (1973). As a story of Iran-Iraq conflict, the "Shah's secret war" of 1972-75 and its sporadic skirmishes are dwarfed by the overt Iran-Iraq War of 1980-88 that killed one and a half million people.

As a story of American betrayal and Kurdish catastrophe, the Kurds' failure in 1975 is overshadowed by the ethnic cleansing of 1987-88. During the genocidal *Anfal* campaign, Saddam's henchman "Chemical Ali" razed villages and killed hundreds of thousands of Kurds, infamously attacking the village of Halabja with poison gas.[1] The US, at the time backing Saddam in order to contain revolutionary Iran, turned a blind eye.[2]

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[1] Samantha Power, *A Problem from Hell: America and the Age of Genocide*, "Iraq: 'Human Rights and Chemical Weapons Use Aside'" (New York: Harper Perennial, 2002), full chapter.
[2] Joost Hiltermann, *A Poisonous Affair: America, Iraq, and the Gassing of Halabja* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007), full text.

As a story of American-Kurdish partnership, US aid for the 1970s rebellion pales in comparison to the watershed moment of US intervention in 1991. After Iraq's defeat in the Gulf War, Kurdish rebels rose once again. Saddam's renewed crackdown sent almost two million Iraqi Kurds fleeing into Turkey. As millions of Kurdish civilians huddled on the mountainous border, facing death by cold and starvation, President H.W. Bush faced the "CNN effect": 24-hour news coverage that amplified an international outcry. Meanwhile, Turkish leaders feared a huge influx of Kurds would exacerbate their own separatist problem.[3] Turkey and world public opinion looked to the US for a solution. Relying on the legal basis of UN Security Council Resolution 688, the US launched "Operation Provide Comfort." This intervention established no-fly zones in Iraqi territory and delivered humanitarian aid, in the hope that "safe havens" would allow Kurds to return home, and thus avoid separatist chaos.

By sparing the Iraqi Kurds from Saddam's wrath, the US gave them the breathing space needed to set up an apparatus of self-government. Kurds held elections the very next year. Messily, in fits and starts, an autonomous[4] Kurdish region coalesced in northern Iraq, with the US helping to resolve internal Kurdish feuds. The US began to rely on Iraqi Kurds as partners,

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*For cover image, see *Times of Israel*, August 2014, accessed
http://cdn.timesofisrael.com/uploads/2014/08/Mideast-Iraq_Horo-1.jpg.

[3] Since 1984, Turkey has faced an insurgency mounted by the militants of the Kurdistan Workers' Party (PKK). This separatist conflict has occasionally flared into civil war in Turkey's Kurdish-majority southeast. Up to the present day, Turkey views Kurdish separatism as an existential threat.

[4] Kurdish "autonomy" is a fraught concept, employed in different ways by the participants in this historical drama and by later commentators. Used disingenuously by the Kurds' foes like Saddam, a promise of Kurdish "autonomy" might mean only the right to use the Kurdish language in schools. In the mouths of ambitious Kurdish nationalists, "autonomy" might extend to a separate Kurdish parliament and army: statehood in all but name. I will follow the usage of most US policymakers and commentators, taking Kurdish "autonomy" to mean protection from violent oppression by the central government, control over Kurdish territory, and a measure of self-government. But my definition still places any "autonomous" Kurdistan within the confines of an existing state.

first in the 2003 invasion against Saddam. After his ouster, Iraq's new US-backed leaders enshrined the principle of Kurdish autonomy into the constitution. After 2003, American-Kurdish partnership deepened as Americans and Kurds fought side by side against al-Qaeda, and later the Islamic State.

Discussing this ongoing US-Kurdish partnership, scholars' and policymakers' conventional wisdom says that cooperation began in 1991. US covert aid to the Kurds during the Cold War is usually forgotten. When treating 1972-75 as anything other than a blip in history, commentators most commonly depict this moment as a betrayal: the manipulation and abandonment of an oppressed people. In 1975, when Saddam struck a deal with the Shah over the disputed Shatt al-Arab waterway, the Shah cut off the Kurds within days and the US followed suit. Many critics on the left argue that Kissinger planned the Kurds' defeat from the beginning. By extension, they see American Kurdish policy as fundamentally cynical, treating Kurds only as instrumental pawns.

Other critics attack Kissinger's policy more on the grounds of the US interest than the humanitarian costs. They see a common Cold War story, what John Gaddis calls "a tail wagging a dog."[5] From this view, the Shah duped his gullible superpower patron so as to pursue his own parochial, territorial interests, with no tangible gain for the United States. For these critics, the failure of the Kurdish rebellion demonstrates that the US lacked any coherent, consistent strategy towards the Kurds. Commentators, whether they emphasize humanitarianism or the US interest, do not see any sustainable US-Kurdish cooperation arising from the 1972-75 covert aid program. This historical moment is remembered only as a callous manipulation or a strategic muddle.

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[5] John Lewis Gaddis, *The Cold War: A New History* (New York: Penguin Press, 2005) 129-130.

I argue that on the contrary, Kissinger's policy began a relatively coherent American approach to the Kurds – defined by a balance between excessively empowering or disempowering them – that resumed in 1991 and continues to the present.

To be sure, the Kurdish collapse in 1975 marked a disruption in this policy. However, the weight of archival and secondary literature makes clear that the Shah forced Kissinger's hand. What appears as an American betrayal is better understood as a temporary interruption, arising from circumstances outside of US control. When humanitarianism and US regional interests again favored cooperation in 1991, the US intervened, and the partnership resumed. Despite a fifteen-year disruption, the American-Kurdish relationship that persists today retains foundations from Kissinger's policy.

Both in 1972-75 and after 1991, the heart of American Kurdish policy was balance. In practice, achieving balance in Kurdish policy means avoiding two destabilizing extremes: the first we might call "winning too much," a scenario where Kurds feel empowered to pursue maximalist goals and tear apart the Middle East's borders. The second undesirable scenario is "losing too much," a Kurdish collapse leading to mass slaughter. Such a defeat would entail not only humanitarian catastrophe, but also huge refugee flows that could spark Kurdish separatism across national boundaries, as Turkey feared in 1991.

I argue further that this partnership-as-balancing-act mirrors the development of US-Israeli cooperation. In its mixed considerations of strategy and sympathy, the origins of American-Kurdish partnership under Kissinger can be understood by analogy to the early years of America's "special relationship" with Israel. Beyond the clear parallels – a minority seeking aid against numerically superior Arabs who deny their statehood – Israelis and Kurds followed

strikingly parallel trajectories in US policy.[6] At first, Anglo-American leaders were ambivalent about Zionism and its destabilizing effects. This reluctance gave way to a special relationship, due to both moral and strategic imperatives. The Holocaust grew in the American conscience, and American Jews urged support for Israel. Simultaneously, US policymakers recognized the urgent need for an ally in the Middle East to combat Soviet-backed Arab radicals.

Analogously, Saddam's genocidal massacres of Kurds in 1988 and 1991, coupled with his emergence as an irredeemable common enemy, led to a sea change in US-Kurdish relations. Amid the tumult and change of the past four decades, the current American-Kurdish alliance still operates upon the principles of balance that Kissinger defined in the 1970s, as I will argue below.

There is no simple formula that runs: "survive genocide + find common enemy = become US ally." And yet a pattern emerges: the US intervenes decisively on behalf of a minority facing slaughter. Spared violence, the minority pursues self-government. Inexorably, a commitment arises for the US to continue protection of the fledgling democracy, regardless of the original rationale to act.[7] Today, while Israel contributes to other US aims, defending Israel has become an end in itself, one of the chief goals of US foreign policy. Nonetheless, the US still seeks balance in its dealings with Israel. The US defends Israel implacably, but opposes Israeli maximalist objectives that would permanently destabilize the region.[8]

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[6] Of course, Israel from the start had a diaspora of numerous Jewish American citizens, a powerful lobby in Washington, and the *de jure* statehood the Kurds sorely lacked.

[7] See also: Kosovo's *de facto* autonomy resulting from US intervention to stop Serb atrocities in 1999, giving way to grudging US support for *de jure* independence in 2008. For a more detailed exploration of this pattern, see Jonathan Esty, "In Defense of the 'Exceptional Solution': Remedial Secession as a Means of Resolving Humanitarian Crises," Yale University, 2016, on file with the author, accessible https://www.dropbox.com/s/gg17j3oft6p3kti/In%20Defense%20of%20the%20%27Exceptional%20Solution%27.docx?dl=0.

[8] Notwithstanding President Trump's vague gestures towards a "one-state solution."

Kissinger's covert Kurdish policy, interrupted in 1975, resumed in 1991 with the establishment of no-fly zones. Freed from the threat of immediate violence, Kurds seized the chance to establish a fledgling self-government. At that moment, following Israel's trajectory, it became near-inevitable that Kurds would transform from a strategic means to an end in themselves.

Though Kissinger rails against the Wilsonian crusade for self-determination as an ineffective approach, he frames his own policymaking within "America's traditional quest for a world [where] the weak are secure."[9] Even if the US initially acts from national interest, we belatedly realize the commitments our actions entail.[10] Morality and strategy, especially in Kissinger's policy, are not opposites to be cleanly teased apart. They exert influence upon each other—means can become ends.

