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# **U.S. Foreign Policy on the Kurds of Iraq, 1958-1975**

**A.T. Vis**

**0731889**

**E-mail: [a.t.vis@umail.leidenuniv.nl](mailto:a.t.vis@umail.leidenuniv.nl)**

**Bachelor Dissertation  
Contemporary History  
Prof. Dr. G. Scott-Smith  
Bachelor History  
Leiden University  
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## Introduction

By the end of the 1940s, the United States and the Soviet Union had become increasingly entangled in a Cold War competition for influence in the Middle East. Because U.S. military planners acknowledged the crucial role of Western access to oil from the Persian Gulf in case of a war with the USSR, Washington adopted a regional strategy for the Middle East which was devised to protect the Gulf, prevent the Soviets from establishing control over its oil reserves, and to prop up the pro-Western conservative regimes in the region.<sup>1</sup> However, when the pro-Western Hashemite monarchy in Iraq was toppled in July 1958, Washington had to reappraise its strategy for the Gulf while it also resulted in a Cold War contest with the USSR over influence on the new Iraqi regime. This competition would eventually last for seventeen years, before the Ba'ath Party finally succeeded in 1975 to obtain full control of Iraq. Bryan R. Gibson's main argument that the primary incentive behind U.S. policy toward Iraq between 1958 and 1975 was the 'application of the broader principles of Cold War strategy on local political developments' is supported by this dissertation.<sup>2</sup>

During this American-Soviet competition for influence on Iraq, a fourteen year-long Kurdish War ravaged Iraq from autumn 1961 till March 1975, although with repeated interruptions. After the pro-Western Hashemite monarchy of Iraq was overthrown, Washington began to examine whether the Iraqi Kurds and their Kurdish nationalism could be useful in restricting the expansion of Soviet influence in Iraq and in the Middle East in general.<sup>3</sup> The U.S. had also an interest in Iraq's Kurds because of their historic connection with Moscow. In the aftermath of the Second World War, the Soviets had assisted the Iranian Kurds with the installation of the short-lived Kurdish Republic of Mahabad in western Iran during 1945-1946. This raised American concerns that the Soviets would use the Kurds to circumvent Washington's regional Communist containment strategy.<sup>4</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> E.C. Keefer and G.W. LaFantasie ed., 'Paper Prepared by the National Security Council Planning Board', *Foreign Relations of the United States, 1958-1960, Volume XII, Document 42* (Washington 1992) (Hereinafter referred to as *FRUS*, with appropriate year and volume number).

<sup>2</sup> B.R. Gibson, *U.S. Foreign Policy, Iraq, and the Cold War: 1958-1975* (London, April 2013) 10-11.

<sup>3</sup> D. Little, 'The United States and the Kurds: A Cold War Story', *Journal of Cold War Studies*, Vol. 12, No. 4 (Fall 2010) 63-64 and 67-68.

<sup>4</sup> *Ibid.*, 65-67; and Gibson, *U.S. Foreign Policy*, 15-16.

This dissertation will focus on America's policy regarding the Iraqi Kurds and their quest for autonomy, in the context of Washington's seventeen year-long Cold War competition with the Soviet Union for influence in Iraq. So was the foreign policy of the United States towards the Iraqi Kurds contradictory or consistent between 1958 and 1975? What factors determined Washington's policy towards the Iraqi Kurds between 1958 and 1975? And what factors caused it to change? These are the main research questions which should provide sufficient insight in Washington's motives and goals which determined its policy on the Iraqi Kurds, and should explain how that policy finally took shape. First of all, Washington's main policy interests in relation to the Iraqi Kurds during General Qasim's regime from 1958 till 1963 will be examined. Second, the main U.S. policy interests regarding the Iraqi Kurds during the Ba'athist regime of 1963 and during the presidencies of the brothers Arif will be investigated. And finally, these same U.S. policy interests will be examined during the Ba'athist regime of President al-Bakr from July 1968, until the 1975 Algiers Agreement between Iran and Iraq. During these three separate periods, this dissertation will also focus on how these U.S. interests were eventually pursued.

In researching U.S.-Kurdish relations, many primary sources were consulted as well as numerous valuable secondary sources. Regarding the primary sources, they were almost all accessed by consulting several online sources. Especially the State Department's *Foreign Relations of the United States* series has been incredibly useful for finding U.S. government documents for each of the U.S. presidencies discussed.<sup>5</sup> Another important online source which offers many declassified intelligence material and sources on U.S. foreign policy during the Cold War is the *Digital National Security Archive*. Its *Kissinger Transcripts Collection* has been very valuable for providing primary sources from the Nixon and Ford administrations regarding the Kurdish Operation.<sup>6</sup> Other online sources utilized are the CIA's CREST system and its FOIA Electronic Reading Room, the Nixon Presidential Library and Museum's online collections, and the National Archives and Record Administration. The only primary source that was not consulted online was the House Select Committee on Intelligence's *CIA: The Pike Report*.

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<sup>5</sup> All volumes in the *FRUS* series can be accessed online: <http://history.state.gov/>

<sup>6</sup> The *Digital National Security Archive* is available online: [http://nsarchive.chadwyck.com./](http://nsarchive.chadwyck.com/)

# 1. U.S. policy interests in relation to the Iraqi Kurds during General Abd al-Karim Qasim's regime

## 1.1 Pan-Arabism and Cold War alliances

Back in 1958, Iraq was a constitutional monarchy ruled by the pro-Western Hashemite royal family. However on 14 July 1958 a group of left-wing army officers, the so-called 'Free Officers' led by Brigadier Abd al-Karim Qasim and Colonel Abdul Salam Arif, seized power in Baghdad and murdered the royal family.<sup>7</sup> Their *coup d'état* led to the proclamation of the Republic of Iraq. Next to this, the 'Free Officers' withdrew Iraq from the Arab Federation of Iraq and Jordan,<sup>8</sup> eventually also withdrew Iraq from the Baghdad Pact in March 1959,<sup>9</sup> and turned to the Soviet Union for support. These events were a major blow for American interests in the Middle East. Because of this new friendly relationship between the Republic of Iraq and the USSR, the United States began contemplating various ways of regaining Iraq within its sphere of influence. That's when the Iraqi Kurds became a potentially interesting asset for American interests in the region.<sup>10</sup>

Qasim and Arif both felt the need to include the Kurds in the new Republic of Iraq. So when the Provisional Constitution was proclaimed just two weeks after the coup, its second article stated that 'Arabs and Kurds are partners in the Homeland', as well as that both ethnicities

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<sup>7</sup> A. H. Rubin, 'Abd al-Karim Qasim and the Kurds of Iraq: Centralization, Resistance and Revolt, 1958-63', *Middle Eastern Studies*, Vol. 43, No. 3 (May 2007) 357.

