

A glimpse of history. Iraqi Kurdistan and the Cold War Through U.S. State Department documents 1972 – 1975

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MA in Middle East history and politics

EHESS Paris

**A glimpse of history.
Iraqi Kurdistan and the Cold War
Through U.S. State Department documents
1972 – 1975**

The term ‘New Iraq’, which surfaced in the post-Saddam era, designates a political paradigm wherein the country is dedicated to fostering partnership among its communities within a federal system. This commitment came after decades of intense repressive policies and wars, perpetrated by the Ba’ath party regime.

The adoption of this political model in Iraq’s federal constitution in 2005 occurred three decades after the Kurdish movement sought United States assistance to establish a similar political system in Iraq, through an Arab-Kurdish cooperation, with the objective of overthrowing the Ba’ath Party rule, which was then seeking to consolidate and expand its hegemony.

The following U.S. State Department document takes on a new significance in this historical context. It is a memorandum of conversation held in Washington DC on 3 April 1972 between the special envoy of the Kurdish movement leader, Mustafa Barzani, and the head of the Iraq desk at the US State Department, revealing Kurdish leadership’s stance and objective to establish an Arab-Kurdish partnership in Iraq.

This request came in the midst of the Cold War, while Iraq, following the Ba’ath Party’s takeover of power in 1968, had become one of the most radical countries in the Arab world in defiance of the West. Iraq aligned itself with the Soviet Union which was already seeking to place this country within its sphere of influence, thus strengthening its presence in the Arab world. The Soviets were welcomed by the new Ba’athist regime to invest economically and militarily in Iraq.

During his meeting with the State Department, Zaid Othman (1924-1978)¹, Iraqi Kurdish political figure and close to the Kurdish leader Barzani, told the Americans that the Soviets aim to use Iraq as a base to destabilize the Gulf region, Iran, and Turkey, a NATO member. He cautioned that should the United States disregard this Kurdish appeal, “the West’s last opportunity to thwart Soviet designs in Iraq will have been lost.”²

Prior to the signing of the Friendship Treaty with Baghdad on April 9th, 1972, the Soviet Union had already been involved in the Iraqi political affairs. In exchange of Soviet support and as part of the arms deal reached with Moscow, Iraq agreed to put an end to its campaign against the Iraqi Communists and form a Soviet-sponsored National Front government, that would bring together the Kurdistan Democratic Party, led by Mustafa Barzani, the Iraqi Communist Party, and the Ba’ath Party.³ The Soviets exerted pressure on Barzani to join the planned national front government, as an attempt to also integrate the Kurdish movement into the Soviet sphere, and under the aegis of the ruling Ba’ath Party.



Kurdish leader Barzani at the center, Zaid Othman second to his left, with leaders of Iraqi Arab political parties visiting Barzani, 1965-66.
Courtesy of Mahmoud Ahmad Uthman’s archives.

¹ In this presentation, the transliteration of the name Zaid Othman, as he himself used, has been retained instead of the one in the State Department document.

² Memorandum From Andrew Killgore of the Bureau of Near Eastern and South Asian Affairs, Department of State to the Assistant Secretary for Near Eastern and South Asian Affairs (Sisco). Foreign Relations of the United States, 1969–1976, volume E–4, documents on Iran and Iraq, 1969–1972. Source: National Archives, RG 59, Central Files 1970–73, POL 13–3 Iraq. Secret. <https://history.state.gov/historicaldocuments/frus1969-76ve04/d304>

³ Gibson, Bryan, U.S. Foreign Policy, Iraq and the Cold War, 1958-1975, PhD dissertation, London School of Economics and Political Science, 2013, p. 196

Zaid Othman asserted that “the Soviets aim through their support of a national front stratagem to establish and consolidate further their position in Iraq, particularly at a time when their position in Egypt and Syria seems to be unpredictable [...] Soviet economic and political interests in Iraq have grown dramatically over the last several years”⁴. He emphasized that “Barzani, however, feels that if the Kurdish Democratic Party (KDP) joins with the Iraqi Ba’ath Party and the Iraqi Communist Party [in a national front government], the Kurdish national movement will in time be subverted and its force dissipated”⁵, adding that “Barzani does not trust either the Soviets or the Ba’athists.”⁶

In an earlier meeting with U.S. Embassy officials in Beirut in July 1971, Zaid Othman warned that in the event of a possible absence of the Kurdish leader Mustafa Barzani from the political scene before Iraq is liberated from the Ba’athist regime “there is great danger that the Kurdish liberation movement will be taken over by radical elements and the larger Kurdish community in Turkey will be infected by this same radicalism”⁷, highlighting a possible takeover of the Kurdish movement by political groups likely to bring it closer to the Soviet sphere.

The Kurdish leadership, which had signed a peace agreement with Baghdad on 11 March 1970 for an autonomy status for Iraqi Kurdistan to be declared after four years, was convinced that Baghdad would not honour the terms of this agreement and that it was seeking to gain time to build up its military strength to use against the Kurds. This conviction was further strengthened following a narrowly averted assassination attempt on Barzani in September 1971. According to a State Department paper, dated 31st May 1972, Barzani knew “that the [Ba’ath] government and, believe[d], the Soviets also, were behind attempts to assassinate him and his elder son Idris last summer”⁸.