I argue that Kissinger's approach to the Kurds in the 1970s, in all its ambivalence, was more a foundation than a false start for American-Kurdish ties. To put this claim in context, I will provide an overview of the Kurdish Question and its relationship to the Cold War. In particular, I will focus on the Soviet-backed Kurdish "Republic of Mahabad" in 1946. Next I will review the strategic setting in the Middle East leading up to the 1972-75 Kurdish rebellion, and cover the facts of the war that even feuding commentators can agree upon. Looking at secondary literature, I will then evaluate the main threads of historical scholarship, including Kissinger's critics and defenders, and offer my own interpretation of Kissinger's actions. Finally, I will argue

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[9] Henry Kissinger, *Years of Renewal*, (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1999), 1078.

[10] In Kissinger's undergraduate thesis at Harvard, we find: "Experience now produces morality, instead of the categorical imperative supplying norms…" (From his discussion of the conduct of states in Kant's "Perpetual Peace": Kissinger, "The Meaning of History," 308, Henry A. Kissinger Papers, Part II (MS 1981), Manuscripts and Archives, Yale University Library. accessed http://findit.library.yale.edu/catalog/digcoll:1193453.)

that US-Israeli and US-Kurdish cooperation developed along analogous lines. This comparison reveals policy imperatives in common between the two cases—imperatives which have shaped American-Kurdish partnership from Kissinger's day to the present.

The Kurdish Question and Early American Attitudes

The Kurds are a Middle Eastern ethnic and linguistic group, the world's largest people without their own state. Kurds inhabit regions at the intersection of Iran, Iraq, Turkey, and Syria. During the 1970s, Kurds numbered five to ten million.[11]

The earliest recorded US attitudes toward the Kurds were strongly negative. In the years before and after World War I, Americans saw Kurds as the Ottoman Turks' chief accomplices in massacring the Armenians.[12] Although Woodrow Wilson briefly proposed a Kurdish state, US "support" never went beyond rhetoric. When Kemal Ataturk's nationalist forces defeated Greece and redrew the Middle East's borders in 1923, the US acquiesced to the incorporation of Kurds into the new states of Turkey, British-dominated Iraq, and French-dominated Syria. Thus the Kurdish Problem, or Kurdish Question, came into being. This territorial dilemma followed similar Polish and Jewish Problems: in an age of nation-states, what is a stateless people to do?

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[11] David McDowall, *A Modern History of the Kurds* (New York: I.B. Tauris & Co., 2014), 3. (Today, Kurds number twenty-five or thirty million.)

[12] Kurds and Armenians had for generations competed for agricultural land in eastern Anatolia. To perpetrate the Armenian Genocide, the Ottoman central government used a grotesque kind of genocidal "franchising." Ottoman authorities gave the Kurds carte blanche to murder their rivals and take their land. Thus it was Turkish Kurds who did a large proportion of the killing (at an even higher rate than was the case in the Holocaust when Nazi authorities stoked the anti-Semitism of Poles to perform pogroms).

For this topic in greater detail, see: Jonathan Esty, "The Kurdish Question in Anatolia After World War I: Competing Nationalism and Broken Promises Under the Shadow of Genocide," 2015, on file with the author, accessible at https://www.dropbox.com/s/w7qh05m0k2ju4sb/The%20Kurdish%20Question%20in%20Anatolia%20After%20World%20War%20I.docx?dl=0.

While the Syrian Kurdish population was negligible, and Turkey clamped down effectively on its Kurds, Iran and Iraq were plagued by recurring Kurdish rebellions. Throughout the twentieth century, Iran, Iraq, Turkey, and Syria occasionally encouraged Kurdish separatism in their neighbors' territory to pressure a hostile government. These states have also cooperated to suppress Kurdish uprisings that threaten them all.[13] It is received wisdom among geopolitical thinkers that Kurdish independence would unleash chaos and unravel the Middle East's borders. Accordingly, US policy has for decades opposed the declaration of a Kurdish state.[14]

A brief note on terminology: the phrase "the Kurds" refers to a group with a common ethnic identity and a measure of shared language, but with no more political unity than "the Arabs." Here, when I refer to the Kurds, unless otherwise specified, I mean the Iraqi Kurds. While Iraqi Kurds have diversity of their own, we may consider them to be under the leadership of Mustafa Barzani and his tribe in the period we are examining. Barzani first came to prominence at the beginning of the Cold War, in a Kurdish rebellion during the Soviet-instigated Iran Crisis of 1946.

The Soviet-backed Mahabad Republic of 1946: "Communist Kurds"?

Kurdish disunity and material weakness meant that rebellions never lasted long enough to establish even fleeting autonomy. This dynamic remained true until 1946, when Iranian Kurds found a superpower patron. Today, few remember that the Cold War was sparked, in small part, by the Kurdish Question overlapping with Stalin's expansionism.

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[13] McDowall, *Modern History*, whole text.
[14] Michael M. Gunter, "The Five Stages of American Foreign Policy towards the Kurds," *Insight Turkey* 13 (2011): 2, accessed http://file.insightturkey.com/Files/Pdf/insight-turkey_vol_13_no_2_-2011_gunter.pdf, 93-102.

During World War II, the USSR had occupied western Iran, and after the war, refused to

leave. The Soviet sought concessions in oil rights or territory, while Soviet operatives

encouraged Azerbaijani and Kurdish separatist groups to apply pressure to Tehran. The Soviets

established local branches of the Communist Party, and facilitated the declaration of the

Kurdish Areas in the Middle East and the Soviet Union

Figure 1:
Note that the USSR directly abuts Iranian Azerbaijan and Iranian Kurdistan. The Mahabad Republic
was located in northwest Iran. (The splotch of Kurdish red in northeast Iran represents a small and
politically inactive community).

Perry-Castañeda Library Map Collection, "Kurdish Areas in the Middle East and Soviet Union"
(Austin: University of Texas, 1986), accessed http://www.lib.utexas.edu/maps/iraq.html.

Azerbaijani People's Republic and the Kurdish-led Republic of Mahabad. Moscow made moves to incorporate these breakaway regions into the Soviet Union unless Iran gave way.[15]

The Mahabad Republic's territory encompassed only the northern portion of Iranian Kurdistan, and was *de facto* independent for only a year before the Iranian army crushed it. Nonetheless this was the first time there had been a "free Kurdistan" in decades of failed uprisings. When the Soviets withdrew from Iran (in part due to American diplomatic pressure), they left Iran's Kurds in the lurch. Mahabad fell days later.[16]

At this moment, a little-known tribal chief, Mustafa Barzani, stepped into the breach. He had come to Iran after a failed rebellion in his native Iraqi Kurdistan, and had risen to become one of the short-lived Republic's best military commanders. Now Barzani again chose flight over surrender. He embarked on something of a Middle Eastern "long march," fleeing hundreds of miles through the mountains to find refuge in the Soviet Union, where he stayed in exile for over a decade. This period cemented in US policymakers' minds the association of Kurdish separatists as pawns in Soviets' subversive schemes. The Mahabad Republic of 1946 also tarred Barzani and his faction as pro-communist "Red Kurds."

This reading of events was wide of the mark. The Kurds were no pliable Soviet pawns. On the contrary, the Kurds brazenly tried to extract maximum military aid from their superpower patrons without adopting Soviet politics. Mahabad's leaders badgered the Soviets incessantly for tanks and anti-air weaponry: the necessities to transform from guerillas into a conventional army.

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[15] Using ethnic separatism to stoke "independence" movements, with the goal of territorial aggrandizement, is an old song. The Russians sing it quite well—just look at the formerly Georgian regions of South Osettia and Abkhazia, or the "Luhansk People's Republic" in eastern Ukraine.

[16] William Eagleton Jr., *The Kurdish Republic of 1946* (London: Oxford University Press, 1963), 113.

The Kurds of Mahabad benefited from Soviet aid while making minimal concessions to Moscow. They took on Soviet trappings but no more. Kurds put portraits of Stalin in their homes, and Barzani occasionally donned a Soviet marshal uniform with cap and epaulets.[17] While Kurdish radio broadcasts perfunctorily praised Soviet military might, the Mahabad Republic's press was uncensored and virtually free of communist ideology.[18]

Unlike in the People's Republic of Azerbaijan, there was no secret police in Mahabad. At the same time that the Kurds were receiving guns and protection from the Red Army, Mahabad's leaders carefully prepared for the arrival of Captain Archie Roosevelt, the US military attaché in

Figure 2: Mustafa Barzani (center, standing, in traditional Kurdish garb) among other leaders of the Mahabad Republic, some in Soviet dress. Mahabad, Iran, 1946 (Eagleton, 66).

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[17] Eagleton, 64.
[18] Eagleton, 101.

Tehran, who visited Mahabad in 1946. Kurdish leaders tried to show their American guest the

Kurds' desire "to form a democratic province under a federal system similar to the American

model."[19] The Kurds denied they had separatist aims and hid signs of Soviet influence. Roosevelt

left impressed with the "free atmosphere" of the Kurds' breakaway Republic.