<sup>8</sup> The Arab Federation of Iraq and Jordan was formed on 14 February 1958 as a union between Iraq and Jordan. Both countries were ruled by members of the Hashemite royal family, and King Faisal II of Iraq and his cousin King Hussein of Jordan decided to form this confederation to counterbalance the establishment of the United Arab Republic in 1958 (a political union between Egypt and Syria). On the 2nd of August 1958 the union between Iraq and Jordan was officially ended.

<sup>9</sup> Rubin, 'Abd al-Karim Qasim and the Kurds of Iraq', 357. The Baghdad Pact was the unofficial name of the Middle East Treaty Organization (METO), an intergovernmental military alliance which was created in 1955 by Turkey, Pakistan, Iran, Iraq and the United Kingdom. After Iraq withdrew from the alliance, the name 'Baghdad Pact' was changed into the Central Treaty Organization (CENTO). The main goal of this Cold War alliance was containing the Soviet Union with a chain of strong Middle Eastern states at the southwest of its frontier. In 1979 the organization was officially dissolved.

<sup>10</sup> Little, 'The United States and the Kurds', 67-68.

were guaranteed their 'national rights'.<sup>11</sup> However, the 14 July Revolution in 1958 took place when pan-Arabism was thriving in the Middle East, culminating in the creation of the United Arab Republic between Egypt and Syria headed by the Egyptian president Gamal Abdel Nasser. Despite the fact that Nasser had no direct involvement in the Iraqi 14 July Revolution, the Western powers and Nasser's regional rivals believed the Iraqi Revolution was an Egyptian bid for regional dominance.<sup>12</sup> The Free Officers coup took Washington completely by surprise. CIA director Allen Dulles thought that if the Iraqi revolution would succeed many pro-Western governments in the Middle East could face a similar fate. U.S. Secretary of State John Foster Dulles initially even claimed that the real power behind the new Iraqi government was in the hands of Nasser, who again was being controlled by the USSR.<sup>13</sup>

On 19 July 1958 an agreement was signed on closer cooperation between the Republic of Iraq and the United Arab Republic in the areas of defense, economy, foreign affairs and culture. Nevertheless, the agreement didn't include a detailed operative dimension.<sup>14</sup> Eventually the question whether Iraq should join the UAR became part of a power struggle between the country's new rulers, the political rivals Qasim and Arif. The most powerful, Qasim, opposed a union but Arif wanted to take Iraq into the UAR. Qasim's anti-UAR position ensured him of the support from Iraq's strongest political faction: the Iraqi Communist Party (ICP). Meanwhile the Kurds were also a major obstacle to unity with the UAR because of their conflicting interests with Pan-Arabism and Qasim tried to exploit this by seeking Kurdish allies.<sup>15</sup> Therefore the Kurds, and their quest for autonomy, became entangled in a volatile post-Hashemite Iraq which was filled with a new set of leading players: the Arab nationalists who were eager to join the United Arab Republic, the Iraqi Communist Party which wanted government participation and closer ties with the Soviet

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<sup>11</sup> Rubin, 'Abd al-Karim Qasim and the Kurds of Iraq', 357; D. McDowall, *A Modern History of the Kurds* (London, New York 2004) 302; and I.S. Vanly, 'Kurdistan in Iraq' in: G. Chaliand ed., *People Without a Country; The Kurds and Kurdistan* (London 1980) 165.

<sup>12</sup> Rubin, 'Abd al-Karim Qasim and the Kurds of Iraq', 357-358.

<sup>13</sup> M. Mufti, 'The United States and Nasserist Pan-Arabism' in: D.W. Lesch ed., *The Middle East and the United States; A Historical and Political Reassessment* (Boulder 1996) 173.

<sup>14</sup> Rubin, 'Abd al-Karim Qasim and the Kurds of Iraq', 357-358.

<sup>15</sup> *Ibid.*, 359; and McDowall, *A Modern History of the Kurds*, 303-304.

Union, the nationalist Kurdistan Democratic Party (KDP), and lastly the Kurdish *aghas*<sup>16</sup> who had collaborated with the Hashemite monarchy.<sup>17</sup>

Eventually Qasim decided in September 1958 to invite the exiled Kurdish nationalist leader Mulla Mustafa Barzani, president of the KDP, back from the Soviet Union and offer him amnesty. However, American and British officials saw Barzani's return as a deceptive Soviet act due to his friendly relations with Moscow, while Iran and Turkey feared Barzani would inspire Kurdish separatism in their territories. But Qasim hoped that the KDP leader's return would appease Kurdish nationalism in Iraq and prevent Arif from establishing closer ties with the Kurds. In the end Qasim prevailed and succeeded in deposing Arif as a deputy prime minister in October 1958.<sup>18</sup>

## **1.2 American interests in the Middle East, Iraq and NSC 5820/1**

In order to properly understand U.S. policy interests in Iraq and with the Iraqi Kurds, one must first look at the regional U.S. interests in the Middle East after World War II. These U.S. interests are basically comprised of two strategic objectives.<sup>19</sup> The first objective was keeping Saudi Arabia and its oil-rich neighbors safely under U.S. protection and influence. The oil-producing countries in this region were vital for the U.S. and its NATO-allies in Western-Europe, because they reduced European dependence on oil and gas from the Soviet Union. The second strategic objective was closely related to this Western dependence on Middle Eastern oil: preventing the expansion of Communist influence in the Arab world.<sup>20</sup>

After World War II the U.S. had used several regional strategies for the Middle East to achieve those strategic objectives. Eventually the U.S. adopted in January 1957 the Eisenhower Doctrine, which wanted to provide the independent Arab governments with an alternative to Nasser's regional leadership. The Eisenhower Doctrine's goal was to strengthen the conservative Arab regimes while isolating Soviet influence by confining

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<sup>16</sup> *Aghas* were traditional, often wealthy, Kurdish tribal leaders.

