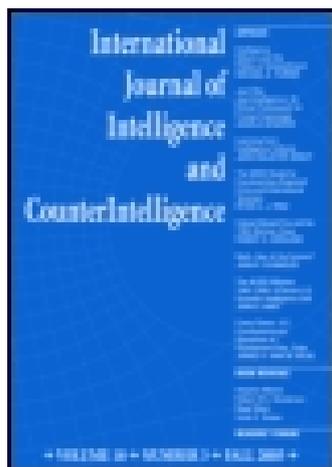


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MICHAEL GUNTER

Mulla Mustafa Barzani and the Kurdish Rebellion in Iraq: The Intelligence Factor

Foreign powers are almost inevitably tempted to intervene in a state torn by internal minority problems. A case in point is Iraq. Over the years, Iraq's rivals and enemies have viewed its Kurdish problem as a way to exert pressure on Baghdad. During the 1950s and 1960s, President Gamal Abdul Nasser of Egypt toyed with the idea of supporting the Kurds on a number of occasions as a means to pressure Iraq while in pursuit of his pan-Arab designs.¹ In 1963, Nasser even met with Jalal Talabani, the sometime representative of the legendary Iraqi Kurdish leader Mulla Mustafa Barzani, and announced that he saw nothing excessive in the Kurds' demands. Nasser always had to be cautious, however, lest he be seen as supporting a non-Arab separatist movement against a fellow Arab country, and in the end his flirtation with the Kurds came to nothing.

Iran and Turkey presented more serious issues because they shared common borders with Iraq and also contained large Kurdish minorities of their own. Since a Kurdish revolt in any of these three states could well foment one in the others, the three usually tried to cooperate on the issue. Thus, the Treaty of Saadabad in 1937 and the Baghdad Pact in 1955 in part obligated them to cooperate on the Kurdish problem.² This collaboration included measures to prevent cross-border communication and support among the Kurds and, in general, sought to prevent any joint, transnational Kurdish action that might challenge their current international boundaries.

These understandings were disturbed when the Iraqi monarchy was overthrown in 1958. In time, Iran grew alarmed at the rise of Arab nationalism in Iraq and the possibility that these nationalistic feelings might be directed at its

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Arab-populated province of Khuzistan and the Gulf. In addition, given Iraq's weakness during the 1960s, Iran began attempts to amend the 1937 treaty that gave Iraq the entire Shatt al-Arab River, which served as their common border in the south. Increasingly, the Shah of Iran began to see the Kurdish card as a way to pressure Iraq. Ultimately, the United States, an ally of Iran, entered the picture.

THE U.S. PRESENCE

After coming to power in 1958, General Abdul Karim Kassem soon gained the animus of the United States by restoring diplomatic relations with the Soviet Union, lifting the ban on the Iraqi Communist Party (ICP), and suppressing pro-Western political parties. This occurred early in the five-year period in which the U.S. Central Intelligence Agency (CIA) attempted to assassinate a number of troublesome world leaders, including Patrice Lumumba, Rafael Trujillo, Fidel Castro, and Ngo Dinh Diem.

In February 1960, the chief of the CIA's Directorate for Plans, Near East Division, proposed that Kassem be assassinated with a poisoned handkerchief prepared by the agency's Technical Services Division.³ Two months later Richard Helms, then chief of operations of the Directorate for Plans and a future director of the CIA, endorsed this proposal as "highly desirable." Although the handkerchief was sent to Kassem, it is not known whether it actually reached him. Certainly it did not kill him, as this was done by his own countrymen three years later. The CIA role in Iraq was to take a different turn.

As early as 1962, Mulla Mustafa Barzani reportedly told *New York Times* correspondent Dana Adams Schmidt: "Let the Americans give us military aid, openly or secretly, so that we can become truly autonomous, and we will become your loyal partners in the Middle East."⁴ In time, the United States and Iran were to exercise an important and eventually tragic foreign influence on the Iraqi Kurds.