Facing Soviet pressure to join a national front government, and continued growing mistrust with Baghdad, the Kurdish leadership started looking for U.S. support.

⁴ Memorandum From Andrew Killgore, op. cit.

⁵ Ibid.

⁶ Ibid.

⁷ Airgram 222 From the Embassy in Lebanon to the Department of State – July 16, 1971. Foreign Relations of the United States, 1969–1976, volume E–4, documents on Iran and Iraq, 1969–1972. National Archives, RG 59, Central Files 1970–73, POL 13-3 IRAQ. Secret; Limdis. Repeated to Amman, Ankara, Jidda, London, Tehran, and USUN.

⁸ U.S. Department of State, Bureau of Intelligence and Research, “The Kurds of Iraq: Renewed Insurgency?” 31 May 1972 (NPL/HAK/Box138/Kurdish Problem-Vol. I/June 1972-Oct 1973), p.3

In his Ph.D. dissertation on U.S. policy toward Iraq, Bryan Gibson⁹ asserts that Zaid Othman's April 1972 talks with Tom Scotese, head of Iraq desk, influenced the US State Department Near Eastern Affairs official, Andrew Killgore's view of Iraq, when the latter reported Zaid Othman's conversation to the U.S. Assistant Secretary of State for Near Eastern Affairs, Joseph Sisco.¹⁰ Along with the memorandum of discussion, Andrew Killgore wrote a note saying that despite an initial negative reaction, they "discussed this matter with Roy [Atherton, deputy assistant secretary of state for Near Eastern Affairs] who agrees that it would be useful if we had an informal review of the Kurdish situation with Mike Waller of the CIA before making any final decision regarding the Uthman appeal [...] Such a review would be in line with your thoughts expressed to Tom Scotese at the airport yesterday, that we continue to update our assessments and not be guided solely by conventional wisdom concerning such matters [...] Meanwhile, we recommend that you brief the Secretary [of State, William Rogers] orally about this problem in view of the fact that the letter from Barzani [transmitted by Zaid Othman] is addressed to him."¹¹ Othman's meeting seems to have encouraged the United States to reassess its position, which until then had ignored repeated requests from Iran, Israel, and Jordan to support the Kurdish movement in Iraq.¹²

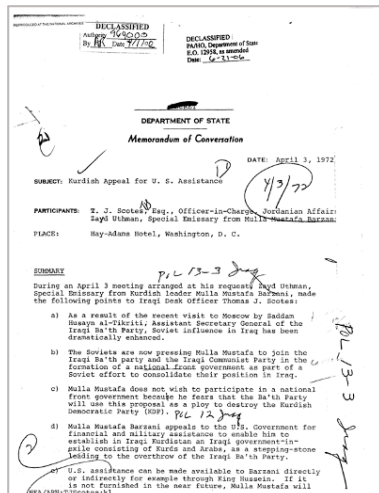
⁹ Bryan Gibson is Assistant Professor of History at Hawai'i Pacific University and Adjunct Professor in Global Security Studies at Johns Hopkins University.

¹⁰ Gibson, Bryan, *op. cit.* p. 203

¹¹ Memorandum From Andrew Killgore, *op. cit.*

¹² Lawyer by profession, Zaid Othman was an advocate of a political partnership between Kurds and Arabs in a decentralized Iraq. He was one of the key architects of the June 1966 agreement between Baghdad and the Kurdish leadership. This agreement recognized Kurdish national rights, including an administrative decentralization plan for Iraqi Kurdistan and Kurdish representation in the Iraqi cabinet and parliament. However, it was subsequently aborted by Ba'athist officers. Othman believed that given the Kurds' challenging geographical position, any alliance with a neighbouring country should have a fallback option in case of failure. He argued that while fostering close relations with Iran, the Kurdish movement should also enhance its ties with pro-Western Arab countries, specifically Jordan and the Gulf states, and initiate direct talks with the West. To this end, and on behalf of the Kurdish leader Barzani, he mobilised his regional and international relations to support the Kurdish cause in this direction. Having maintained close relations with King Hussein of Jordan for many years, he met with King Feisal bin Abd-Al-Aziz of Saudi Arabia to secure Saudi support for the Kurdish movement in 1971. (Airgram 222 From the Embassy in Lebanon to the Department of State, *op. cit.*).

His 1972 meeting with U.S. officials in Washington D.C. was facilitated through the support of King Hussein and the then U.N. Assistant Secretary General, Ismet Kittani, an Iraqi Kurd and close acquaintance of Othman. Few days before Othman's meeting with the State Department, "King Hussein asked Nixon directly to reconsider his position" towards the Iraqi Kurds, and Kittani "contacted the then U.S. Ambassador to the United Nations, George H. W. Bush, [...] who suggested that either] Rogers or [Henri] Kissinger meet with Othman. [No declassified record indicates that such a meeting took place]. King Hussein and Kittani's approaches helped set in motion a subtle



US State Department Memorandum of conversation between Tom Scotese, head of Iraq desk and Kurdish politician, Zaid Othman, special envoy of Kurdish leader Barzani. Washington DC, 3 April 1972. Photo courtesy: Zaid Othman family

Henry Kissinger, Assistant to the US President for National Security Affairs at the time,¹³ hints in his memoirs that the U.S. finally decided to back the Kurds after he and President Nixon met the Shah in Tehran in May 1972.¹⁴ U.S. aid began in the fall of that year through Iran. The Americans took every possible precaution to keep their operation in support of the Kurdish movement secret, likely to avoid instigating a direct and open confrontational front with the Soviets, while at war in Vietnam.