<sup>17</sup> McDowall, *A Modern History of the Kurds*, 303.

<sup>18</sup> Rubin, 'Abd al-Karim Qasim and the Kurds of Iraq', 359.

<sup>19</sup> Mufti, 'The United States and Nasserist Pan-Arabism', 167.

<sup>20</sup> *Ibid.*, 167.



Nasser.<sup>21</sup> However, during the Syrian Crisis of 1957 Washington was forced to cooperate with Nasser in order to prevent a Syrian turnover to the Soviet Bloc.<sup>22</sup> With the 14 July Revolution in Iraq of 1958, where a pro-Western government had been toppled and president Qasim increasingly had to count on the ICP for fighting off his domestic opponents, another Arab country was in danger of being pulled into the Soviet bloc. These developments in Iraq and the Syrian Crisis of 1957, led to another shift in U.S. policy for the Middle East from the Eisenhower administration: the U.S. would from now on accommodate to pan-Arab nationalism. The National Security Council report NSC 5820/1 that followed on November 4, 1958, would provide the core for the next three years of the United States' policy for the Middle East.<sup>23</sup>

The NSC report identified two basic developments in the Middle East that were responsible for the weakening of the Western position in the area: the rise of the radical pan-Arab nationalist movement and the infiltration of the Soviet Union in the region. The virtual collapse of the pro-Western conservative regimes in 1958 in the face of pan-Arab nationalism required a shift in Western strategy.<sup>24</sup> According to the NSC 5820/1 report, the USSR's policy on the Near East was designed to weaken and finally eradicate Western influence, using Arab nationalism as a tool. So the prevention of further Communist expansion to the Near East depended on the extent to which the U.S. would be able to cooperate with, and accommodate to Nasser and Arab nationalism.<sup>25</sup> In order to secure Washington's *primary* objectives, 'Denial of the area to Soviet domination' and the continued supply of sufficient Near Eastern oil to its NATO partners in Western Europe,<sup>26</sup> the U.S. had to cooperate with Nasser on regional problems where the UAR was directly

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<sup>21</sup> Mufti, 'The United States and Nasserist Pan-Arabism', 170; and D.D. Eisenhower, 'Special Message to the Congress on the Situation in the Middle East', January 5, 1957.

<sup>22</sup> D. W. Lesch, 'The 1957 American-Syrian Crisis: Globalist Policy in a Regional Reality' in: D.W. Lesch ed., *The Middle East and the United States; A Historical and Political Reassessment* (Boulder 1996) 138-143.

<sup>23</sup> Mufti, 'The United States and Nasserist Pan-Arabism', 173-174.

<sup>24</sup> E.C. Keefer and G.W. LaFantasie ed., 'National Security Council Report 5820/1: U.S. Policy toward the Near East', *Foreign Relations of the United States, 1958-1960, Volume XII, Document 51*, 188.

<sup>25</sup> *Ibid.*, 188-189.

<sup>26</sup> *Ibid.*, 189.

involved.<sup>27</sup> The NSC report also outlined U.S. policy regarding states in the Middle East that had a neutralist position in the Cold War, such as the Republic of Iraq headed by Qasim: 'While seeking pro-Western orientation, accept neutralist policies of states in the area when necessary.'<sup>28</sup>

On Iraq, the NSC report specifically advised to continue friendly relations on a complementary basis. Also in case of a possible Iraqi exit from the Baghdad Pact, the U.S. was advised to comply.<sup>29</sup> Ultimately, U.S. relations with the Iraqi Kurds were directly dependent on Washington's relations with Qasim's government and the Cold War context. Another complicating factor in U.S. relations with the Iraqi Kurds was the long association of the Iraqi Kurds with the Iraqi Communist Party and the apparently natural Communist-Kurdish coalition.<sup>30</sup>

### **1.3 Communist-Kurdish relations**

After the 14 July Revolution both the ICP, as well as the Iraqi Kurds, opposed a union with the UAR, because both groups feared persecution and discrimination by Arab nationalists. Kurdish nationalists and their main political party KDP were also incompatible with liberal Iraqi parties of the left, due to their Arab nationalism. Consequently the KDP, although being nationalist, was naturally driven towards the Communists.<sup>31</sup> Meanwhile the Iraqi KDP, founded in 1946, was being organized on the same lines as the Iranian KDP, which was a 'Marxist-Leninist inspired party'.<sup>32</sup> Eventually by the 1950s, the KDP had changed its main focus from Kurdish autonomy to socioeconomic problems, becoming even more aligned with the ICP. Some of the KDP's points were: Kurdish autonomy under a republican administration, extensive land reforms, and finally nationalization of the Iraqi oil production.

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<sup>27</sup> LaFantasie E.A., *FRUS, 1958-1960, Volume XII, Document 51*, 195.

<sup>28</sup> *Ibid.*, 190.

<sup>29</sup> *Ibid.*, 196-197.

<sup>30</sup> S.C. Pelletiere, *The Kurds: An unstable element in the Gulf* (Boulder 1984) 116.

<sup>31</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>32</sup> Vanly, 'Kurdistan in Iraq', 164.