The details of the American role were revealed by the unauthorized publication in *The Village Voice* of the Pike House Committee Report investigating the CIA.⁵ This document shows that in May 1972 the Shah of Iran, who was already supporting Barzani because Iran and Iraq "had long been bitter enemies," asked United States President Richard M. Nixon and soon-to-be Secretary of State Henry Kissinger — who were returning from a Moscow summit meeting — to help him in this project.

Although the U.S. aid was "largely symbolic,"⁶ "the United States acted, in effect, as a guarantor that the insurgent group [the Kurds] would not be summarily dropped by the foreign head of state [the Shah]." The Pike Committee Report explained that "on numerous occasions the leader of the ethnic group [Barzani] expressed his distrust of our allies' [i.e., Iran's] intentions. He did,

however, trust the United States as indicated by his frequent statements that ‘he trusted no other major power.’ ” John B. Connally, the former governor of Texas, “personally advised the head of state that the United States would cooperate.” Although similar proposals had been turned down three times earlier,⁷ Nixon and Kissinger had decided to act now for a variety of reasons, including the following:

- The Pike Committee Report concluded that “the project was initiated primarily as a favor to our ally [the Shah], who had cooperated with United States intelligence agencies, and who had come to feel menaced by his neighbor [Iraq].” Former United States Ambassador William Eagleton, Jr. concurred with these findings when he wrote: “My impression ... is that by far the most important reason for the U.S. intervention was a desire to respond positively to the Shah’s request, which was apparently based on Barzani’s insistence that some kind of big power support was needed to balance Iraq’s Soviet connection.”⁸
- The Cold War. A continuing Kurdish insurgency would sap the strength of Iraq, a Soviet ally. Did Nixon and Kissinger — who, as mentioned, were just returning from a summit conference in Moscow — believe they were somehow serving the interests of détente by checkmating the Soviets here?
- A continuing Kurdish problem in Iraq would tie Baghdad’s troops down at home and make it less likely that Iraq would enter any future Arab-Israeli conflict. As Kissinger later noted in his memoirs: “The benefit of Nixon’s Kurdish decision was apparent in just over a year: Only one Iraqi division was available to participate in the October 1973 Middle East War.”⁹

Given this reasoning, the Pike Committee Report argued, “it is particularly ironic that ... the United States ... restrained the insurgents [the Kurds] from an all-out offensive on one occasion when such an attack might have been successful because other events were occupying the neighboring country.” The reference was to Kissinger’s shuttle diplomacy at the end of the October 1973 War, and how a Kurdish offensive at that time would have hindered it. Thus, as the report shows, Kissinger had sent the following message to the Kurds: “We do not, repeat, not consider it advisable for you to undertake the offensive military action that [another government (Israel)] has suggested to you.” In his memoirs, however, Kissinger argues “that the decision to discourage the Kurds from launching a diversionary offensive during the October 1973 conflict was based on the unanimous view of our intelligence officials and the Shah that the Kurds would be defeated in such an offensive; this judgment was concurred “by the Israeli government.”¹⁰

- The Iraq Petroleum Company, which had just been nationalized. One of Barzani’s unfortunate promises was that if he were to win his struggle against Baghdad he was “ready to become the 51st state.”¹¹ The Kurdish

leader also declared that he would “turn over the oil fields to the United States” and that “the United States could look for a friend in OPEC once oil-rich Kurdistan achieved independence.”¹² Thus, by supporting the Kurds, the United States might have helped solve the oil and energy problem it was facing at the time.

To implement this U.S. policy, the normal watchdog procedures for an intelligence operation were suspended: “There was no Forty Committee meeting at which a formal proposal paper containing both pros and cons could be discussed and voted on.”¹³ The Pike Committee Report declared that “the highly unusual security precautions and the circumvention of the Forty Committee were the product of fears by the President and Dr. Kissinger that details of the project would otherwise lead — a result which by all accounts would have mightily displeased our ally [the Shah].” The secrecy also “was motivated by a desire that the Department of State, which had consistently opposed such ventures in the region, be kept in the dark. ... Elaborate measures were taken to ensure that the Department of State did not gain knowledge of the project.” The precautions went so far “that not even the Ambassador to the country involved was to be told. In addition, evidence in the committee files is conflicting on whether Secretary of State William P. Rogers was ever informed.”