The main motivation that drove the United States to support the Kurds was to deter the Soviets from expanding and consolidating their positions in this strategically important region, where Iraq was increasingly gaining importance to the Soviet Middle East strategy. The withdrawal of Soviet troops and advisors from Egypt in July 1972 further motivated Moscow to strengthen its ties with Baghdad. Henry Kissinger asserts that they previously ignored appeals for direct aid to the Kurds because they did not want to incite further influx of Soviet

shift in U.S. thinking toward the Kurds.” (Gibson, Bryan, op. cit, p. 202).

¹³ Henry Kissinger served as Assistant to the President for National Security Affairs (1969–1975) and as Secretary of State (September 1973–January 1977), under President Richard Nixon and President Gerald Ford.

¹⁴ Kissinger, Henry, *Years of Renewal*, New York, Simon & Schuster, 1999, Kindle Edition, pp. 582-583.

arms and influence in the region. However, the U.S. reconsidered its non-intervention policy after Soviet Premier Alexei Kosygin signed the Friendship Treaty with Iraq in April 1972 “that, even in the absence of American intervention on the side of the Kurds, included provisions for large-scale supply of Soviet arms. Iraq was thereby transforming itself into a geopolitical challenge and was on the way to becoming the principal Soviet ally in the area.”¹⁵

As the deadline for the promulgation of the autonomy law for Iraqi Kurdistan approached, the issue of the demarcation of autonomous region’s borders strained the talks. The oil rich province of Kirkuk and other disputed areas, whose identity had to be determined by a referendum before the law was announced, were not included in the autonomous region. The Kurdish leadership rejected any autonomy law that did not include a fair solution for these areas.

On March 11th, 1974, the Iraqi government, unilaterally, declared a law of limited autonomy and established a legislative and executive councils, run by Kurds affiliated to Baghdad. Hundreds of thousands of civilians from villages, small towns and major cities joined the areas controlled by Barzani. In April, a year-long conventional war erupted between the Iraqi military and the Kurdish forces, which gained control of large areas. Baghdad mobilized two-thirds of its army, equipped with heavy Soviet weaponry, and suffered ten thousand casualties.¹⁶

While the Kurds made significant military gains, in summer 1974 the Kurdish positions went under massive attacks by Baghdad, “that eventually engaged 80 percent of [its] army”.¹⁷ The Kurds appealed for further military aid, particularly offensive weapons. However, instead of providing such weapons, Iran intervened directly by sending its artillery and air defence units, shelling Iraqi positions, which, with the arrival of bad weather, eventually stopped the Iraqi advance.¹⁸

The Shah’s sudden unilateral decision, in March 1975, to stop Iran’s aid to the Kurds in the midst of intense fighting caught the Kurds off guard and presented the Americans with a *fait accompli*. The Kurdish revolt, which then controlled almost half of the Iraqi Kurdistan territory, collapsed within a few weeks when

¹⁵ Ibid, p. 581.

¹⁶ The Implications of the Iran-Iraq Agreement, report by the Department of State, CIA & Defense Intelligence Agency, 1 May 1975

¹⁷ Ibid, p. 3

¹⁸ Ibid, p. 3

Saddam Hussein made territorial and waterway concessions to Iran in exchange for Iran's cessation of its aid to the Kurds, in an agreement signed between the two parties in Algiers on March 6th, 1975; with promises that Iraq would leave the Soviet orbit. Upon his return to Tehran, the Shah told the US ambassador in Iran and former CIA director, Richard Helms, "the cut-off of Iranian assistance to Barzani's Kurdish insurrection would also entail terminating all American assistance."¹⁹

In his memoirs, Henri Kissinger recounts his meeting with the Shah in Zurich on February 18th, 1975, who "without any prior warning" informed him that he was "exploring a negotiation with Saddam Hussein [...] I reminded the Shah of his own repeated warnings that the collapse of the Kurds would destabilize the entire area. Any assurances by Saddam regarding the governance of the Kurdish area, I cautioned, would be worthless. And since the Soviets would view Iran's retreat as symptomatic of the growing weakness of the West, their adventurism was likely to increase even on that front."²⁰

The Algiers Agreement caused mixed reactions among U.S. officials. Helms and the head of the US interests' section in Baghdad, Arthur Lowrie considered the agreement as a step to achieve regional stability. However, "upon learning of the deal, Kissinger was furious at the Shah, who had ignored his advice and led him to believe the deal was on hold. Further, he could not conceive how the accord was a good deal. Why would the Shah so carelessly trade a valuable coercive asset, like the Kurds, for a modest border concession on the Shatt al-Arab—a deal that the development of Iran's Gulf ports would render useless?"²¹