The case of the Kurdistan Democratic Party (KDP) demonstrates how Kurds were able to

flatter their patrons' political leanings, while milking them for material aid. Founded under

Soviet influence in 1946, the KDP was analogous to the communist Tudeh party that controlled

Soviet-occupied Iranian Azerbaijan. Over decades, Barzani hollowed out the ostensibly

communist KDP and made it his own.[20] Even during years of exile in the USSR, he ensured that

the KDP never became a Soviet tool. Instead he turned it into a vessel for his tribal and national

ambitions.[21] One of his followers recalls Barzani, at the end of his time in the USSR, offering

this chameleonic advice: "we Kurds when we go abroad should stick to our roots, pick up the

good things from new cultures and ignore the bad things."[22]

When the 1958 Iraqi Revolution deposed the monarchy, Barzani was invited back to Iraq

by Abd al-Karim Qasim, Iraq's new dictator. Barzani quickly used the KDP to organize outside

of his own tribe. Over time the KDP became a clandestine paramilitary that dominated Iraqi

Kurdish politics. Barzani grew dissatisfied with Baghdad's proposed Kurdish autonomy

agreement. Within a ten-year span, Barzani rebelled; fought the Iraqi army to a draw;

precipitated the government's collapse; waited as a new government rose, reneged on an

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[19] Eagleton, 109.
[20] McDowall, 17, 251-4.
[21] Ibid.
[22] Nijyar Shemdin, quoted in "Mullah Mustafa Barzani," *Kurdistan House*, December 27, 2011, accessed http://www.kurdistanhouse.org/?p=151.

autonomy deal, and fell; launched another rebellion; and gained a new autonomy agreement under the Baath.

One now understands something of the repetitive and baffling character of Kurdish history. One of Kissinger's aides explained to him the "old story" of "the Kurdish drive in Iraq for greater autonomy…[which has] led to periods of civil war, insurrection and truce" in seemingly endless repetition.[23] In 1972, the Shah asked the US to play a part in this "old story." For the first time, American leaders said yes.

Iran and Iraq in American Middle East Strategy

Looking beyond the Kurds' struggle, the Middle East as a whole seemed to be shifting against the US in this period. Since 1955, the "Baghdad Pact" had loosely linked American allies Turkey, Iraq, Iran, Pakistan, and Britain on security matters. [24] But the group fell into shambles after Iraq's new government abrogated the treaty in 1958, leaving a Baghdad Pact without Baghdad. 1971 brought new setbacks: a declining Britain, the region's historical power, withdrew from all responsibilities "east of Suez."

Thus the US came to rely increasingly on the "twin pillars" of Saudi Arabia and Iran, along with Israel. Richard Nixon's administration favored the Shah above all as his "regional policeman." Vietnam had discredited the overt application of American military force. The

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[23] Alfred Atherton, The Kissinger Transcripts: A Verbatim Record of U.S. Diplomacy, 1969-1977, Digital National Security Archive, Minutes of Secretary's Meeting, April 22, 1974, accessed
http://search.proquest.com/dnsa_kt/docview/1679082852/fulltextPDF/B080057ED7244DE7PQ/1?accountid=15172.
[24] Also known as the Central Treaty Organization (CENTO) after Iraq's withdrawal.

"Nixon Doctrine" instead called for allies to "act creatively and dynamically to develop and maintain an amenable regional structure."[25]

Initially, American and Iranian interests seemed to align perfectly. Nixon, at a meeting in Tehran in 1971, looked the Shah in the eye and said, "Protect me."[26] The Shah had an appetite for a much greater defense budget and was happy to oblige. But the Shah had ambitions of recreating the dominance of the old Persian empires, rather than being a mere "policeman." Seeking regional hegemony, he framed his security goals in the context of Cold War threats. He claimed that his regional rivals, especially the Iraqis, were conspiring with the USSR to disrupt the flow of Gulf oil.

US observers at the time agreed. Across the Muslim world, the Soviets seemed to be on the move. American ally Pakistan suffered a humiliating defeat in 1971 to Soviet-leaning India, with East Pakistan breaking away as the new state of Bangladesh. US policymakers feared the Soviets would "move south" and spread influence towards the Persian Gulf and Indian Ocean.[27] 15,000 Soviet military "advisors" were already stationed in Egypt, seeming to validate the Shah's claim of concrete Soviet designs on the Middle East.

When in 1972 Nasser ordered these advisers to leave, the Soviets turned towards Iraq as their new main client in the region. They ramped up their arms sales and oil purchases.[28] Offsetting hardware allowed Nixon and Kissinger to make a countermove on the Cold War

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[25] Stephen McGlinchey, *US Arms Policies Towards the Shah's Iran* (New York: Routledge, 2014), 65.

[26] Roham Alvandi, *Nixon, Kissinger, and the Shah: the United States and Iran in the Cold War* (London: Oxford University Press, 2014), 28.

[27] McGlinchey, 75.

[28] Francis Fukuyama, "The Soviet Union and Iraq Since 1968," RAND Corporation, July 1980, accessed https://www.rand.org/content/dam/rand/pubs/notes/2007/N1524.pdf, 35.

chessboard. The Soviets gave Mig-23 planes to Iraq; the US gave F-14 and F-15s to Iran.[29] Soon,

half of *global* US arms sales began flowing to the Shah, and Iran undertook a "titanic shopping

spree" in new armaments.[30] The Soviets stepped up their support for Baathist Iraq, including

Baghdad's campaign to crush the Kurds, in part to check the Shah's rise as an American-funded

military machine.

At this moment in 1972, on the eve of the Kurdish rebellion, Kissinger's regional strategy

could be summarized as the following:

1) Block Soviet influence in the Gulf
2) Empower Iran as a regional policeman
3) Protect Israel, avoid region-wide Arab-Israeli war

This first objective embodies classic geopolitics. As Kissinger wryly observes in his later

writing, "two hundred years of Russian expansionism toward the Gulf indicate a certain

proclivity."[31] The British had long blocked that "proclivity," warding off Tsarist threats to India

in the nineteenth-century Great Game. In the twentieth century, a new Anglophone empire

stepped in to thwart the Soviet thrust.

It has become a cliché of international relations that Russia, whatever its ideology, seeks

out warm-water ports, especially on the Mediterranean Sea or Indian Ocean.[32] This was

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[29] Gibson, 136.
[30] McGlinchey, 78.
[31] Kissinger, "Council on Foreign Relations draft article," Fall 1991, Kissinger Papers, accessed
http://findit.library.yale.edu/images_layout/view?parentoid=11781689&increment=26.
[32] This stereotype of Russian policy is now known mainly by geopolitical analysts, historians,
and the Davos set. But popular songs were once written about frustrating Russian designs on
warm-water ports. Many know the term "jingoism," but forgot that it comes from a patriotic
jingle whose chorus goes:
　　We don't want to fight but by jingo if we do /
　　We've got the ships, we've got the men, and got the money too! /
　　We've fought the Bear before... and while we're Britons true, /
　　The Russians shall not have Constantinople…

especially true during the Cold War. A CIA report expressed concern that the Soviets would use influence over the Iraqi Kurds to form an informal "land bridge" to the Gulf, in lieu of overt annexation.[33] The Soviet Union then tried to pressure Nasser into allowing Soviet naval and air bases on Egyptian territory, to counter the US Sixth Fleet in the Eastern Mediterranean.[34] This age-old geopolitical imperative was heightened by the Gulf's oil reserves.[35]

Within this strategy, Israel and especially Iran could serve as a check on the Soviets and their Arab proxies. The US defended Israel's interests, while seeing to avoid an escalating, messy war that might provide the Soviets an opportunity to expand influence over anti-Israel Arab states. The Shah's plan to arm the Kurds served all three components of Kissinger's regional strategy.

Beginning of Covert Aid to the Kurds in 1972

In April 1972 the Shah proposed a new initiative: weakening Soviet-aligned Iraq by arming Iraqi Kurdish rebels. The Shah's plan followed the signing of a Soviet-Iraqi "Treaty of Friendship and Cooperation" the same month. This move caught the US off-guard.[36] Not only was Iraq a Gulf state, it also bordered Iran and Turkey. With their large Kurdish populations, they were vulnerable to separatist subversion.

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[33] CIA, Memorandum for the Director, "The Kurdish Problem," April 7, 1959, accessed https://www.cia.gov/library/readingroom/docs/CIA-RDP79R00904A000500010098-1.pdf.

[34] Rami Ginat, "The Soviet Union" in *The 1967 Arab-Israeli War: Origins and Consequences*, ed. William Roger Louis and Avi Shlaim (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2012), 215.

[35] The Soviets' cooperation with the Kurds had fizzled since the days of Mahabad. *Pravda* published the occasional article decrying Iraqi "imperialist" oppression of the Kurds. But after Barzani left the USSR for Iraq, there had been no Soviet-Kurdish cooperation. The Soviets fully pivoted to Baghdad, showing themselves willing to back any entity that provided influence in the Gulf; anything to achieve the geopolitical prizes of oil and a warm-water port.

[36] Gibson, 118.

Under a pro-Moscow Baghdad government, independently minded Iraqi Kurds could be crushed, then incorporated into the Soviets' regional program. With Iraqi Kurdistan transformed into a hub of Soviet subversive activity, "Red Kurds" trained and coordinated by Moscow could undermine American allies. This was a specter like that of the Soviet-backed Mahabad Republic, but on a grander scale. The Shah in conversation with Nixon and Kissinger brought up the threat of a Baathist-Communist-Kurdish coalition, by which "the Kurdish problem instead of being a thorn in the side becomes an asset of the Communists."[37] In response, Kissinger asked "what could be done."

Baghdad was tilting more towards Moscow by the day, and the Shah seemed to be creatively proposing a solution on his own initiative, as the Nixon Doctrine called for. Still the State Department and CIA bureaucracy remained suspicious of the scheme. A State Department memo summed up the chief concerns: 1) the infeasibility that the Kurds could defeat the Iraqi army, 2) skepticism that the Kurds had truly cut the umbilical cord with Moscow, and 3) the difficulty of keeping support for the Kurdish rebellion a secret.