This secrecy prevented more people from being involved in the decisionmaking process, which might had led to a more rational and honest policy. The Shah’s support for the Kurds was an open secret; why such elaborate secrecy was thought necessary to disguise it is difficult to understand.

The real tragedy of this foreign interference, however, was that it reinforced the Baathist concern that Barzani’s ultimate objective was the dismantling of Iraq and thus helped lead to the breakdown of the March Manifesto of 1970. Even more, the United States-Iranian aid was never intended to be enough for the Kurds to triumph because, if Barzani were actually to win, the Kurds would no longer be able to play the enervating role against the Baathists desired by Washington and Teheran. Thus, the United States and Iran actually “hoped that our clients [the Kurds] would not prevail. They preferred instead that the insurgents simply continue a level of hostilities sufficient to sap the resources of our ally’s [Iran’s] neighboring country [Iraq]”¹⁴ Of course, “this policy was not imparted to our clients, who were encouraged to continue fighting. Even in the context of covert action, ours was a cynical enterprise.”

As shrewd and tough as Barzani was in his own mountainous homeland, he was naive and weak when it came to trusting the United States. Indeed, “his admiration for Dr. Kissinger was expressed on two occasions when he sent a gift of three rugs and later, on the occasion of Dr. Kissinger’s marriage, a gold and pearl necklace.”

But on 6 March 1975, as noted earlier, Iran and Iraq signed the Algiers Accord under which Iraq recognized the middle of the Shatt al-Arab River as the boundary between their two states, while Iran undertook to halt its aid to Barzani. "The cut-off of aid ... came as a severe shock to its [the Kurds'] leadership"¹⁵ and made it impossible for the Kurdish rebellion to continue.

Barzani sent the following message to the CIA: "There is confusion and dismay among our people and forces. Our people's fate [is] in unprecedented danger. Complete destruction [is] hanging over our head. ... We appeal [to] you ... [to] intervene according to your promises." The Kurdish leader also appealed to Kissinger: "We feel, your Excellency, that the United States has a moral and political responsibility toward our people who have committed themselves to your country's policy."

Despite these pleas, "the U.S. [even] refused to extend humanitarian assistance to the thousands of refugees created by the abrupt termination of military aid." As the Pike Committee Report explained, the United States had become such "junior partners" of the Shah, that it "had no choice but to acquiesce" in his cutting off Barzani's support.

At the time, Barzani justified his disastrous reliance on the Shah and the United States by arguing that "a drowning man stretches his hand out for everything";¹⁶ later, however, in exile, he admitted: "Without American promises, we would never have become trapped and involved to such an extent."¹⁷ In reply, Kissinger simply stated that "covert action should not be confused with missionary work."¹⁸ In April 1991 the Iraqi Kurds were to learn this lesson again.

OTHER REASONS FOR DEPENDENCY

At first glance, it seems difficult to understand how Barzani had become so hopelessly dependent on Iranian aid that he could not continue without it, when all through the 1960s he had managed to battle Baghdad to a standstill on his own. The explanation is multifaceted.

First of all, of course, Barzani had received some earlier aid from the Iranians during the 1960s. This aid had played a secondary role in helping him withstand the government at that time. Much more important, Baghdad governments during the 1960s had been weak and unstable. Thus Barzani had been able to hold out against the central authorities despite their repeated attempts to subdue him. All this began to change dramatically in July 1968, when the Baathists returned to power and constructed a much more stable and modern political and military infrastructure than had previously existed. By 1975, the institutional prerequisites for subduing the Kurds were in place and Barzani's career came to a quick end.