Henri Kissinger claims that the decision to stop aid to the Kurds, and consequently the collapse of the Kurdish revolt, was solely Shah's decision. He also argues that the United States could under no circumstances pursue its assistance to the Kurds alone, which would have required opening another front of direct and open confrontation with the Soviet Union, in the midst of the Vietnam War, an adventure that the Americans could not afford. Pressuring the Shah to maintain the passage of US aid was also suggested, but this, according to Kissinger, could have led to undermine the close US-Iranian alliance. Kissinger considered that the U.S. had to keep Iran as a friend for global stability. He argues in his memoirs: "A friendly Iran was nearly indispensable to both the re-

¹⁹ David Korn, "Last Years of Mustafa Barzani," *Middle East Quarterly*, June 1994, Volume 1: Number 2, pp. 12-27, quoted by Gibson, Bryan, op. cit, p 264

²⁰ Kissinger, Henry, op. cit. p. 592

²¹ Gibson, Bryan, op. cit. p. 264

gional and global equilibrium. It would have been frivolous and irresponsible to unhinge another key ally by launching a political assault on the Shah or cutting off aid to Iran. Our commitment to the defence of Iran had not been a favour to be withdrawn when we were displeased but an expression of our own geopolitical interest.”²²

On March 10th, Kissinger sent a telegram to the Shah in which he “stopped well short of endorsing his actions and implied that [he] had doubts about the benefits the Shah seemed to hold in store for himself”. He wrote, “with respect to the Kurdish question, there is little I can add to what I have already said to you personally during our recent meeting. This is obviously a matter for Your Majesty to decide in the best interests of your nation. Our policy remains as always to support Iran as a close and staunch friend of the United States. I will, of course, follow with great interest the evolution of Iraqi-Iranian relations and of Iraqi policy in your area generally and toward the Soviet Union in particular.”²³

In early 1975, the Shah, who had long been obsessed by the communist threat to his power, seems to have been convinced, after a series of meetings with some Arab leaders that the then Iraqi vice-president, Saddam Hussein, was trying to get Iraq out of the Soviet sphere of influence. “Arab governments were feeling Iraqi pressure to intervene to secure an end to Iranian intervention. Cairo, in particular, was arguing that ending the confrontation would help draw Iraq into the Arab political mainstream and lessen its dependence on the Soviet Union. The Shah was concerned over Moscow’s growing influence in Baghdad, and Cairo’s argument may have influenced him.”²⁴

A critical factor in the Kurds’ downfall was a conversation between the Shah and Ashraf Marwan, a close aide of Egypt’s leader Anwar Sadat, on March 2nd, “that sealed the Kurds’ fate”, according to Bryan Gibson.²⁵ U.S. officials in Tehran reported that “Marwan repeated the message that [he] had received through others, i.e., that Saddam Hussein was ready to pull Iraq out of the Soviet orbit if Iran would remove the military pressure which was forcing Iraq into the arms of the Soviets. Marwan expressed the view that it was almost certain that Saddam would pull away from the Soviets as promised.”²⁶

²² Kissinger, Henry, op. cit. p. 594

²³ Ibid, p. 594

²⁴ The Implications of the Iran-Iraq Agreement, op. cit. p. 4

²⁵ Gibson, Bryan, op. cit. p. 262

²⁶ Tehran 2237 to State, “Iranian/Iraqi Agreement,” March 10, 1975 (NARA/AAD/RG59/CFPF/ET/1975), p.1, quoted by Gibson, Bryan, op. cit. p. 262

However, there are still grey areas as to Shah's motivation to reach such agreement with Saddam Hussein, while his main objective, since the early 1960s, has been to have the upper hand in political developments in Iraq and eliminate any threat that Iraq may pose. Also, the Shah signed this agreement while aware of the expansionist nature of the Iraqi ultra-nationalistic regime, which most likely, once his regime strengthened, could become a strong rival for the Gulf region's leadership. "Iran and Iraq are natural competitors in the Gulf [...] Both the Shah and Saddam Husayn have widely differing views of how the region should evolve politically and both aspire to regional leadership and dominance."²⁷

The Algiers agreement was a lifeline for Saddam Hussein. By signing the agreement, the Shah gave Saddam Hussein a second chance to live, as his regime was under threat of falling. "The pursuit of the military campaign against the Kurds also entailed risks for Saddam Husayn and might have brought his downfall [...] The Iraqi strongman had made a personal commitment to a military solution and his prestige was on the line. Yet there were serious problems developing within the military over heavy casualties and over Baghdad's inability to respond effectively to Iranian intervention. Also, the military campaign monopolized national attention and resources."²⁸

Instead of addressing the potential escalating threat of Saddam Hussein, should he survive the Kurdish war, and backing the Kurdish initiative to topple the Ba'ath rule in collaboration with Iraqis opposed to Saddam Hussein, the Shah limited his regional ambitions to some land and waterway concessions; and believed Saddam Hussein's promise that Iraq would leave the Soviet orbit.

In his meeting with the State Department, Zaid Othman told the Americans that "on behalf of Barzani, he has been in touch with 'reputable' Iraqi elements who are opposed to the Ba'athists and who are prepared to cooperate with the Kurds in an attempt to overthrow the Ba'ath regime. These Arab elements, however, will make no overt commitment to support Barzani until they are assured of U.S. support [...] Uthman was certain that in view of the strong antipathy toward the Ba'athist regime in Iraq, both the Iraqi Army and the Iraqi people will welcome the establishment of a 'liberation' movement located in the north [...] The Kurds have already been in touch with disaffected elements in the Iraqi Army which are only, waiting for the signal to come over to Barzani."²⁹

²⁷ The Implications of the Iran-Iraq Agreement, op. cit. p. 4

²⁸ Ibid, p. 3

²⁹ Memorandum From Andrew Killgore, op. cit.