But outreach by the Shah and other allies began to persuade Kissinger and Nixon, despite resistance from the bureaucracy. The Israelis – who had armed and trained Barzani's Kurdish faction since the 1960s to undermine Iraq – were on board with the Iranian effort. A Kurdish rebellion would keep Iraqi troops preoccupied at home, weakening any joint Arab offensive against Israel. The Gulf monarchies were happy to preclude Iraqi adventurism against its neighbors.

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[37] Pahlavi and Kissinger, Kissinger Transcripts, Memorandum of Conversation, May 30, 1972, accessed http://search.proquest.com/dnsa_kt/docview/1679125008/DC84902999684903PQ/16?accountid=15172.

Barzani, for his part, was wary of Iranian intentions. Until the US signed on, Barzani would not commit to the risky path of open resistance. "We do not trust the Shah," he told an American journalist in an off-the-record talk.[38] "I trust America. America is too great a power to betray a small people like the Kurds." Dollar for dollar and gun for gun, the Shah provided vastly more aid than did the US. But "the symbolism of the American contribution was more important than its size; for [Barzani] it guaranteed that the shah would not one day suddenly cut him off."[39]

When Soviet designs on Iraq accelerated, the Nixon administration decided to act. Moscow began new negotiations with Baghdad for access to a naval base at Iraq's Umm Qasr port, while possibly allowing for Soviet overflights and air-basing rights.[40] Such measures would greatly enhance the USSR's ability to project force in the Gulf. At roughly the same time, Baghdad nationalized the Iraqi Petroleum Company in which US and other Western companies had a large stake. The US initially took no public response to these threatening moves. The negotiation of SALT I had just been concluded and the Nixon-Kissinger plan of détente was at a delicate stage. But while public indifference allowed arms negotiations to stay on track, it did not preclude covert, deniable action.

Aid to the Kurds had to be covert and deniable, not only to protect détente, but because of the United States' responsibility to preserve regional stability. The British, when they had served as the region's imperial steward, recognized that they could not back Kurdish autonomy, especially not in public. In 1941, before Iran's Kurds had received Soviet support, they petitioned London for aid. The British military attaché to Tehran worried about opening a

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[38] Alvandi, 124.

[39] David Korn, "Last Years of Mustafa Barzani," *Middle East Quarterly*, June 1994, accessed http://www.meforum.org/220/the-last-years-of-mustafa-barzani.

[40] Gibson, 135.

Pandora's box of separatist claims: "If the Kurds in Persia succeed in getting local autonomy

supported by us, the Arabs of Khuzistan [in southwestern Iran] will want it and Heaven knows

who else."[41]

Kissinger, too, recognized that it was irresponsible to fan separatism openly. As he later

wrote, "because we were supporting an ethnic group against its legal government," the aid had to

be covert.[42] Discussing the deniability of operations in Kurdistan, Kissinger joked to his aides, "I

don't even know where the place is. (Laughter)."[43]

Laughably obscure as the Kurds might be, secret aid for their cause could still serve as a

countermove on the geopolitical chessboard. Kissinger described at length how the Kurdish

rebellion contributed to his strategy:

> We want to be sure the Soviets consider the Middle East too expensive an area to play
> around in… What I want is for the Politburo in Moscow to be in a frame of mind not to
> want to get involved in further adventures in the Middle East. I want them to recall…that
> Iraq turned out to be a bottomless pit. I want them to tell anyone who comes with a
> recommendation for renewed activity in the Middle East to go away...I want the Shah to
> help in this strategy. We do not want to push the USSR against the wall. We just want
> them in a frame of mind where they judge that the costs for activity in the Middle East
> seem excessive. We also want the Arabs in the area to feel that they cannot get a free ride
> by linking up with the Soviet Union. We want the Kurds to have enough strength to be an
> open wound in Iraq.[44]

By picking at this "open wound," the US could at once stymie Soviet plans for Iraq, punish the

Baath for their tilt to Moscow, and pin down Iraqi troops to defend Israel and empower Iran. We

see here how aid to the Kurds, a very minor action of the Cold War, was incorporated within

Kissinger's broader strategy.

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[41] McDowall, 232.

[42] Kissinger, *Renewal*, 579.

[43] Kissinger, Kissinger Transcripts, Minutes of Secretary's Meeting, April 22, 1974, accessed
http://search.proquest.com/dnsa_kt/docview/1679082852/fulltextPDF/B080057ED7244DE7PQ/
1?accountid=15172.

[44] Kissinger, FRUS, Memo 24, July 23, 1973, accessed
https://history.state.gov/historicaldocuments/frus1969-76v27/d24.

The Success, Limits, and Eventual Failure of the Kurdish Strategy in 1975

From the beginning of the 1972 rebellion, some of the plan's backers had known the Kurds' limits as allies. Mossad agents had been on the ground in northern Iraq since 1965, to arm and train Barzani's forces against Baghdad. Over the next decade, the Israelis discovered the geographic and institutional factors that reduced Kurdish effectiveness. A Mossad operative described Kurds' strengths and weaknesses:

> The greatest asset of the mountain people—ten thousand mountains towering above the clouds, every mountain a natural fortress, stable and steep, between them narrow passages where a few fighters equipped with anti-tank weapons can block armored divisions ascending from the Iraqi lowlands. Their greatest weakness—poverty: poverty of means…poverty of organization and maintenance…The Kurds knew how to fight well…in an extended and stubborn mountain partisan war, in small and irregular units."[45]

This account fits the mold of what Robert Kaplan calls "terrain-specific sub-state land forces."[46] In his *Revenge of Geography*, Kaplan describes these forces that can fight better on their own territory than any outside army, thus blunting an organized state's advantage in troop numbers and technology.

This very advantage restricts the reach of such forces. Certainly, "small groups of turbaned irregulars can use the tortuous features of an intricate mountain landscape to bedevil [even] a superpower."[47] But without truly massive intervention on their behalf, Kurdish fighters could not leave their mountains and fight in the open plains of Iraq where many Kurds lived. Unable to assert control over the entirety of Iraqi Kurdish territory, Barzani's guerillas alone could never create the conditions for statehood.

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[45] Alouph Harevan, quoted in Yossi Alpher, *Periphery: Israel's Search for Middle East Allies* (London: Rouman & Littlefield), 57.
[46] Robert D. Kaplan, *The Revenge of Geography: What the Map Tells Us About Coming Conflicts and the Battle Against Fate* (New York: Random House, 2012), 125.
[47] Ibid.

Mossad agents found this to be the case. Attempts to train the Kurds to as a conventional army that could fight "set piece battles" all "failed spectacularly."[48] Barzani made repeated requests to his patrons to increase the amount of aid he received. His stated goal was to overcome Kurdish limitations, shifting the war from a guerilla stalemate to an offensive stance that could achieve autonomy or independence.

While Kissinger admired the heroism of the Kurds' struggle, he noted later that a heroic attitude came with "extraordinary faith and a kind of obliviousness to the normal calculation of balance of forces."[49] Such was the case when Barzani called for astronomical increases in aid. At a time when Iran, Israel, and the US together supplied $40 million to the Kurds annually, Barzani asked for $180 million to establish partial Kurdish autonomy, and $360 million for a plan of "full independence." Kissinger drily notes in his memoirs that "[e]ven Barzani's minimum figure would exceed the total budget allotted to all covert operations being undertaken by the United States."[50] Given prohibitive financial costs, the Kurds' institutional and geographical limits, and the risk that Kurdish autonomy would create regional chaos, the US and Iran repeatedly rebuffed Barzani's requests.

Although financial reality imposed a ceiling on Barzani's ambitions, the Kurds' rebellion ultimately fell apart due to incompatible goals among the Kurds' backers. With a new Arab-Israeli war looming in 1973, Israel requested a major Kurdish offensive to ensure Iraq could not commit any troops to an attack on Israel. The Shah, fearing the chaotic consequences of an all-out Kurdish attack, rejected the request. He ostensibly supported Iraqi Kurdish autonomy, but was wary of any action that would inspire Iran's Kurds pursue the same goal. The Shah

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[48] Alpher, 58.
[49] Kissinger, *Renewal*, 588.
[50] Ibid, 589.

explained his Kurdish policy to Mossad's director: "I want the flame alive. I do not want a fire."[51] The US, fearing escalation into open war between Iran and Iraq, concurred with the Iranian perspective. Barzani was told to stand down, and no Kurdish offensive was launched, to Israel's chagrin.[52]

Even without a Kurdish offensive, two-third of Iraqi forces remained tied down fighting a guerilla war in Iraqi Kurdistan. Although Iraq was able, belatedly, to send the remaining third of its forces through Syria to assist the Arab attack, Iraqi forces inflicted no casualties on Israel during the 1973 Yom Kippur War. Kissinger proudly pointed to this figure to claim success for the Israeli dimension of his Kurdish policy.[53]

This moment of discord among the Kurds' backers served as a warning sign: the Shah's support for the Kurds was tactical and limited. Furthermore, Israeli and Iranian goals were ultimately incompatible. As we shall see below, the Israelis backed the Kurds in part because they sympathized with their political goals. The Shah saw Kurds only as dangerous pawns who could stir up separatism in his own country.

Looking at the motives of the parties involved, we find a tangled mess of overlapping and non-overlapping interests. On the Iraqi side, Baghdad went on the offensive to finally solve its Kurdish Problem, hoping for the domestic stability needed to turn outwards and assert itself against in the Gulf and against Israel. The Soviets saw the Kurdish conflict as an opportunity to sell arms and thus gain more influence over an oil-rich client, and subsequently to use Iraq as a launch-pad to the Gulf's strategic wealth of energy and ports.