The reliance on Iranian and United States aid led to such self-assurance that nothing was done to win over progressive Arab, European, or Third-World support. In addition, Barzani called for Kurds throughout Iraq to move to the area he held in the north, where he created a bloated, inefficient bureaucracy that made fighting the war more difficult. Overzealous denunciations of the government's bombing attacks created panics that triggered mass refugee problems. Finally, the heavy weapons received from Iran lulled Barzani into trying to maintain fixed lines and fighting a conventional war that he could not win given the government's new-found energy.¹⁹

ISRAEL'S INTEREST

Israel, perceiving itself in a precarious position amid the Arab world and particularly threatened by Iraq's frequent hostility toward its very existence, inevitably took an interest in the Kurdish problem as a possible way to divert Iraqi resources and antagonism from itself. Even before the creation of the State of Israel, the Jewish Agency planted an operative in Baghdad.²⁰ From there, under journalistic cover, Reuven Shiloah, who later became the founder of the Israeli intelligence community, trekked through the mountains of Kurdistan and worked with the Kurds in pursuit of a "peripheral concept" as early as 1931. Operationalizing the adage "the enemy of my enemy is my friend," Israel sought potential allies on the periphery of the hostile Arab world.

During the 1960s, Israeli military advisers trained Kurdish guerrillas as a way to reduce the potential military threat Iraq presented to the Jewish state and also to help Iraqi Jews escape to Israel. This training operation was code-named "Marvad" (Carpet). In the mid-1960s Shimon Peres, the Israeli deputy minister of defense and later prime minister, met secretly with Kumran Ali Bedir-Khan, a Kurdish leader who had spied for the Israelis in the 1940s and 1950s. An Israeli Cabinet member, Aryeh (Lova) Eliav, personally rode a mule over the mountains in 1966 to deliver a field hospital to the Kurds. Israeli officers apparently assisted Barzani in his major victory over Baghdad at Mt. Hindarin in May 1966.

The important defection of an Iraqi air force pilot with his top-secret MIG-21 fighter in August 1966 was accomplished in part with the assistance of Kurdish guerrillas who helped smuggle the pilot's family out of Iraq.²¹ This coup greatly helped the Israeli air force during the Six Day War in 1967, when it managed to shoot down six Syrian MIGs in dogfights over the Sea of Galilee without a single Israeli loss. The original Iraqi MIG remains on exhibit at the Israeli air force museum at Hatzerim in the Negev desert.

Israeli assistance for the Kurds increased considerably following the Six Day War.²² Yaakov Nimrodi, the influential Israeli military attaché in Tehran, served as the main channel. At times, Israeli advisers wore Iranian uniforms. In

September 1967, Barzani visited Israel and presented Moshe Dayan, the Israeli defense minister, with a curved Kurdish dagger. Barzani found Israeli mortars superior to those he had been using and asked for more. Many believed that a particularly successful Kurdish mortar attack on the oil refineries at Kirkuk in March 1969 was the work of the Israelis. Israeli officers helping the Kurds remained in constant radio contact with Israel.

Basing his story on a CIA account, the American reporter Jack Anderson wrote: "Every month ... a secret Israeli envoy slips into the mountains in northern Iraq to deliver \$50,000 to Mulla Mustafa al-Barzani. ... The subsidy ensures Kurdish hostility against Iraq, whose government is militantly anti-Israel."²³ Former Israeli Prime Minister Menachem Begin admitted in 1980 that his country gave the Kurds "money, arms, and instructors."²⁴

Writing about the 1960s, Sa'ad Jawad, an authority on the Iraqi Kurds, concluded that "it is an open secret that they [the Israelis] sent some sophisticated weapons through Iran, particularly anti-tank and anti-aircraft equipment, accompanied by instructors." He added that "some Kurds had military training in Israel, while several KDP [Barzani's Kurdistan Democratic Party] leaders made visits to Israel and high-ranking Israeli officials to Kurdistan."²⁵ Both the Israeli Mossad and the Iranian Savak helped Barzani establish "a sophisticated intelligence apparatus, Parastin [Security] ... to gather information on the Iraqi government and its armed forces."²⁶

Indicative of the close relationship that developed between Barzani's Kurds and the Israelis was Barzani's reaction to the death in battle of Israeli Captain Arik Regev. This Israeli officer had made several covert visits to the Kurds. When he was killed in a 1968 battle with the Palestinians, Barzani sent a telegram to the Israeli chief of staff offering "his deepest condolences on the loss of such a fine officer."²⁷ As recently as 1990, it was commonly understood that the Mossad still maintained contacts with the Iraqi Kurds.²⁸

OFT-FORGOTTEN LESSONS

An appreciation for the role of the intelligence process can give further insight into historical events. In this particular case, a greater understanding of covert involvements helps to explain why and how the Iraqi Kurdish rebellion led by the legendary Mulla Mustafa Barzani for so many years suddenly collapsed in March 1975.