Because of these close ties between the KDP and the Iraqi Communist Party, Kurdish nationalist development in northern Iraq was heavily influenced by leftist politicians.<sup>33</sup>

In his first years in power, General Qasim focused on diminishing the influence of the traditional Kurdish *aghas*. Qasim invited Mulla Mustafa Barzani back to Iraq for that purpose. At first it seemed like a fruitful cooperation, but in the end it wouldn't last. In exchange for financial support and weapons, Barzani made sure the KDP remained loyal to the regime and helped suppressing opponents of the Qasim government.<sup>34</sup> On March 8, 1959, Arab nationalist and Baathist army officers revolted in Mosul, but this rising was eventually suppressed by an ICP militia and Barzani tribesmen. Subsequently Qasim used the uprising as an excuse for expulsion of members from these hostile parties from his own army and administration.<sup>35</sup>

After the Mosul revolt, the KDP alliance with the ICP had become even closer and the ICP started demanding direct participation in the Qasim administration. For Qasim, this meant that the ICP had become the biggest threat for his regime. In mid-July 1959 the northern Iraqi city Kirkuk was also struck by violence when Turkomans were murdered by Kurdish Communists during ethnic riots.<sup>36</sup> Qasim eagerly took the opportunity to blame the ICP. Next he succeeded in obtaining Barzani's help in curbing the ICP's influence, because Barzani believed that Communists were behind a recent assassination attempt against him in Rawanduz.<sup>37</sup>

However, during the year of 1960, relations between Qasim and Barzani deteriorated fast. Barzani decided to make war on rival Kurdish tribes with weapons supplied by Qasim, but without seeking his approval. Also, the KDP became increasingly outspoken in their criticism on the regime and kept demanding some kind of Kurdish autonomy. Eventually tensions

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<sup>33</sup> Pelletiere, *The Kurds*, 116-117; Rubin, 'Abd al-Karim Qasim and the Kurds of Iraq', 355-356; and Vanly, 'Kurdistan in Iraq', 164.

<sup>34</sup> McDowall, *A Modern History of the Kurds*, 304; and Rubin, 'Abd al-Karim Qasim and the Kurds of Iraq', 354.

<sup>35</sup> McDowall, *A Modern History of the Kurds*, 304; and Pelletiere, *The Kurds*, 119.

<sup>36</sup> McDowall, *A Modern History of the Kurds*, 304-305; and Pelletiere, *The Kurds*, 119-120

<sup>37</sup> McDowall, *A Modern History of the Kurds*, 305.

between Baghdad and the Barzani Kurds, their allied tribes, and the KDP resulted in civil war in the autumn of 1961.<sup>38</sup>

#### 1.4 American involvement in the Kurdish insurrection of 1961?

By September 1961 the KDP had joined the rebellion as well. Barzani actually had major ideological differences with the KDP. Like the other *aghas*, his main complaints were about the Agrarian Reform Law (which the KDP supported) and the intertribal fighting which Qasim stimulated. Barzani, after he had first tried to achieve Soviet support in 1960,<sup>39</sup> also fruitlessly sought help from the British and Americans while the KDP regarded the latter two as 'arch-imperialists'.<sup>40</sup> Meanwhile the KDP's main complaint was lack of Kurdish autonomy. So there was certainly not a united Kurdish separatist movement at the start of the rebellion in summer 1961.<sup>41</sup>

After one year of fighting the Kurdish rebels, Qasim hadn't made any progress at all. Meanwhile, his army wasn't eager to fight a guerilla war and Qasim had increasingly become politically isolated. Meanwhile, the KDP approached the ICP for preparing a coup, but the Communists hesitated. So by December 1962 the KDP started negotiations with Arab Nationalists, Nasserists and the Baath Party. These parties wanted guarantees from the KDP that the Kurds would not take advantage of a coup. The KDP complied, believing that it would receive full Kurdish autonomy as a reward. Eventually on February 8, 1963, Qasim was successfully overthrown in a military coup.<sup>42</sup>

There is some discussion as to whether the Americans were somehow involved in supporting the insurrection of Barzani and his Kurdish allies. The Kurdish rebels were able to fight an effective guerilla war, but they needed help to end the deadlock and force Qasim into negotiations or surrender. Therefore, the Iraqi Kurds started a propaganda campaign

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<sup>38</sup> McDowall, *A Modern History of the Kurds*, 307-308; and Rubin, 'Abd al-Karim Qasim and the Kurds of Iraq', 354.

<sup>39</sup> Rubin, 'Abd al-Karim Qasim and the Kurds of Iraq', 366.

<sup>40</sup> McDowall, *A Modern History of the Kurds*, 310-311.

<sup>41</sup> *Ibid.*; Rubin, 'Abd al-Karim Qasim and the Kurds of Iraq', 367; and Pelletiere, *The Kurds*, 130-131.

<sup>42</sup> McDowall, *A Modern History of the Kurds*, 312-313

aimed at the West.<sup>43</sup> Kurdish envoys had already been trying to persuade American (and European) officials since September 1961 to promote the Kurdish cause at the United Nations,<sup>44</sup> to deliver material and military support, and convince Iran to allow smuggling into Iraqi Kurdistan.<sup>45</sup> One KDP official even told an American diplomat in the summer of 1962 that most Communists had been purged from the KDP and the rest would soon follow. However, the conversation ended with 'USG policy toward Kurdish rebellion has not changed'.<sup>46</sup>

A September 11, 1962, U.S. memorandum on Iraq stated: 'The United States considers the Kurdish problem in Iraq an internal matter which should be resolved internally. Our Government does not support Kurdish activities against the Government of Iraq in any way and hopes an early peaceful solution will be possible.'<sup>47</sup> Besides, any U.S. comments on certain Kurdish constitutional wishes would be a violation of Iraq's sovereignty. Washington believed that the future of the Kurdish people was 'inseparably tied to the well-being of the countries in which they reside', which refers to Iran and Turkey as well.<sup>48</sup> In the end, Kurdish efforts didn't succeed in changing Washington's policy. The USSR also didn't want to break with Qasim and continued its supply of Soviet arms to the regime. Soviet support to the KDP only consisted of some minor financial contributions,<sup>49</sup> and there is no evidence (to date) that the Soviet Union delivered any significant material assistance to Barzani or to the KDP.<sup>50</sup>

Still, there is some disagreement among historians about whether the U.S. secretly delivered some kind of support to the Kurdish rebels. Douglas Little suggests that the U.S. was somehow involved in the Kurdish insurrection. Although Little correctly observed that

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<sup>43</sup> Rubin, 'Abd al-Karim Qasim and the Kurds of Iraq', 371.

<sup>44</sup> N.J. Joring and G.W. LaFantasie ed., 'Telegram from the Department of State to the Embassy in Iraq', *FRUS, 1961-1963, Volume XVII, Document 305* (Washington 1994) 746-747.

<sup>45</sup> Rubin, 'Abd al-Karim Qasim and the Kurds of Iraq', 372.