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[51] Shah Reza Pahlavi, quoted in Alpher, 53.
[52] Alpher, 55.
[53] Kissinger, *Renewal*, 586.

In backing the Kurds, the Shah wanted to keep Iraq weak, inwardly focused, and unable to serve Soviet designs; to get a favorable concession on the Shatt al-Arab boundary dispute and thus improve his geostrategic position; and to keep his own Kurds from being inflamed. The Israelis wanted the Iraqi army tied down and unable to participate in Arab attacks; to topple the Baath if possible; and defend the Kurds whose plight they saw as parallel to their own.

Barzani wanted the necessary anti-armor and anti-air weaponry to turn his guerillas into a conventional army.[54] Anticipating a military victory, Barzani even hoped for a kind of Kurdish Marshall Plan, with massive economic aid to be supplemented by diplomatic support. He desired all the ingredients necessary for the long-awaited Kurdish declaration of independence. Barzani believed that US support would guarantee the rebellion's motley supporters would not abandon the Kurds. Barzani, at the peak of his naïveté and infeasibility, even proposed that Iraqi Kurdistan join the US as the fifty-first state.[55]

Amid all these conflicting aims, the Shah had the power to call the shots. Iran supplied the bulk of weaponry to the Kurds, six times more than Israel and the US. While Israel had Mossad and Iran had Savak[56] agents in Kurdistan, Iranian soldiers fought alongside the Kurds, supporting the guerillas with artillery and anti-air. The only Americans directly involved were a few scattered CIA operatives. The US was the party least affected, least invested, and least aware.

The hard realities of power meant the two chief parties to the conflict were the Shah and Saddam. When their interests coincided, this overlap proved determinative, overriding all else. In

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[54] Just as Barzani and the Kurdish leaders of the Mahabad Republic had badgered the Soviets incessantly for more materiel, tanks, and anti-air weapons.

[55] Jonathan C. Randal, *After Such Knowledge, What Forgiveness?* (London: Westview Press, 1999), 154.

[56] Savak was the Iranian intelligence service under the Shah.

1975, when Saddam reluctantly agreed to redraw the Shatt al-Arab maritime boundary, the Shah struck a deal and dropped his support for the Kurds overnight. The Shah got his territorial adjustment; Saddam got carte blanche to crush his Kurdish problem without Iranian interference; and both parties avoided a bruising, overt war.

As part of the 1975 Algiers Agreement brokered between Baghdad and Tehran, the Shah not only ended his own aid, but closed his border to all supplies flowing to Iraqi Kurds. Given the operation's deniability, and Iraqi Kurdistan's landlocked position, Israel and the US had no way to continue sending support to Barzani on their own. Logistical reality required the US and Israel to acquiesce to the Shah's decision. Kissinger, writing decades later, calls the entire affair "the tragedy of the Kurds." Diagnosing the failure, he admits that the US "probably should have analyzed more carefully the disparate motives of the anti-Iraqi coalition together with the consequences of one of the partners jumping ship."[57]

As we place this small component of Kissinger's Cold War strategy into the larger whole, we must not forget the overpowering influence of Watergate at this moment in 1975. Witness this exchange between Israeli Prime Minister Yitzhak Rabin and Kissinger: the Israeli leader complains that "the Kurds are very disappointed about the US attitude" in refusing Kurdish pleas for more aid.[58] Kissinger retorts, "Everyone around in the world is disappointed in the US attitude," and links it to "the biggest security problem in the world…the domestic weakness of the United States" in the wake of Watergate.[59]

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[57] Kissinger, *Renewal*, 584.
[58] Yitzhak Rabin and Kissinger, Kissinger Transcripts, Memorandum of Conversation, May 9, 1975, accessed http://search.proquest.com/dnsa_kt/docview/1679082208/DC84902999684903PQ/15?accountid=15172.
[59] Ibid.

Even if it had been logistically possible for the US to escalate its support to save the

Kurds, Kissinger did not have the option. Congress was already hounding the executive branch

and the CIA. Continuing current operations would be hard enough, but a mammoth increase

would be impossible. Once the Shah made his decision to quit, the Kurds were lost.

Review of Secondary Literature: Kissinger the Dupe or Kissinger the Evil Genius?

A principal critique of Kissinger's Kurdish policy, from the perspective of the US

interest, is that the Kurds' rebellion only helped the Shah. Using Gaddis's metaphor, critics

allege that "the Iranian tail had wagged the American dog."[60] CIA historians criticize the US for

waging a secret war as "a favor for the Shah,"[61] abetting his "Machiavellian double-dealing"

while gaining nothing in return.[62] Iran expert Roham Alvandi points to the Shah's "paramount

role in convincing Nixon and Kissinger to end the longstanding US policy of non-intervention in

the Kurdish Question…against all advice…from the State Department, the CIA, and the NSC."[63]

True, the Shah was the prime mover in launching the 1972-75 rebellion. He was decisive

in shifting the US away from its traditional hands-off Kurdish policy. Years before US

involvement began, we see Kissinger's wariness to let Kurdish separatism out of the box. The

Turkish president had complained about Israeli aid to Barzani, and Kissinger wrote that Ankara

was "not too keen about this trifling with the forces of nationalism on the Turkish frontier."[64]

Looking back on the rebellion after its collapse, Kissinger described how the US had two or

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[60] Alvandi, 123.

[61] John Prados, *Presidents' Secret Wars: CIA and Pentagon Covert Operations from World War II Through Iranscam* (New York: William Morrow, 1986), 313.

[62] Randal, 167.

[63] Alvandi, 123.

[64] Kissinger, Confidential Memo, December 2, 1968, Kissinger Papers, accessed http://findit.library.yale.edu/images_layout/view?parentoid=11774530&increment=30.

three times rejected the possibility of aiding the Iraqi Kurds. Only when "the Shah pleaded with

the President" did the US stance change.[65]

While the Shah initiated the Kurdish operation, it does not follow that he alone stood to

gain. The record shows how Kissinger saw the Kurdish gambit providing benefits to the US. By

debilitating Iraq, the US would have an easier time defending Israel, while signaling to the

Soviets to keep clear of the Middle East. Soviet diplomats had even tried to convince Barzani to

stand down his guerillas, so as to free up Iraqi divisions to attack Israel.[66] The Kurdish rebellion

had taken on a genuine Cold War dimension, *contra* Alvandi's claim that the war served strictly

Iranian national goals.

But this tail-wagging narrative is not the primary criticism found in the literature. The

overwhelming body of critique, in countless books and articles, charges not that Kissinger was

gullible, but that he was a coldblooded manipulator. This school of thought claims that Kissinger

knew the Kurds would lose, and planned to betray them from the outset. These critiques arise

from a single root: the work of one man, Congressman Otis Pike (D-NY).

Whether Kurdish specialists or the dovish American left, all critics follow in the

footsteps of Pike's investigation of the CIA in 1976. His findings, once leaked to the press,

opened the covert Kurdish operation to public condemnation. The Pike Report wove the

"betrayal" of the heroic Kurds into a tapestry of CIA sins, alongside skullduggery in Laos and

Chile. Pike bolstered the Kurdish narrative of grievance, a line parroted by Kissinger's domestic

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[65] Kissinger, Kissinger Transcripts, Memorandum of Conversation, October 31, 1975, accessed
http://search.proquest.com/dnsa_kt/docview/1679081771/DC84902999684903PQ/10?accountid
=15172.

[66] "The Situation in Kurdistan," Kissinger Transcripts, May 7, 1974, accessed
http://search.proquest.com/dnsa_kt/docview/1679084059/DC84902999684903PQ/2?accountid=
15172.

opponents. The titles alone give an idea of this narrative: *Pawns in a Deadly Game*[67] or "How Abandoned Kurds Lost Out."[68]

In this latter piece, a *Washington Post* article, we recognize a romantic idealization of the Kurdish cause. Barzani stars as the "proud and dauntless leader of a fierce mountain people," leading his "unfortunate tribesmen" who became "pawns on Henry Kissinger's chessboard…manipulated and then abandoned" during the US leadership's "strange love affair" with the scheming Shah.[69]

This narrative is summed up by one damning phrase attributed to Kissinger. We find in history after history, the same quote drummed out: a "high US official" (always presumed to be Kissinger himself) is cited as saying, "Covert action should not be confused with missionary work."[70] Taken from testimony during the Pike investigation, this sentence is used as an indictment of Cold War callousness that dismissed all humanitarian considerations. This narrative builds upon the old Kurdish proverb, "No friends but the mountains," and enforces the fatalistic notion that the Kurds are fated to be betrayed by false allies.[71]

Some State Department memos support this notion, with lines like, "The Kurds are fighting a hopeless battle. No interested party wants to see them succeed."[72] However, this was

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[67] Lokman Meho and Michel Nihme, "Pawns in a Deadly Game: Iraqi Kurds and the United States, 1975-1975," *International Studies*, 32 (1995):1, 50-54, accessed http://journals.sagepub.com/doi/pdf/10.1177/0020881795032001003.

[68] Jack Anderson, "How Abandoned Kurds Lost Out," *Washington Post*, 1980, accessed https://www.cia.gov/library/readingroom/docs/CIA-RDP81M00980R002000090053-3.pdf.

[69] Anderson, "How Abandoned Kurds Lost Out."

[70] Andrew Scott Cooper, *Oil Kings: how the U.S., Iran, and Saudi Arabia Changed the Balance of Power in the Middle East* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 2011), 245.