Did the Shah agree to let Saddam Hussein take over Iraqi Kurdistan out of concern that the Kurds may achieve wider autonomy in the event of their victory against Baghdad? If this is the case, it suggests that for the Shah a deal with an Iraq liberated from Soviet influence would be more reassuring, even if it posed a major threat to his regional ambitions, than the potential regionalization of the Kurdish issue. In a note to President Ford regarding his meeting with the Shah in Zurich on February 18th, Kissinger wrote, “[the Shah] is suspicious that the Iraqis will stimulate some incidents along the Iraqi-Iranian border which could lead to an internationalization of the Kurdish question and its being brought before the United Nations Security Council which he would consider most unhelpful. In short, he seems tempted to try to move in the direction of some understanding with Iraq regarding the Kurds but is understandably skeptical that much is possible. In the meantime, he intends to continue his support for the Kurds.”³⁰

The Shah not only wanted to be the sole source of assistance to the Kurds and control other possible outside sources, he also tried to control the course of the fighting between Baghdad and the Kurdish forces. Despite repeated requests and independent attempts by the Kurdish leadership to obtain offensive weapons to reinforce their positions and make progress in the fighting, Iran vigorously limited its military aid to defensive weapons, reducing the military situation of the Kurdish forces strictly to a defensive position.³¹

Facing the pressure of massive Iraqi army attacks launched immediately after signing the agreement, with a short notice for the Iraqi Iranian border to be closed in the face of the Kurds, and a growing humanitarian refugee crisis, Barzani sent a telegram to Kissinger on March 10th, requesting “to take action as immediate as possible on the following two issues.” First, “[exert pressure to] stopping the Iraqi offensive and opening the way for talks between us and Iraq”, and second, “using whatever influence you have with the Iranian friends to help our people in these historically tragic and sad moments and at least in such a way that our people and Peshmergas could maintain some livelihood and perform at least partisan activities in Iraqi Kurdistan until our problem is also solved within the framework of the over-all Iranian-Iraqi agreement. Mr. Secretary, we are anxiously awaiting your quick response and action and we are certain that the United States will not remain indifferent during these critical

³⁰ Kissinger, Henry, *op. cit.* p. 592

³¹ Conversation with Mr. Muhsin Dizayee, former Minister, Ambassador to Prague and Ottawa, and senior leading Kurdish political figure, close to the Kurdish leader, Mustafa Barzani. He lived at the heart of the major events that marked the Kurdish political movement in Iraq during the past sixty years. Erbil, Kurdistan Region, Iraq, 12 September 2023.

and trying times. We have also written in detail on these issues a memorandum to His Imperial Majesty.”³²

A week later, a message from Kissinger was sent to Helms through the US President’s Deputy Assistant for National Security Affairs, Brent Scowcroft, to be transmitted orally to Barzani. Excerpts read, “We appreciate the deep concern which prompted General Mulla Mustafa Barzani’s message to Secretary Kissinger. We can understand that the difficult decisions which the Kurdish people now face are a cause of deep anguish for them [...] We will be talking with our Iranian friends and will be in contact with the General later.”³³ By then, it was already too late.

Facing a deteriorating situation and to save the lives of hundreds of thousands of civilians, who had joined the Kurdish-controlled areas, from Iraqi army’s attacks, the Kurdish leadership decided not to continue the military confrontation. A large number of Kurds, civilians and militaries, crossed the border and took refuge in Iran. A significant number of those civilians who returned to the Iraqi-controlled Kurdish areas were displaced to southern areas of Iraq, where they stayed several years. The Iraqi army controlled the entire territory of Iraqi Kurdistan and established a no-man’s land buffer zone of 30 kilometres deep inside Iraqi Kurdistan along the Syrian, Turkish, and Iranian borders. A year later, the Kurds resumed guerrilla warfare, representing a spectrum of various political formations, marking the beginning of a new phase of the Kurdish political movement.

Being a covert action, the United States was constantly concerned about its involvement in the Kurdish revolt being exposed. Moreover, the US seriously feared a mass extermination operation by Baghdad against the Kurds. In fact, Iraq’s genocidal intentions, as an option to consider for settling the Kurdish issue, were in the making much earlier than its first use of chemical weapon against the Kurds during the late 1980s. According to a CIA paper, dated 23 January 1975, “Iraq desires to develop an offensive CW capability for use against

³² Backchannel Message From the President’s Deputy Assistant for National Security Affairs (Scowcroft) to Secretary of State Kissinger. March 10, 1975. Foreign Relations of the United States, 1969–1976, volume XXVII, Iran; Iraq, 1973–1976. Source: Ford Library, National Security Adviser, Kissinger–Scowcroft West Wing Office Files, Box 19, Kurds (3). Secret; Eyes Only; Immediate.