<sup>46</sup> N.J. Noring and G.W. LaFantasie ed., 'Telegram from the Embassy in Iraq to the Department of State', *FRUS, 1961-1963, Volume XVIII, Document 49* (Washington 1995) 116-117.

<sup>47</sup> 'Memorandum from the Director of the Office of Near Eastern Affairs (Strong) to Assistant Secretary of State for Near Eastern and South Asian Affairs (Talbot)', *Department of State, Central Files, 787.00/9-1162*.

<sup>48</sup> Ibid.

<sup>49</sup> LaFantasie E.A., *FRUS, 1961-1963, Volume XVIII, Document 49*, 117.

<sup>50</sup> Rubin, 'Abd al-Karim Qasim and the Kurds of Iraq', 372.

there were American intelligence contacts with the Kurds, and that Qasim suspected U.S. involvement, he continues his argument that despite the CIA was considering 'extreme measures to achieve regime change in Baghdad', it ultimately preferred 'political action rather than assassination.'<sup>51</sup> Yet, he doesn't present any evidence which would link direct CIA involvement to the emergence of the Kurdish insurrection. Little even acknowledges himself that there's no evidence (to date) that the Kennedy administration was somehow involved and only presents some quotes from an April 1962 CIA report which merely predicted correctly that Barzani might become a big problem for Qasim that year.<sup>52</sup> Therefore I agree with Roham Alvandi and Bryan R. Gibson that there is no substantial evidence to support Little's claim that the U.S. played a role in encouraging the outbreak of, or providing support to, the Kurdish insurgency against Baghdad in 1961.<sup>53</sup> Gibson even suggests that the outbreak of the Kurdish War had been part of a Soviet plan.<sup>54</sup>

Malik Mufti also states that the Kurdish revolt of 1961 in Iraq 'may have received some U.S. backing.' Unfortunately, he also fails to present any evidence which might prove this, but Mufti suggests that the Kurdish insurrection might be related to Qasim's failed efforts to annex Kuwait in June 1961.<sup>55</sup> However, according to Avshalom H. Rubin neither the U.S. nor the United Kingdom provided any material or political support to the Kurds and their rebellion.<sup>56</sup> Author David McDowall does recall how Barzani approached the United States and the U.K. for support, but also makes no statements on any U.S. involvement in the Kurdish revolt whatsoever.<sup>57</sup> Because of the fact that none of those authors that suggest possible U.S. involvement in the Kurdish revolt can back this up with reliable evidence, nor

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<sup>51</sup> Little, 'The United States and the Kurds', 68.

<sup>52</sup> Ibid.

<sup>53</sup> Gibson, *U.S. Foreign Policy*, 16; and Roham Alvandi, H-Diplo Article Review: Douglas Little, 'The United States and the Kurds: A Cold War Story,' *H-Net: Humanities and Social Sciences Online*, No. 302 (May 2011) 2-3. Available online: <http://www.h-net.org/~diplo/reviews/PDF/AR302.pdf>

<sup>54</sup> Gibson, *U.S. Foreign Policy*, 16. For more information on the Soviet role in the Kurdish War see: Vladislav Zubok, 'Spy Vs. Spy: The KGB Vs. the CIA, 1960-1962,' *Cold War International History Project*, Woodrow Wilson Center for Scholars, No. 4 (1994) 28-29.

<sup>55</sup> Mufti, 'The United States and Nasserist Pan-Arabism', 179.

<sup>56</sup> Rubin, 'Abd al-Karim Qasim and the Kurds of Iraq', 372.

<sup>57</sup> McDowall, *A Modern History of the Kurds*, 311.

(at present) any disclosed U.S.G. official documents seem to exist which would show direct U.S. support for the Kurdish rebels, while other official U.S. Government documents declare that the Kurdish cause is an internal Iraqi affair which doesn't concern the U.S.,<sup>58</sup> it seems very unlikely that any (significant) American covert support to the Kurdish rebels ever took place.

Interestingly, a May 1962 U.S. memorandum on contingencies in Iraq suggested that if the Iraqi Kurds, in case of Qasim's overthrow, would refuse to support a new Iraqi government and make claims for autonomy, this should have no influence on Washington's recognition of the new administration. In this way the U.S. could not be accused of supporting the Kurdish cause.<sup>59</sup> This suggests that American officials were seriously contemplating to continue their course of non-involvement with the Iraqi Kurds, if Qasim would be overthrown. Besides, this also makes any previous covert U.S. involvement in the Kurdish rebellion even more unlikely. Therefore I agree with the authors Rubin and Stephen C. Pelletiere that 'there is no convincing evidence that either the United States or the USSR meddled in this first revolt of Barzani',<sup>60</sup> and that even if some form of support took place, it is certain that no heavy weapons were delivered.<sup>61</sup>

### **1.5 U.S. policy interests in relation to the Iraqi Kurds during Qasim**

So if one looks at what the main U.S. policy interests were in relation to the Iraqi Kurds during general Qasim's reign, it seems there weren't many at all. One of the complicating factors for supporting the Iraqi Kurds was the fact that two major U.S.-allies in the region, Turkey and Iran, could become destabilized if their considerable Kurdish minorities would also be inspired to ignite Kurdish nationalist activities. The benefits of weakening the Qasim

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<sup>58</sup> 'Memorandum from Strong to Talbot', *Department of State, Central Files, 787.00/9-1162*; LaFantasie E.A., *FRUS, 1961-1963, Volume XVIII, Document 49*, 117; LaFantasie E.A., *FRUS, 1961-1963, Volume XVII, Document 305*, 746-747; and LaFantasie E.A., 'Memorandum from Grant to McGhee', *FRUS, 1961-1963, Volume XVII, Document 262*, 655.

<sup>59</sup> LaFantasie E.A., *FRUS, 1961-1963, Volume XVII, Document 262*, 655.

<sup>60</sup> Pelletiere, *The Kurds*, 130.