[71] David L. Phillips, "Iraqi Kurds: 'No Friends but the Mountains," *Huffington Post*, November 2013, accessed http://www.huffingtonpost.com/david-l-phillips/iraqi-kurds-no-friend-but_b_4045389.html.

[72] Baghdad Interests Section, FRUS, Memo 268, December 23, 1974, accessed https://history.state.gov/historicaldocuments/frus1969-76v27/d268.

one document amid numerous others that demonstrated constant debate about how much the Kurds stood a fighting chance.[73] Notably, Kissinger overruled the bureaucracy's doubts to continue backing the Kurds, even after the end of the 1973 Arab-Israeli War reduced the need to "tie down" the Iraqi army for Israel's defense.[74]

No matter that he was one of the most pro-Kurdish members of the US government, Kissinger knew that Pike and other Democrats in Congress were readying the long knives for him. "Their purpose is to show that I am the evil genius," he groused to President Ford.[75] That was exactly how he has been portrayed by journalists and analysts who take the Pike findings at face value. As recently as 2016, and in works by relatively conservative authors like the American Enterprise Institute's Michael Rubin, one finds erroneous claims. Rubin mentions in passing that Kissinger intended from the beginning to abandon the Kurds, and that he even "brokered" the 1975 arrangement between Iraq and Iran to cut off the Kurds.[76] This false impression has so pervaded the literature because the manipulation of an oppressed minority seems to fit within the clichéd conception of Kissinger the heartless mastermind, whose cynical conduct verges on the demonic.[77]

Such nuance-free treatment led Kissinger to become defensive in the extreme. Gaddis describes Kissinger's *Years of Renewal* as "the memoirist's equivalent of a battleship, intimidating in appearance, heavy with armor and bristling with armaments, equipped to fire

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[73] Alvandi, 110.
[74] CIA, Cable from Situation Room, March 1974, accessed https://www.cia.gov/library/readingroom/docs/LOC-HAK-259-3-89-4.pdf.
[75] Kissinger, National Security Council Minutes, October 31, 1975, accessed https://www.fordlibrarymuseum.gov/Library/document/0314/1553283.pdf.
[76] Michael Rubin, *Kurdistan Rising? Implications for the Kurds, Their Neighbors, and the Region* (Washington, DC: American Enterprise Institute, 2016), 55.
[77] Ferguson, 20.

salvos at past critics while launching pre-emptive strikes against histories as yet unwritten."[78]

Into this thicket of polemics and counter-polemics wades Bryan R. Gibson. His evenhanded work, *Sold Out?*, questions the simple narrative of malevolent American chess-master, greedy Persian king, and heroic Kurdish chieftain. At the same time, he critically scrutinizes the *pro se* defense Kissinger offers through his memoirs. The result is a qualified vindication of Kissinger's policy, and a rebuttal of the false notion that Kissinger willfully "sold out" the Kurds. Gibson's most crucial correction is to note how scholarship has suffered from the "distorting effect" of the Pike Report.

The entire notion of "Kurdish betrayal" rests upon the edifice of Pike's Congressional investigation. But Congressman Pike was an extremely self-interested critic, fixated on exposing the CIA as a "rogue elephant," before even beginning his investigation.[79] Pike's work was, in large part, an ideologically motivated hatchet job designed to undercut the CIA at every turn, regardless of the facts of the case.[80]

Gibson's argument is corroborated by Kissinger's conversations at the time among his deputies, where he expresses anger that the Shah cut off the Kurds despite his opposition. After hearing that Barzani was complaining of abandonment, Kissinger asks rhetorically, "What do [the Kurds] say we should have done without the Iranians? How could we have supported him

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[78] Gaddis, "The Old World Order: *Years of Renewal*, reviewed," *New York Times*, March 21, 1999, accessed http://www.nytimes.com/books/99/03/21/reviews/990321.21gaddist.html?_r=2&scp=1&sq=%22years%20of%20renewal%22%20and%20%22john%20lewis%20gaddis%22&st=cse.

[79] Gerald K. Haines, "Looking for a Rogue Elephant: The Pike Committee Investigations and the CIA," Center for the Study of Intelligence, April 14, 2007, accessed https://www.cia.gov/library/center-for-the-study-of-intelligence/csi-publications/csi-studies/studies/winter98_99/art07.html.

[80] Bryan R. Gibson, *Sold Out? US Foreign Policy, Iraq, the Kurds, and the Cold War* (New York: Palgrave MacMillan, 2015), 164-5.

[even] if we had the means?"[81] Kissinger in his later memoirs notes the difficulty of maintaining military equilibrium by only covert methods. After the Shah pulled out, the US only could have saved the Kurds by massive, overt intervention. With US society reeling from Vietnam and Watergate, "[w]e did not have the option of overt support in a war so logistically difficult, so remote, and so incomprehensible to the American public."[82] The entire Kurdish affair may have been a mistake, but Gibson is right to reject the idea of a "betrayal."

Beyond Condemnation or Exoneration:
Kissinger's Policy as the Foundation of American-Kurdish Partnership

Gibson comprehensively examines the question of Kissinger's culpability for the so-called abandonment of the Kurds. My argument fits within Gibson's work: neither of us believe Kissinger to be the callous villain of the Pike Report's caricature, nor the hapless dupe of the "tail wagging the dog" school.

Gibson spends many pages arguing that America's Kurdish policy was subsumed within the larger Cold War struggle. I agree, and wish to expand his thesis from 1972-75 to the latter period of US-Kurdish cooperation, from 1991 to present. America's Kurdish policy has always served the overarching policy of the era, whether the Cold War or the War on Terror. Although US Kurdish policy fits within a larger grand strategy, I argue that the particular contours of an American-Kurdish partnership are discernible.

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[81] Kissinger, The Kissinger Transcripts, Memorandum of Conversation, July 30, 1976, accessed http://search.proquest.com/dnsa_kt/docview/1679085186/DC84902999684903PQ/3?accountid=15172.

[82] Kissinger, *Renewal*, 591.

In making my argument, I look to move beyond the Kissinger-centric debate focused on subjecting one man's morality or competence to extreme scrutiny.[83] I aim instead to examine what Kissinger's policy set in motion: its ripple effects in the later history of American-Kurdish relations. I argue that Kissinger's strategy in 1972-75 laid the foundations for an American-Kurdish partnership that resumed in 1991 and persists to this day.

This policy seeks to balance Kurdish power, avoiding "winning too much" as well as "losing too much." America's Kurdish policy began with Kissinger in the 1970s, and continued after 1991 with America's hesitant support for Iraqi Kurds' autonomy.

I argue that this policy of balance mirrors the development of the US-Israeli special relationship. In both cases, the US dealt cautiously with a minority group that had the potential to destabilize the Middle East. With both Kurds and Israelis, we see a parallel trajectory: at first, the minority served as a means of US policy, but over time evolved into an end in itself.

Better Friendly and Autonomous than Hostile and Autonomous

America's risk-averse policy toward the Kurds could be summed up as follows: we do not want autonomous Kurds if we can avoid it—but if it appears that Kurds are going to achieve autonomy anyway, it better be through us. This attitude prevailed both in 1972 and 1991, when we offered limited support to Iraqi Kurds.

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[83] I aim to avoid psychoanalysis across the decades, following Niall Ferguson's warning not to indulge in facile speculation about Kissinger's psyche based on his upbringing in Nazi Germany. *Kissinger, Volume I, 1923-1968: the Idealist* (New York: Penguin Press, 2015), 18.
See also: attacks on Kissinger's morality from fellow Jews who view him as un-Jewish, as he "did not often exude much of that legendary sympathy for weakness and suffering for which Jews regularly were credited" (Ferguson, 19).

In 1972, Iran relied on a similar argument when soliciting US aid for the Shah's Kurdish operation. The Iranian Foreign Minister conjured a nightmare scenario of autonomous Kurds as the clients of a hostile power. He warned of "a Soviet plot to transform Iraqi Kurdistan into an autonomous state which would then seek unification with the Soviet Union," allowing the Soviets to "leapfrog past the Turkish-Iranian containment barrier" and "directly penetrate the Middle East."[84] This prospect harks back to the Mahabad Republic's Soviet-backed Kurdish separatism. The threat of autonomous, hostile Kurds recurred both in 1972-75 and 1991.

The US ally in each case – the Shah's Iran in the 1970s and Turkey in 1991 – "shared the American objective of preventing either a Communist or a rogue regime from controlling the Kurdish enclaves," Kissinger writes in his memoirs.[85] These states ultimately decided to abet a limited Kurdish autonomy over which they would have some control. This lesser evil would be preferable to hostile and uncontrollable separatism.

But this risk-averse policy could easily go awry, empowering Kurds too much. Then the cure would be worse than the disease. Kissinger himself draws the analogy between support for Iraqi Kurds in 1972 and 1991. He writes in his memoirs, "[n]either Iran in the 1970s nor Turkey in the 1990s had the slightest interest in seeing Kurdish nationalism inflamed to the point where it included its own Kurdish populations."[86] This language echoes the Shah's phrase about the need to balance Kurdish autonomy: "I want the flame alive. I do not want a fire."[87]

Kissinger called his initial decision to back the Kurds in 1972 a "Hobson's choice."[88] Later US leaders, too, saw support for Kurds as the only path forward among intolerable

[84] Gibson, 125.
[85] Kissinger, *Renewal*, 578.
[86] Ibid.
[87] Meir Amit, quoted in Alpher, p. 53.
[88] Kissinger, *Renewal*, 584.

outcomes. Better if friendly Kurds gain autonomy under a US aegis than hostile Kurds do the same under Soviet or Baathist patronage, or under their own terroristic ideology of separatism. By acting as a benefactor, the US could at least guide the flow of Kurdish ambition along more responsible channels. But Kurds, even as US clients, could be dangerous. This danger led the US to find balance between "winning too much" and "losing too much."