³³ Backchannel Message From the President’s Deputy Assistant for National Security Affairs (Scowcroft) to the Ambassador to Iran (Helms), March 16, 1975. Foreign Relations of the United States, 1969–1976, volume XXVII, Iran; Iraq, 1973–1976. Ford Library, National Security Adviser, Backchannel Messages, Box 4, Mideast/Africa, Outgoing 3/75. Secret; Exclusively Eyes Only. Sent with the instruction to deliver at the opening of business.

the Kurds. The Iraqis have purchased and installed a nerve agent production plant which may give them an agent capability by this spring.”³⁴

In the end, it was Saddam Hussein who gained the most from the Algiers Agreement. Not only did he survive the Kurdish war but emerged stronger and prevailed over his internal foes and later attacked his external enemies. By eliminating the Communist Party, Saddam Hussein let the Shah believe it was part of the agreement, while he was removing the second serious threat, after the Kurds, to his growing power. He maintained the USSR as Iraq’s principal arms supplier and remained dependent on Soviet military equipment and services for over two decades. Meantime, he developed relationships with several Western European countries, fostering close economic and military cooperation. At the same time, he continued his radical rhetoric in defiance of the West and supported regional militant groups. He invested all the gains of the Algiers Agreement to strengthen the foundations of his power, and his grip on the country and the region.

The Algiers Agreement, by being the catalyst that maintained Saddam Hussein in power and strengthened his regime, marked the beginning of a new regional order. It contributed significantly to shaping the future of Iraq, if not of the region, for the two and a half decades that followed. With the collapse of the Kurdish movement, the last powerful bastion of resistance against the then emerging process of “Ba’athification” of Iraq was removed. It was only then that Saddam Hussein was able to consolidate his authoritarian scheme, start his march towards total domination of the entire country and become a serious threat to the regional security, using all imaginable destructive means to achieve them. The details are known to history.

Thirty-five years of political violence under the Ba’athist regime generated another cycle of violence after its fall in 2003. Had it been supported, the New Iraq, that which was envisioned by the Kurds over fifty years ago, could have offered other prospects for the region, where the political landscape could have been drastically different today.

³⁴ Foreign Relations of the United States 1969-1976 Volume xxxv. National Security Policy, 1973-1976. BRIEFING FOR NSSM-192: CHEMICAL WEAPONS POLICY, Washington, 23 January 1975 p. 250

Memorandum From Andrew Killgore of the Bureau of Near Eastern and South Asian Affairs, Department of State to the Assistant Secretary for Near Eastern and South Asian Affairs (Sisco)

UNITED STATES GOVERNMENT

Memorandum

TO: NEA - Mr. Sisco
DATE: April 5, 1972
THRU NEA - Mr. Atherton
FROM : NEA/ARN - Andrew I. Killgore
SUBJECT: Kurdish Appeal for U.S. Assistance

Attached is a memorandum of the [Zayd] Uthman-Scotes conversation. Uthman made an appeal for direct or indirect U.S. assistance to enable Barzani to establish an Iraqi Arab-Kurdish "liberation movement" in Iraqi Kurdistan with the aim of overthrowing the Ba'athi regime in Baghdad. He also transmitted a letter to the Secretary [of State, William Rogers ...] in which Barzani makes the same appeal. He has requested an answer to this appeal by Thursday, April 6.

Our initial reaction to this appeal is negative based on our views that (a) a Barzani-dominated regime would have difficulty surviving in the face of what would doubtless become consolidated Arab opposition to it from both inside and outside Iraq; (b) the Soviets are so well established economically in Iraq that even if Barzani succeeds in overthrowing the Ba'athis, it is unlikely that he could break Iraq's ties with Moscow unless we were prepared to step in with immediate and perhaps large-scale assistance; (c) USG support for a coup operation which at best appears to be ill organized would be difficult to conceal and thus the USG would risk further strains on its relations with the other Arab states because of support for a non-Arab movement backed by other non-Arab states (Iran and Israel) against "the Arabs"; (d) facilitating the coming to power of a Kurdish-supported government in Baghdad also risks arousing the expectations of Kurds in neighboring Iran and Turkey, thus causing-concern in at least Turkey if not Iran; (e) any encouragement to the Kurds can only give further impetus to Kurdish nationalist aspirations which aim eventually to establish a separate state of Kurdistan, a step which would be retrogressive in that

it would represent further fragmentation in an already fragmented area.

Despite the above initial reaction, we have discussed this matter with Roy [Atherton, deputy assistant secretary of state for Near Eastern Affairs] who agrees that it would be useful if we had an informal review of the Kurdish situation with Mike Waller of CIA before making any final decision regarding the Uthman appeal. CIA has also been getting through independent sources the same information and similar appeals. Such a review would be in line with your thoughts expressed to Tom Scotes at the airport yesterday that we continue to update our assessments and not be guided solely by conventional wisdom concerning such matters.

Meanwhile, we would recommend that you brief the Secretary orally about this problem in view of the fact that the letter from Barzani is addressed to him.

Attachments: Memorandum of Conversation

(...)

NEA/ARN:TJScotes:bdf

DEPARTMENT OF STATE

Memorandum of Conversation

DATE: April 3, 1972

SUBJECT: Kurdish Appeal for U. S. Assistance

PARTICIPANTS:

T. J. Scotese, Esq., Officer-in-Charge [Iraqi and] Jordanian Affairs

Zayd Uthman, Special Emissary from Mulla Mustafa Barzani

Place: Hay-Adams Hotel, Washington, D. C.