<sup>61</sup> *Ibid.*; and Rubin, 'Abd al-Karim Qasim and the Kurds of Iraq', 372.

government with a Kurdish insurrection, didn't outweigh the costs of perhaps also spoiling relations with two strategically very important allies for Washington, if a U.S. sponsored Kurdish insurrection could not be contained within Iraqi borders.<sup>62</sup>

However, Iran did try to somehow exploit and support Kurdish nationalism in Iraq in spite of its risks. Many Iranian officials wished to replace Qasim because they had lost a Baghdad Pact ally, feared Qasim's cooperation with the ICP and KDP, and finally because of territorial disputes with Baghdad.<sup>63</sup> However, from the fall of 1958 British and American officials began to warn Iran not to promote Kurdish separatist activities against Baghdad. Both countries thought Kurdish separatism was unfavorable, and most of all feared that a Kurdish insurrection would drive Qasim even closer to the Soviet Union and the ICP.<sup>64</sup>

Possibly the biggest obstacle for U.S. support of the Kurdish struggle for autonomy in Iraq, were the close historic ties which the main Kurdish political party, the KDP, and its president Barzani, had with International Communism. As previously stated, the U.S. main strategy for defending its interests in the Middle East was basically built on two strategic objectives. The first objective was keeping the oil producing countries in the Middle East safely under U.S. (military) protection and influence, so America's NATO-allies were assured of a sufficient oil supply. The second strategic objective was preventing the expansion of Communist influence in the Middle East.<sup>65</sup>

U.S. support for the KDP, which was pro-Soviet, which originally had very close ties with the Iraqi Communist Party, which had a president (Barzani) who had been in exile in the Soviet Union from 1947 till 1958, and whose political programme declared that the KDP was a 'Marxist-Leninist inspired party',<sup>66</sup> would thus be contrary to one of its own *primary* strategic objectives for the Middle East. Barzani even vainly tried to achieve material support from the

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<sup>62</sup> Rubin, 'Abd al-Karim Qasim and the Kurds of Iraq', 372.

<sup>63</sup> Ibid., 363.

<sup>64</sup> Ibid.; LaFantasie E.A., 'Telegram From the Department of State to the Embassy in Iran', *FRUS, 1958-1960, Volume XII, Document 260*, 623-624; and LaFantasie E.A., 'National Intelligence Estimate 36.2-60: The Outlook for Iraq', *FRUS, 1958-1960, Volume XII, Document 222*, 517-520.

<sup>65</sup> Mufti, 'The United States and Nasserist Pan-Arabism', 167; and LaFantasie E.A., *FRUS, 1958-1960, Volume XII, Document 51*, 189.

<sup>66</sup> Vanly, 'Kurdistan in Iraq', 164.



Soviets in 1960.<sup>67</sup> After KDP-ICP cooperation ended in August 1959, both parties' immediate goals remained largely the same, except for the 'Kurdish autonomy' problem. By backing the KDP and Barzani, the U.S. would thus be indirectly supporting the expansion of Communist influence in Iraq and the Middle East.

In addition the KDP already announced in its 1953 programme that it wished to nationalize the Iraqi oil industry.<sup>68</sup> This industry was being controlled by Western oil companies,<sup>69</sup> so Iraqi nationalization would not only be contrary to Western business interests in Iraq, but it could possibly also endanger another *primary* objective of the U.S. in the region. Baghdad had friendly relations with the USSR and its Warsaw Pact allies, and if Iraq's oil production would be nationalized, Baghdad could more easily decide to start exporting Iraq's oil to one of these countries instead of supplying NATO-members.

As stated before, the NSC 5820/1 report advised Washington to continue friendly relations with Qasim's government on a complimentary basis in an attempt to curb Soviet influence.<sup>70</sup> The NSC report also declared that leadership groups should be supported which present the best chance of promoting U.S. objectives in the region. However, it continues with: 'avoid becoming identified with specific internal issues or individuals. Seek to discredit groups which promote pro-Soviet thinking.'<sup>71</sup> So Washington didn't want to become involved in the Kurdish problem, nor could it support Barzani and the KDP due to their Communist origin and ties with the ICP. Although the U.S. wanted a new, pro-Western government in Baghdad, there were no realistic alternatives to Qasim available. Any U.S. support for the KDP and Barzani would also harm American diplomatic efforts to improve relations with Qasim.

Another advice in the NSC report related to U.S. policy interests with the Iraqi Kurds was to promote groups within Iraq which wanted friendly relations with the West, but without becoming identified with political matters and specific individuals.<sup>72</sup> But if the KDP and

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<sup>67</sup> McDowall, *A Modern History of the Kurds*, 311.

<sup>68</sup> *Ibid.*, 299.

<sup>69</sup> A.R. Ghassemilou, 'Kurdistan in Iran' in: G. Chaliand, *People Without a Country*, 118.

<sup>70</sup> LaFantasie E.A., *FRUS, 1958-1960, Volume XII, Document 51*, 196.

<sup>71</sup> *Ibid.*, 191.

<sup>72</sup> *Ibid.*, 196-197.

Barzani remained true to their Marxist-Leninist inspired party origins, it would be highly doubtful whether long-term friendly relations with the West could be established. Taking in account Washington's 1958 policy-shift of accommodating to pan-Arab nationalism, it would actually make much more sense for the U.S. to discretely support the Baath party, Arab nationalists and Nasserists. They were fiercely anti-Communist, willing to topple Qasim and had far better chances of successfully carrying out a military coup, as could be seen in their February 1963 overthrow of Qasim.<sup>73</sup>

### **1.6 Conclusion U.S. foreign policy on the Iraqi Kurds during Qasim's regime**

In the end, the only major strategic objective that the U.S. and the Iraqi Kurds really had in common during General Qasim's reign was the fact that both wished that eventually Qasim's regime would be overthrown. And the main U.S. policy interest regarding the Iraqi Kurds was the fact that in theory the Kurds could be useful in toppling Qasim. However, in the end there were way too many strategic reasons for Washington to deny the Iraqi Kurds support in their fight for autonomy. Most important of all was the fact that providing support to the Iraqi Kurds during the 1961 Kurdish insurrection would be contrary to the United States' two *primary objectives* of its main strategy for the Middle East.