Threading the Needle Between Kurdish Maximalism and Kurdish Collapse

Superpower support for the Kurds followed certain traceable patterns—even when we observe the scenario from the other side of the Cold War chessboard. The Soviets' Kurdish policy in 1946 shows the danger that one's own Kurdish clients might expand out of control. When Kurdish fighters from the Mahabad Republic seemed ready to seize southern Iranian Kurdistan, including British-run oilfields, the Soviets were spooked. [89] They warned Mahabad's leaders that the Red Army would cut off support if Kurds pursued this expansionist agenda.[90]

Although the immediate harm would have fallen on Britain, the Soviets feared the destabilizing effect of even "friendly" Kurdish nationalism. Kurds, empowered to the point of pursing maximalist objectives, threatened chaos. To preempt this outcome, the Soviets acted to rein in the ambitions of their Kurdish clients.

Kissinger encountered the same danger. State Department cables explicitly addressed the question: what would it mean for the Kurds to "win"? Under what conditions would a Kurdish victory serve American and allied interests? Diplomats in Tehran wrote:

> While [the Shah] is probably not anxious that the Kurds "win" to the extent of establishing a totally autonomous or independent state on Iran's border, he would not be upset to see them gain semi-autonomous status … It is not necessary for the Kurds to take

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[89] Eagleton, 97.
[90] Ibid.

Baghdad "to win." If they succeed in bringing down the Baathist government or, at a minimum, in forcing it to come to acceptable terms with them, then the Kurds will have "won."[91]

They preferred a manageable, narrow Kurdish victory rather than the open-ended pursuit of Kurdish objectives. In the event that Iraqi Kurdistan broke away completely, the diplomats feared chaos, "further fragmentation in an already fragmented area" of the Middle East.[92] Although the US embassy in Tehran in this period produced many cables praising the Shah's Kurdish gambit, here they sounded a warning. Even the plan's boosters saw the need to carefully define victory.

Kissinger writes in his memoir that he only gained full appreciation for these limits in retrospect. He offered this self-critique:

> [A]bove all we should have understood better that the Kurds might prove to be volatile partners, difficult to fit into any overall strategy. Whatever the professions of their leaders, their principal goal was bound to be independence or at least complete autonomy, and they would always resist attempts to calibrate their priorities in relations to outside powers' conceptions of geopolitical equilibrium.[93]

He regrets that, at the outset of the operation, he did not evaluate the dynamics of the Kurdish Question, to establish clear boundaries on US support. Kissinger's approach, partly by its very errors, showed the need for balance in US Kurdish policy.

Balance was key, as a crushing Kurdish defeat brought its own problems. As the Kurds' rebellion heated up in 1974, Kissinger noted, "[t]he danger is that the Kurds will collapse."[94] He feared Barzani would lose too much, and "the collapse of the Kurds would destabilize the entire

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[91] Embassy Tehran, FRUS, Memo 270, December 30, 1974, accessed https://history.state.gov/historicaldocuments/frus1969-76v27/d270.

[92] Gibson, 133.

[93] Kissinger, *Renewal*, 584.

[94] Kissinger, National Security Council Minutes, August 26, 1974, accessed https://www.fordlibrarymuseum.gov/library/document/0314/1552766.pdf.

area."[95]

Defeat carried with it an additional danger: "refugee threat."[96] In both 1975 and 1991,

Saddam crushed a rebellion, leading two million Kurds to flee Iraq. In 1975, the displaced Kurds

flooded into Iran. At that time, US agencies expressed concern that a "[l]arge number [o]f

Kurdish males of working age may cause serious problems" as refugees, given their propensity

to flare up into separatist rebellion.[97]

In 1975, refugee threat was managed via a pre-planned program. The Shah had an

effective if cruel system in place to absorb the hundreds of thousands of Kurds flooding across

Iran's borders. Iran resettled most refugees in regions far from its own Kurdish populations, or

forcibly repatriated them to Iraq where they faced arrest or execution.[98] Brutally, the Shah had

ensured there would be no spreading fire of Kurdish nationalism. The US acquiesced to this

"solution." US policy memos blandly noted that if the violence rose to the level of "genocide,"

the US might have to change its stance—at least in public.[99]

In 1991, when once again two million Iraqi Kurds fled into a neighboring state, Saddam's

Anfal genocide of 1988 was fresh in public memory. However, the key reason the US intervened

to stop Saddam's latest slaughter was Turkey's panic over refugee threat. Unlike the Shah in

1975, Turkey in 1991 had no such system to handle refugees en masse. Ankara was terrified that

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[95] Kissinger, *Renewal*, 593.

[96] This term, first used by India in 1971 to justify its intervention in the Bangladesh Independence War, referred to the destabilizing effects of massive refugee flows. In 1971, ten million Bangladeshis fled Pakistani atrocity to sanctuary in India, destabilizing its border region. India was so threatened by the influx of Bangladeshis that it attacked Pakistan to stop the slaughter and end the chaos—thereby enabling Bangladeshi secession.

[97] FRUS, Memo 283, accessed https://history.state.gov/historicaldocuments/frus1969-76v27/d283.

[98] Ibid.

[99] Ibid.

an uncontrolled Kurdish influx would swell the ranks of Turkey's separatist insurgency, or even spark all-out civil war. While the US was moved by humanitarian motivations as well as strategic considerations of regional stability and allied interests, the strategic factors proved determinative.[100]

The Israeli-Kurdish Analogy: Sympathy and Strategy

To understand the mixture of sympathy and strategy in the US-Kurdish relationship, it is helpful to look at the development of US-Israeli ties. In making this analogy, I do not argue that US policymakers consciously saw the two minority peoples as equivalent. Rather I argue that the case of the Kurds and Israelis had inherent geopolitical and humanitarian imperatives that called for similar policies. These common dynamics meant that US policy toward each group evolved along similar lines, whether or not policymakers were aware of the parallels at the time.

US-Israeli partnership was forged mainly during the 1967 Arab-Israeli War. But even as this "special relationship" emerged, it was marked by ambivalence. Unlike with the Kurdish case, there was the factor of electoral considerations: Lyndon Johnson hoped to benefit from the Jewish vote.[101] But above all, US policy towards Israel appears as the same balancing act between "winning too much" and "losing too much" that the US faced when dealing with the Kurds.

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[100] There is not room here to fully discuss the 1991 intervention as the Rubicon for the US-Kurdish relationship. For extended analysis of why US leaders decided to intervene to protect Kurds in 1991, see: Jonathan Esty, "Final Solution and Stopgap Solution: International Responses to Iraqi Atrocity in 1987-88 and 1991," 2016, on file with author, accessible https://www.dropbox.com/s/6h1cv3w3tnpmpsb/HI%20Kurdistan%20short%20paper%2C%20Jonathan%20Esty.docx?dl=0.

[101] Smith, "The United States and the 1967 War," full chapter, in Louis and Shlaim (eds.).

In 1967, US leaders worried about the risk of "letting Israel go it alone" in the war. Standing back to allow "Israeli unilateralism" risked one nightmare scenario: Israel "losing too much" and being wiped off the map.[102] There was a second nightmare: Israel "winning too much." Dean Rusk worried that a lopsided Israeli victory would redraw the map of the Middle East and "create a revanchism for the rest of the 20th c[entury]."[103]

In part to save Israel, in part to avert reckless Israeli action, the US accepted that it would bear continuing responsibility for Israel's defense. The reasoning ran: better an Israel that relies on US aid and thus is relatively responsive to US guidance, than a loose cannon Israel that could destroy the region or be destroyed by it. However, even after the US decided to aid the Israelis, it needed to moderate its support, lest "the scale of our military support for Israel upsets the present strategic balance in the area to Arab detriment."[104] Lending the Israelis our strength might inadvertently empower them to pursue maximalist goals. This policy of balance in the early years of US-Israeli cooperation mirrors America's ambivalent support for the Kurds.

Another commonality was that both Israelis and Kurds were geopolitically vulnerable. During the 1972-75 Kurdish rebellion, President Gerald Ford asked Kissinger, "Are the Kurds reliable?" Kissinger's reply is illuminating: "Yes. It is their existence at stake."[105] The US could rely on Israelis and Kurds to fight tenaciously because for them, the fights were existential. The very immediacy of the Israelis' and the Kurds' struggles makes them effective proxies when they

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[102] Charles D. Smith, "The United States and the 1967 War," in Louis and Shlaim (eds.), *1967 War*, 177.

[103] Dean Rusk, quoted by Smith, in Louis and Shlaim (eds.), *1967 War*, 188.

[104] Ibid.

[105]Ford and Kissinger, Memo 259, FRUS, August 26, 1974, accessed https://history.state.gov/historicaldocuments/frus1969-76v27/d259.

join with the United States against common foes. Both minorities have a strong incentive to maintain military effectiveness—their backs are against the wall.

Of course, there are crucial differences between the two cases. Israel has benefited from a substantial Jewish diaspora in the United States. The Holocaust left a mark on the Western conscience in a way that Saddam's *Anfal* massacres could never match. In its appeal as an ally, Israel also had the advantages of a well-developed lobby in Washington, a nuclear program, and *de jure* statehood.