SUMMARY

During an April 3 meeting arranged at his request Zayd Uthman, Special Emissary from Kurdish leader Mulla Mustafa Barzani, made the following points to Iraqi Desk Officer Thomas J. Scotese:

- a) As a result of the recent visit to Moscow by Saddam Husayn AL-Tikriti, Assistant Secretary General of the Iraqi Ba'th Party, Soviet influence in Iraq has been dramatically enhanced.
- b) The Soviets are now pressing Mulla Mustafa to join the Iraqi Ba'th party and the Iraqi Communist Party in the formation of a national front government as part of a Soviet effort to consolidate their position in Iraq.
- c) Mulla Mustafa does not wish to participate in a national front government because he fears that the Ba'th Party will use this proposal as a ploy to destroy the Kurdish Democratic Party (KDP).
- d) Mulla Mustafa Barzani appeals to the U.S. Government for financial and military assistance to enable him to establish in Iraqi Kurdistan an Iraqi government-in- exile consisting of Kurds and Arabs, as a stepping-stone leading to the overthrow of the Iraqi Ba'th Party.
- e) U.S. assistance can be made available to Barzani directly or indirectly for example through King Hussein. If it is not furnished in the near future, Mulla Mustafa will not be able to withstand the Soviet and Ba'th pressures which in turn will result in the eventual Sovietization of Iraq thereby threatening Free World interests in the Persian Gulf as well as Iran and Turkey.

f) Uthman conveyed a letter in Arabic from Barzani to Secretary Rogers in which Barzani makes the same appeal as above. Uthman requested an answer to this appeal before his departure from Washington in April 6.

1. Barzani Plea for U.S. Assistance.

[Zayd] Uthman stated that he is coming on a special mission from Mulla Mustafa Barzani to the United States to seek U.S. assistance at a critical time in the history of Iraq and of the Kurdish national movement. Uthman continued that as a result of the recent trip to Moscow by Saddam Hussein Tikriti, Assistant Secretary General of the Iraqi Ba'th Party, the Soviets are now supporting the Iraqi Ba'th Party's effort to establish a national front government in Iraq. This Soviet support has taken the form of Soviet pressure on Mulla Mustafa Barzani to accede to the Ba'thist request. A high-ranking Soviet Communist Party official was recently in Kurdistan trying to persuade Barzani. Barzani, however, feels that if the Kurdish Democratic Party (KDP) joins with the Iraqi Ba'th Party and the Iraqi Communist Party, the Kurdish national movement will in time be subverted and its force dissipated. Uthman explained that the Soviets aim through their support of a national front stratagem to establish and consolidate further their position in Iraq, particularly at a time when their position in Egypt and Syria seems to be unpredictable. Uthman continued that Soviet economic and political interests in Iraq have grown dramatically over the last several years, and the Soviets wish to protect this investment. Moreover, the Kurds believe that the Soviets intend to use Iraq for subversion not only in the Gulf but against Iran and Turkey as well. Uthman concluded that the stakes are high and that only the U.S. can, by supporting Barzani either directly or indirectly, stem the Soviet tide. In response to my question, Uthman stated that the Kurds have been in touch with both the Shah and King Hussein. The former, however, blows hot and cold in his support of the Kurdish national movement. Barzani cannot commit himself to an all-out struggle against the Ba'th regime in Baghdad on the basis of such unpredictable support. King Hussein, sympathetic though he may be, has been unable to promise the Kurds anything but moral support. He has expressed, however, his willingness to go to Tehran to solicit further assistance from the Shah. Barzani can wait no longer for either the Shah or King Hussein. The Soviets and the Iraqi Ba'th leadership are pressing him for an answer in the next three or four weeks. It is for this reason that Barzani decided to send a letter [...] to the Secretary of State in which he makes a final appeal to the U.S. for help. If this help is not forthcoming, Barzani will be obliged to join the national front, and the West's last opportunity to thwart Soviet designs in Iraq will have been lost.

2. Barzani Plan

Uthman then explained how Barzani intends to proceed if U.S. assistance is forthcoming. Uthman noted at the outset that the U.S. might wish to make its assistance available to the Kurds indirectly as for example, through King Hussein. This would be acceptable to the Kurds, who in any event trust King Hussein. Uthman continued that he, on behalf of Barzani, has been in touch with "reputable" Iraqi elements who are opposed to the Ba'thists and who are prepared to cooperate with the Kurds in an attempt to overthrow the Ba'th regime. These Arab elements, however, will make no overt commitment to support Barzani until they are assured of U.S. support, both moral and financial. Uthman repeated several times that once U.S. support becomes known, these elements will flock to Barzani in the north which will then be used as a center from which to launch initially a propaganda attack against the Ba'thist regime to be followed by whatever military action is required. In response to questions, Uthman was unwilling to be specific concerning military actions, saying that details would be worked out later. Uthman was certain that in view of the strong antipathy toward the Ba'thist regime in Iraq, both the Iraqi Army and the Iraqi people will welcome the establishment of a "liberation" movement located in the north. Uthman indicated that the Kurds have already been in touch with disaffected elements in the Iraqi Army which are only, waiting for the signal to come over to Barzani. Of course, Uthman continued, Barzani must be in a position to pay these men their salaries as well as to maintain their families if and when they defect. This financial support would be in addition to the current financial support which Barzani must make to his own Kurdish irregulars (Pishmerga). At the present time the Iraqi regime pays Barzani approximately 150,000 Iraqi Dinars (about \$420,000) a month [per March 1970 agreement between the Kurdish leadership and Baghdad, for an autonomy status for Kurdistan] to support the Kurdish irregulars. If Barzani refuses to go into the national front [government], Uthman continued, it was likely the Iraqi Government will cut off this payment, thereby leaving Barzani with no money to support his troops (in this regard Uthman observed that there are now approximately some 24,000 Pishmerga either under arms or able to mobilize within 24 hours. Uthman added that if funds become available, the Kurds can raise approximately 50,000 men in the north in a few months time.) Uthman said that Barzani would also need "offensive" weapons to supplement the "defensive" weapons which the Kurds now possess.