U.S. relations with the Iraqi Kurds were directly dependent on Washington's relations with the Qasim-government. Because the United States actually wanted a pro-Western government, but realistic alternatives weren't available, Washington had to accept the neutralist policies of Qasim and continued friendly relations with Baghdad so Soviet influence could be balanced.<sup>74</sup> Therefore the official U.S. government position on the Kurdish autonomy issue was that it should be strictly regarded as an internal Iraqi matter. Any Western interference with the Iraqi Kurds was undesirable, as it could hurt American relations with Baghdad. In addition, the U.S. feared that a Kurdish revolt could drive Qasim even closer to the Soviet Union. So U.S. backing of the Kurdish rebellion of 1961 was out of

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<sup>73</sup> McDowall, *A Modern History of the Kurds*, 312-313.

<sup>74</sup> LaFantasie E.A., *FRUS, 1958-1960, Volume XII, Document 51*, 189.

the question,<sup>75</sup> and it is therefore very unlikely that the United States has provided any (significant) support to the Kurdish rebels.<sup>76</sup>

In May 1962, the Americans already anticipated that if Qasim would be overthrown, a new regime would probably be less anti-Western in its policy. Therefore the U.S. was already advised to let friendly relations with the new Iraqi regime prevail over U.S.-Kurdish relations.<sup>77</sup> A new nationalist Iraqi regime would probably be anti-Communist, so supporting this new government would be more in line with the United States' *primary objectives*. In the end Kurdish and American interests simply didn't match, hence Washington's position of non-involvement in the Iraqi-Kurdish conflict during Qasim's reign.

## **2. U.S. policy interests regarding the Iraqi Kurds from General Qasim's overthrow until the July 1968 Ba'athist coup**

### **2.1 Qasim's overthrow**

The military coup on February 8, 1963, which toppled General Qasim, was headed by his longtime opponent Abdul Salam Arif. Although Iraqi nationalists were also involved, the bulk of the revolutionary forces was comprised of young Ba'ath Party officers.<sup>78</sup> In the aftermath of the *coup d'état* many of Qasim's supporters, and most of all scores of Iraqi Communists, were murdered by Ba'athist death squads. There are strong indications that these death squads used hit lists which were allegedly delivered by American intelligence networks and the CIA.<sup>79</sup>

In Washington the regime change in Baghdad was welcomed due to its complicated relations with Qasim. U.S. officials expected that U.S.-Iraqi relations would be considerably improved with this new regime and that the internal situation of Iraq would benefit as

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<sup>75</sup> 'Memorandum from Strong to Talbot', *Department of State, Central Files, 787.00/9-1162*.

<sup>76</sup> Pelletiere, *The Kurds*, 130; and Rubin, 'Abd al-Karim Qasim and the Kurds of Iraq', 372.

<sup>77</sup> LaFantasie E.A., *FRUS, 1961-1963, Volume XVII, Document 262*, 655.

<sup>78</sup> Pelletiere, *The Kurds*, 132-133.

<sup>79</sup> Little, 'The United States and the Kurds', 69; and M. Farouk-Sluglett and P. Sluglett, *Iraq Since 1958: From Revolution to Dictatorship* (London, New York 2001) 85-86.

well.<sup>80</sup> However, in spite of the fact that Moscow was clearly not pleased with losing Qasim's regime and the subsequent crackdown on Iraqi Communists, it tried to maintain as much influence in Baghdad as possible. So U.S. attempts to exploit the regime change and improve its position in Iraq would not go unchallenged.<sup>81</sup> It also didn't take long before the Kurdish question would complicate Washington's relations with the Ba'athist regime. Barzani soon started pressing Baghdad for Kurdish autonomy as a reward for the Kurdish role in destabilizing Qasim's government. In May 1963, U.S. diplomats already warned the new Iraqi government that unless they started serious negotiations with the Kurds, the guerilla war in the north would resume with the Kurds now probably being backed by the Soviets.<sup>82</sup>

A March 1963 Department of State document described the official U.S. policy guidelines for dealing with Iraq's new government. The document concluded that if the new Iraqi regime should fail to achieve a swift political solution to the Kurdish problem, that the only beneficiaries would be the USSR and the Iraqi Communists. However, the official U.S. position still remained that the Kurdish question should be strictly regarded as an 'internal Iraqi matter.'<sup>83</sup> The U.S. would have no direct or indirect role in solving the Kurdish autonomy problem, but did want a peaceful compromise. Washington also had to use its influence on Iran and Turkey to achieve a 'similar hands-off policy' from their respective governments and aim for friendly Iraqi relations with its neighboring countries.<sup>84</sup> Since the new regime was anti-Communist, it was expected that Iraq would follow a more non-aligned course and thus effectively reduce Soviet influence. So there was no need for the U.S. to give Iraq advice on how to deal with its domestic Communism.<sup>85</sup>

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<sup>80</sup> N.J. Noring and G.W. LaFantasie ed., 'Memorandum From Stephen O. Fuqua to Sloan', *FRUS, 1961-1963, Volume XVIII, Document 153*, 343; and LaFantasie E.A., 'Memorandum From Secretary of State Rusk to President Kennedy', *FRUS, 1961-1963, Volume XVIII, Document 154*, 344.

<sup>81</sup> LaFantasie E.A., 'Memorandum From Robert W. Komer of the National Security Council Staff to President Kennedy', *FRUS, 1961-1963, Volume XVIII, Document 159*, 351-352.

<sup>82</sup> Little, 'The United States and the Kurds', 69-70.

<sup>83</sup> LaFantasie E.A., 'Circular Airgram From the Department of State to Certain Posts', *FRUS, 1961-1963, Volume XVIII, Document 174*, 383.

<sup>84</sup> *Ibid.*, 383-384.

<sup>85</sup> *Ibid.*, 384-385.