An analysis of the Report of the House Committee led by Otis G. Pike (D., N.Y.) that investigated the CIA in the mid-1970s details the role U.S. intelligence played in bringing about Barzani's collapse. This understanding in turn helps in further comprehending why the Iraqi Kurds today are hesitant to trust would-be foreign protectors. Indeed, the sorry role played by the United States in

encouraging yet another disastrous Iraqi Kurdish uprising, this time at the end of the 1991 Gulf War,²⁹ illustrates that either the Kurds had forgotten the earlier lesson or that a people so poorly situated in world politics will often be condemned to repeat past errors.

On the other hand, an analysis of the other reasons for Barzani's sudden collapse, illustrates that insights gathered from the intelligence process can answer only part of the question. Thus, erring too much on the side of stressing an overly explanatory role for intelligence may lead to a fall into the opposite trap, one that ensnares those who ignore the role of intelligence.

The role that Israeli intelligence has played in furthering that state's "peripheral strategy" over the years is little known. Although it amounted only to a minor factor overall, the surreptitious Israeli-Iraqi Kurdish relationship did pay Israel a number of rewards. For the Kurds, though, this relationship served mostly to further lessen any sympathy Arabs might have had for their plight because the Kurdish relationship with Israel cast the Kurds into a supportive role for the Arabs' perceived Zionist enemy.

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¹See Sa'ad Jawad, *Iraq and the Kurdish Question, 1958–1970* (London: Ithaca Press, 1981), pp. 287–288; Edmund Ghareeb, *The Kurdish Question in Iraq* (Syracuse, NY: Syracuse University Press, 1981), p. 61; and Ismail al-Arif, *Iraq Reborn: A Firsthand Account of the July 1958 Revolution and After* (New York: Vantage Press, 1982), pp. 86–87.

²This attempt at cooperation, however, was not built on firm historical foundations. Both the Ottoman and Persian Empires had continuously intervened in Kurdish affairs in attempts to manipulate matters. The Kurds, for their part, had also participated willingly. See M. M. van Bruinessen, *Agha, Shaikh and State: On the Social and Political Organization of Kurdistan* (Utrecht: University of Utrecht, 1978), pp. 150–248. As to the effect on the Kurds of the Saadabad Treaty and Baghdad Pact, see Joyce Blau, *Le probleme kurde: Essai sociologique et historique* (Brussels: Centre pour l'Etude des Problemes du Monde Musulman Contemporain, 1963), p. 38. On the foreign policy of Iran during these years, see Ruhollah Ramazani, *The Persian Gulf: Iran's Role* (Charlottesville: University Press of Virginia, 1972); and Shahram Chubin and Sepehr Zabih, *The Foreign Relations of Iran: A Developing State in a Zone of Great-Power Conflict* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1974). Syria also contains a smaller Kurdish minority and over the years has played a significant role in the Kurdish question.

³This and the following data were taken from Thomas Powers, *The Man Who Kept the Secrets: Richard Helms and the CIA* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1979), p. 130.

⁴Cited in Dana Adams Schmidt, "The Kurdish Insurgency," *Strategic Review*, 2 (Summer 1974), p. 54. Also see David Adamson, *The Kurdish War* (New York: Praeger, 1965), p. 94; and Lee Dinsmore, "The Forgotten Kurds," *The Progressive*,

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⁵"The CIA Report the President Doesn't Want You to Read," *The Village Voice*, 16 February 1976, pp. 70–92; hereafter cited as the Pike Committee Report. The part dealing with the Kurds is entitled "Case 2: Arms Support," and appears on pp. 85 and 87–88. In addition, see the two essays William Safire wrote based on the Pike Committee Report: "Mr. Ford's Secret Sellout," *The New York Times*, 5 February 1976, p. 31; and "Son of 'Secret Sellout,'" *The New York Times*, 12 February 1976, p. 31.