3. Ba'ath Demands of Barzani

Uthman said that as part of Barzani's willingness to participate in a national front government, the Iraqis expect Barzani to close his part of the border with Iran and permit the stationing of Iraqi troops in the north. Barzani is unwilling to accept these proposals. The Soviets have been endeavoring to ease Barzani's apprehensions by expressing their willingness to send a high-level Soviet official to stay in the north with Barzani to assure that the Iraqi Ba'athists would keep their part of the agreement which would involve ostensibly the granting of autonomy to the north. Barzani does not trust either the Soviets or the Ba'athists.

4. Soviet Aims

Uthman repeated several times his assessment of Soviet aims in Iraq and in the area. As mentioned above, Uthman stated that initially the Soviets wished to protect their major economic and political investment in Iraq. In this connection, Uthman opined that the Soviets may also have their eyes on Iraqi oil. He said that the Kurds have heard from a reliable source that Saddam Husayn has sought Soviet views and assistance in connection with the possible nationalization of the British and American shares of the IPC consortium. Uthman continued that the longterm goal of the Soviets in Iraq is to use it as a center by which to outflank Turkey and thereby NATO, as well as to subvert Iran and the Persian Gulf. Uthman said that the Soviets are already helping the Iraqis put up a missile defense system at Shu'aybah Air Base near Basra. Soviet military advisors are also widespread in the Iraqi Army.

5. Past Iranian Involvement

Although expressing Kurdish appreciation for Iranian assistance in the past, [Zayd] Uthman opined that the Iranians either do not know how to deal with Iraqis or are using the Iraqi situation for their own ends. He inclined to the latter view, noting that the Iranians have tried to prevent the Kurds from seeking to make [direct] contacts with other possible sources of assistance such as the U.S. Uthman stated his view that the Iranians are short-sighted if they believe that they can use the Kurds and the other moderate Iraqis in this manner. Uthman opined that continued instability in Iraq should not be an Iranian goal, as it now appears to be.

6. Egyptian Approach to Barzani

Uthman said that recently Egypt sent some emissaries to Barzani who expressed Syrian and Egyptian interest in cooperating with the Kurds for the purpose of overthrowing the Ba'athist regime in Baghdad. The Egyptians, however, indicated that it would be necessary for the Kurds to cooperate with Arab "nationalist" elements which Barzani is not prepared to do because of his belief that these elements are generally discredited among the Iraqi people.

Situation in the North

According to Uthman, the situation in the north is quiet. Despite reports of central government assistance to the Kurds, Uthman alleged that very little has in fact been accomplished [since the signing of the 1970 agreement]. This is one reason why Barzani has become disillusioned with the Ba'athist regime and its promises. In addition, of course, the recent assassination attempt on Barzani's life did little to enhance the credibility of the Ba'athist regime among the Kurds. Although Arab settlers have been leaving the Arbil area, the Baghdad Government is continuing to bring Arab settlers into the Kirkuk region in an obvious effort to Arabize that area before any plebiscite is held. (Barzani doubted that such a plebiscite would ever be held.) Meanwhile, Barzani's prestige among the Kurds has never been higher. Almost all of the tribes now support him including such traditional Barzani tribal rivals as the Lolans, the Harkis and the greater part of the Zibaris. In addition, the Jalal Talabani faction of the KDP is now completely behind Barzani with Talabani and Ibrahim Ahmed in the north at Barzani's headquarters.

Situation in Baghdad

[Zayd] Uthman described the situation in Baghdad as one of growing opposition to the regime. He added, however, that the terror employed by the Ba'athists has cowed most of the population. He said that the torture being used in Iraqi prisons is much worse than any of the Communist regimes have ever used in the past. In this regard, he said that the East Germans are reportedly training the Iraqi secret police. Uthman reiterated the readiness of the Iraqi Arab population to support any movement which would lead to the overthrow of the Ba'athist regime. He qualified this, however, by saying that the Iraqi Arabs would not support "old regime" elements or "sloganeering" Arab nationalists.

REF: *Memorandum From Andrew Killgore of the Bureau of Near Eastern and*

South Asian Affairs, Department of State to the Assistant Secretary for Near Eastern and South Asian Affairs (Sisco). Foreign Relations of the United States, 1969–1976, volume E–4, documents on Iran and Iraq, 1969–1972. Source: National Archives, RG 59, Central Files 1970–73, POL 13–3 Iraq. Secret.
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