Despite these points of divergence, Israelis and Kurds followed a parallel track in US policy. They progressed from initial US skepticism of their ambitious aims, to a moment of military crisis when the US chose to intervene decisively on their behalf. This intervention allowed for the entrenchment of an embryonic state with US support, but with a continuing need for balancing between the extremes of disruptive victory and devastating loss.

The Israeli-Kurdish comparison also illuminates how both groups evolved from serving as a strategic means, to becoming ends in their own right. The US may have intervened to help Israel in the 1960s and 70s for a host of reasons, moral and strategic: the domestic Israel lobby, electoral considerations, and the common enemy of Soviet-backed Arab states. But whatever the original motivation to intervene, once the Israelis had firmly established themselves as a self-governing entity under US protection, the American sense of responsibility grew inexorably. Israel's humanitarian appeal increased, and it became ever harder to treat the Israelis solely as a means to some other goal.

The US created a similar ongoing commitment for itself by saving the Iraqi Kurds from slaughter in 1991. The initial choice arose mainly from US interest—forestalling regional instability, defending an ally from refugee-related unrest, and making sure President H.W. Bush

did not appear passive in the face of atrocity. But after Iraqi Kurds seized the moment to hold elections in 1992 and set up an autonomous government under the security umbrella of US no-fly zones, their humanitarian claim increased.

To safeguard its own interests, the US continued its policy of ambivalence and balance, to ensure that the Kurds would not get out of control. But the Kurds had created a new political fact on the ground: a fledgling democracy whose survival depended, very publicly, on US protection. The Kurds, if they ever were mere pawns, began to evolve into ends in themselves.

Conclusion: Can Kissinger's Policy of Balance Survive Kurdish Independence?

I have argued that US support for the 1972-75 Kurdish rebellion was not, as critics argued, simply a false start. Rather, Kissinger laid the foundations for an American Kurdish policy that resumed in 1991 and continues to the present day. The US pursued an American-Kurdish cooperation that balanced between Kurds' "winning too much" and "losing too much." I have shown how the US-Kurdish partnership, in its mixture of sympathy and strategy, mirrors the origins of the US-Israeli special relationship.

By re-orienting our view to see the many continuities between 1972-75 and the post-1991 US-Kurdish cooperation, we acquire a new view of Kurdish history and the American role in it. Admittedly, my argument does not account for the many Kurdish factions beyond the conservative Barzani-led Kurds of Iraq,[106] including the left-leaning Kurds who have now seized

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[106] In contemporary Iraqi Kurdistan, Barzani's Kurdistan Democratic Party (KDP) shares power with the Patriotic Union of Kurdistan. This latter party, led by the Talabani clan, tends to be urban, cosmopolitan and left-leaning, with close ties to Iran, just as the Barzani faction is more right-leaning, tribal, and Sunni Islamist, with stronger ties to Turkey. After a civil war in the mid-1990s, the US brokered a truce and power-sharing agreement. Today the two factions form an imperfect democracy, governing Iraqi Kurdistan in coalition.

autonomy in Syrian Kurdistan. Nor does it explain the period 1979-1989, when the US tilted

towards Baghdad to counter revolutionary Iran, and the Kurds suffered disaster upon disaster.[107]

However, it helps to scrutinize American-Kurdish partnership in 1972-75 as more than a

blip in history. This period lets us better understand even the horrors of the 1980s, when the

Kurds lacked any patron. Rather than throwing up our hands and saying that the Kurds are

doomed to be betrayed as they have "no friends but the mountains," we can look at how

Kissinger's policy of American-Kurdish partnership was interrupted in 1975, and why it resumed

in 1991.

Rather than an inexplicable series of manipulations and betrayals, we see a more coherent

narrative of Kurdish history. Prior to 1972, Kurds lived again and again through the same "old

story" that Kissinger's aides described: agitation for autonomy, broken promises, repression, and

stalemate, with no resolution. When US and Kurdish interests aligned after 1991, and the US

began consistently providing aid, the Kurds finally had the chance to access a superpower's

resources. Thus they finally got the chance to escape the cycle in which they had been trapped:

the chance to emerge from the mountains and begin constructing the apparatus of statehood, self-

administration, and a conventional army to guard their autonomy.

Over the past decades, Iraqi Kurds have only increased in importance for US policy.

Stronger US allies in the region have become afflicted by political dysfunction that precludes

external action (Egypt, 2011), anti-Americanism (Iraq since 2011), or a combination of the two

(Turkey since 2016). The more that Middle Eastern states have collapsed, the more the US has

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[107] We should note that overriding desire to thwart Iran distorted US policy severely in this period. The most extreme example of this phenomenon was when Saddam attacked a US Navy vessel, and the US retaliated—but against Iran's navy. For in-depth discussion of the Iran-Iraq War's distortionary effects, see: Andrew Bacevich, *America's War for the Greater Middle East: a Military History* (Random House: New York, 2016), Chapter 6: "Rescuing Evil," full chapter.

turned towards the Kurds. Even America's official opposition to a *de jure* Kurdish state may be evolving towards a position akin to the "One-China Policy"—a polite diplomatic fiction that masks independence in all but name.

Today, no one can deny the military and economic success of Iraqi Kurdistan. Erbil, the capital of the regional government, looks like a city in the developed world. If we still consider it part of Iraq, then it is by far the safest "Iraqi" population center. In the twenty-first century, Iraqi Kurds' success has led to numerous books that are bullish on Kurdish independence and American-Kurdish partnership: *Kurdistan: Genocide and Rebirth*, *The Miracle of the Kurds*, and *The Kurds Ascending*. This "rise of the Kurds" has become almost as much of a commonplace in Middle Eastern policy circles as the "rise of China" in the Asia-Pacific.

US support for this rise had its basis in hard strategy (considerations of geopolitical instability and shared foes) as well as arguments from humanitarianism (atrocity prevention and shared pluralistic values). However, perhaps the most crucial question we must consider as Iraqi Kurds edge closer to independence: how much have the Kurds become like us?

Ostensibly, Iraqi Kurdistan is a democracy. But in practice, tribal-dynastic politics function much as they have since the time of Ottoman rule.[108] Mustafa Barzani's son and heir, Masoud, governs Iraqi Kurdistan as a president-for-life, and has for years ignored calls to hold elections, given the "emergency" of the war with the Islamic State. President Barzani's sons serve in key political and military roles, seemingly being groomed to take power in Erbil.

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[108] See: McDowall, 386, for a discussion of the neo-tribal practices of Kurdish "democracy" in the 1990s. In fairness to Kurds' genuine democratic leanings, we should note the 2009 rise of the reformist, anti-corruption "Change" Party, to challenge the entrenched tribal diumvirate of the Barzani-Talabani clans.

Following my argument, the United States' insertion into Kurds' affairs in 1972 began a

process of American-backed development that has led the Kurdish people to the cusp of

statehood. New research could focus on the question of how Kurds have incorporated American

power into their own nationalist strategy.

Future historians would do well to examine the inverse of my research question about

America's Kurdish policy: have the Iraqi Kurds pursued a conscious "American policy"? If so,

what is it?

Figure 3: Fathers of the Nation? Or, The Three Presidents
This White House photo-op appears to signal a rough parity between the younger Barzani and the younger Bush.

"President Bush Meets with President Barzani of Kurdistan Regional Government of Iraq," The Oval Office, October 25, 2005, accessed https://georgewbush-whitehouse.archives.gov/news/releases/2005/10/20051025-7.html.

Recall Mustafa Barzani's token gestures during the Republic of Mahabad era: the Soviet marshal cap, the Stalin portraits, and the ostensibly "Communist" political party that Barzani hollowed out to make his own. It is conceivable that Iraqi Kurds today have done the same thing with their American partners, but on a grander scale—adopting the trappings of our values to get military and economic aid, while remaining an essentially tribal society. Just as Mustafa Barzani tried on the Soviet hat, has his son Masoud been trying on the American hat for a quarter-century?[109] The younger Barzani has certainly shown no squeamishness about receiving aid from whatever quarter. During the mid-1990s Iraqi Kurdish civil war, Masoud Barzani opportunistically invited Saddam's forces into Kurdistan to massacre the rival Kurds of the Talabani tribe.[110] Have Kurds treated us as only an instrumental means of achieving their dream of independence? Or have both sides evolved to consider each other as ends, as well as means?

Only time will tell the depth of the American-Kurdish partnership whose foundation Henry Kissinger laid in the 1970s. His policy of balance may be about to face its greatest challenge: a Kurdish declaration of independence. President Barzani regularly talks of holding an independence referendum. Many observers believe that independence is a political carrot to dangle in front of his supporters to distract them from Iraqi Kurdistan's real problems of corruption and mal-investment.

But, if the Kurds choose such a path, American-Kurdish partnership will be forced to confront its central tension: at its heart, is it an alliance of common values? Or mere tactical cooperation against the common enemies of Saddam, al-Qaeda, and the Islamic State? After

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[109] A historical irony: Masoud Barzani, now the American-style President of Iraqi Kurdistan, was born in the Soviet-backed Mahabad Republic during his father's one-year generalship during which the elder Barzani dressed up as a Soviet-style marshal.

[110] Bradley Graham and Dan Balz, "Iraqi Attack," *Washington Post*, September 1, 1996, accessed http://www.washingtonpost.com/wp-srv/inatl/longterm/iraq/timeline/090196.htm.

decades when Kissinger's principles of balance defined the limits of US-Kurdish relations, can

America's Kurdish policy survive if the Kurds take the plunge?

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