⁶According to the Pike Committee Report, it only amounted to "some \$16 million."

⁷According to the Pike Committee Report, these earlier proposals had been rejected (1) some time before August 1971, (2) in August 1971, and (3) in March 1972.

⁸William Eagleton, Jr., letter to the author, dated 10 July 1991.

⁹Henry Kissinger, *White House Years* (Boston: Little, Brown and Co., 1979), p. 1265.

¹⁰*Ibid.*

¹¹Cited in Pike Committee Report.

¹²Cited in Ghareeb, *The Kurdish Question in Iraq*, p. 140.

¹³Pike Committee Report. The Forty Committee is an external bureaucracy in the executive branch of the United States government established to oversee covert operations and thus prevent abuses. See Edward Blaim, "Covert Action: Discussion," in *Intelligence Requirements for the 1990s: Collection, Analysis, Counterintelligence and Covert Action*, ed. Roy Godson (Lexington, KY: Lexington Books, 1989), p. 231.

¹⁴This and the following citations were taken from the Pike Committee Report.

¹⁵This and the following citations were taken from *ibid.*

¹⁶Cited in Gwynne Roberts, "Kurdish Leader, Facing Possible Civil War, Looks to West for Support," *The New York Times*, 1 April 1974, p. 14.

¹⁷Cited in Ghareeb, *The Kurdish Question in Iraq*, p. 159. For an interesting account of Barzani's final days in exile, see David A. Korn, "The Last Year of Mustafa Barzani," *Middle East Quarterly*, 1 (June 1994), pp. 13–27.

¹⁸Cited in the Pike Committee Report.

¹⁹For a further discussion of these points, see Ismet Sherif Vanly, "Kurdistan in Iraq," in *People without a Country: The Kurds and Kurdistan*, ed. Gerard Chaliand (London: Zed Press, 1980), pp. 189–192.

²⁰The following information was taken from Dan Raviv and Yossi Melman, *Every Spy a Price: The Complete History of Israel's Intelligence Community* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Company, 1990), pp. 21 and 82; and Ian Black and Benny Morris, *Israel's Secret Wars: A History of Israel's Intelligence Services* (New York: Grove Weidenfeld, 1991), pp. 184–185 and 327–330. Also see Andrew Cockburn and Leslie Cockburn, *Dangerous Liaison: The Inside Story of the US-Israeli Covert Relationship* (New York: HarperCollins Publishers, 1991), pp. 104–105.

²¹The following discussion is based on Samuel M. Katz, *Soldier Spies: Israeli Military Intelligence* (Novato, CA: Presidio Press, 1994), p. 175.

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²³Jack Anderson, "Israelis Infiltrate Arab Regimes," *The Washington Post*, 17 September 1972, p. B7.

²⁴Cited in Jason Morris, "Begin Admits Secret Israeli Aid to Kurds as Reminder for Iraqis," *The Christian Science Monitor*, 6 October 1980, p. 11.

²⁵Jawad, *Iraq and the Kurdish Question*, p. 303.

²⁶Ghareeb, *The Kurdish Question in Iraq*, p. 133. Parastin was created in 1966.

²⁷On this point, see Katz, *Soldier Spies*, p. 200n17.

²⁸Raviv and Melman, *Every Spy a Price*, p. 428.

²⁹On the U.S. role here, see "United States Turns Down Plea to Intervene as Kirkuk Falls," *International Herald Tribune*, 30 March 1991; and Lucian O. Meysels, "A Shame for the Entire World," *Vienna Wochenpresse*, 11 April 1991, pp. 28–29; as cited in *Foreign Broadcast Information Service — Near East & South Asia*, 16 April 1991, p. 25. Apparently, President Bush had given the CIA secret orders in January 1991 to aid the Kurdish rebels with a clandestine, antigovernment radio station. See Jim Drinkard, "Bush Gave Secret Orders to Aid Rebels in Iraq," *Cookeville (Tenn.) Herald-Citizen*, 3 April 1991, p. 1.