An April 1963 National Intelligence Estimate called 'The Soviet Role in the Arab World', accurately described Washington's assessment of the USSR's role during the Iraqi Baathist regime of 1963. During Qasim's presidency, the Soviets had managed to increase their influence in Iraq significantly by providing Soviet weaponry and many economic assistance projects. In addition, Qasim made use of the influential and well-organized ICP while his regime's foreign policy was strongly corresponding to Moscow's line.<sup>86</sup> However, the Baathist coup of February 1963 proved to be a major setback for Soviet influence in Iraq and the Middle East. The Baath Party was extremely hostile towards the ICP, especially because they had assisted Qasim in cracking down on Baathists and Nasserists. Eventually, during 1963, the Baathists succeeded in effectively cutting out the ICP by assassinating prominent party officials.<sup>87</sup> The chances of a successful Communist grab for power in Iraq were thus severely reduced, while the Baathist regime also tried to decrease Iraq's reliance on the Soviet Union and its allies. Therefore Baghdad sought Western technical support, financial assistance and even wished Western weapons.<sup>88</sup>

Washington believed that the Soviets might have thought that they were just about to take Iraq into the Soviet Bloc, so they were extremely disappointed about the recent course of events. The U.S. now feared that the Soviets would try to regain their influence in Iraq by trying to sabotage Baathist efforts to achieve any compromise with the Iraqi Kurds. If Moscow would succeed, Washington believed that the Soviets could try to regain lost ground by supporting a renewed Kurdish rebellion.<sup>89</sup> Meanwhile, with the Baathist government in power in Baghdad, Egypt, Syria and Iraq now all had anti-Communist governments which manifested once again an Arab desire for unity. So by 1963, Washington

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<sup>86</sup> CIA, National Intelligence Estimate (NIE) Number 11-6-63, 'The Soviet Role in the Arab World', 24 April 1963, *Digital National Security Archive, Soviet Estimate Collection, Item Number: SE00382*, 4-5.

[http://gateway.proquest.com.ezproxy.leidenuniv.nl:2048/openurl?url\\_ver=Z39.88-2004&res\\_dat=xri:dnsa&rft\\_dat=xri:dnsa:article:CSE00382](http://gateway.proquest.com.ezproxy.leidenuniv.nl:2048/openurl?url_ver=Z39.88-2004&res_dat=xri:dnsa&rft_dat=xri:dnsa:article:CSE00382)

<sup>87</sup> *Ibid.*, 5.

<sup>88</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>89</sup> *Ibid.*

believed that a possible Arab political union could actually be an extra obstacle for Communist infiltration in the Middle East.<sup>90</sup>

When in April 1963 Barzani requested American support for the Kurdish revolt, U.S. officials replied that the revolt was considered an internal Iraqi matter and that the U.S. wouldn't back them.<sup>91</sup> However, when Kurdish negotiations with the Iraqi government failed the U.S. could not afford to remain out of the conflict. Due to the dangerous consequences which a resumption of the Iraqi-Kurdish conflict could have on the entire region, U.S. officials tried to convince both sides that a mutual compromise on Kurdish autonomy was the best solution.<sup>92</sup> Officially, U.S. policy regarding the Kurdish question remained unchanged. Nonetheless, U.S. diplomats pointed out in informal contacts that there were many advantages for the Kurds in remaining an integral part of the Iraqi state, and in signing a workable compromise. Baghdad was also informally pressed by the U.S. to be 'forthcoming in meeting Kurdish aspirations to a reasonable degree.'<sup>93</sup>

## **2.2 Resumption of the Iraqi-Kurdish war during the Ba'athist regime**

Eventually U.S. diplomats vainly tried to arrange an agreement between the Ba'athist regime and the Kurds by offering surplus wheat from the U.S. Food for Peace program. However, in the end U.S. diplomatic efforts could not prevent a resumption of Iraqi-Kurdish hostilities in June 1963. In the summer of 1963 the Iraqi regime declared to be willing to assist in liberating Palestine and continued to buy Soviet weaponry.<sup>94</sup> Despite the fact that these moves were contrary to American interests, the U.S. still turned down Kurdish requests in July 1963 for American assistance for their rebellion.<sup>95</sup> On the contrary, according to a memorandum from July 10, 1963, the U.S. had just agreed to sell American weapons to Iraq

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<sup>90</sup> CIA, 'The Soviet Role in the Arab World', *DNSA, Soviet Estimate Collection, Item Number: SE00382*, 6.

<sup>91</sup> LaFantasie E.A., 'Telegram From the Department of State to the Embassy in Iraq', *FRUS, 1961-1963, Volume XVIII, Document 208*, 451.

<sup>92</sup> *Ibid.*, 452.

<sup>93</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>94</sup> Little, 'The United States and the Kurds', 70.

<sup>95</sup> LaFantasie E.A., 'Memorandum From McKesson to Bundy', *FRUS, 1961-1963, Volume XVIII, Document 307*, 665-666.

and the document even continues with 'we're giving Iraqis some ammo for Kurd campaign. So are Syria and UAR apparently.'<sup>96</sup> Eventually, the Iraqi army offensive was so successful that by the end of September U.S. intelligence expected that unless the Kurds would receive any outside help, their rebellion would probably collapse.<sup>97</sup>

Meanwhile, Soviet-Iraqi relations deteriorated even further due to the fact that the USSR supported a failed attempt to bring the Kurdish question to the attention of the United Nations.<sup>98</sup> On 15 June 1963, the Soviet Union declared in an official statement that Moscow supported the Kurdish demands for autonomy within the Iraqi state and that Iraq's Kurdish policy violated the U.N. charter. However, the added assertion that Ba'athist government policies could enable a restoration of Western dominance of Iraq, which could be used 'against the security of the Soviet State', revealed Moscow's primary concerns.<sup>99</sup>

By August 1963 the United States wanted in the long run that the Kurds would be assimilated within Iraq with a certain amount of local self-government in essentially Kurdish areas. A prolonged Iraqi-Kurdish conflict would generate instability for its neighboring countries as well, and U.S. officials feared that the Soviet Union would exploit the Kurdish problem in Iraq to increase its influence in the region as a whole.<sup>100</sup> In order to achieve an early end to the conflict, the U.S. believed that a strong Iraqi military posture combined with an Iraqi readiness to take into account legitimate Kurdish complaints was the best option. Therefore the U.S. government was advised to comply with reasonable Iraqi requests for military equipment. The U.S. influence which would thus be gained should then be used to advocate Iraqi moderation in the Kurdish conflict.<sup>101</sup>

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<sup>96</sup> LaFantasie E.A., 'Memorandum From Robert W. Komer of the National Security Council Staff to President Kennedy', *FRUS, 1961-1963, Volume XVIII, Document 293*, 638.

<sup>97</sup> Little, 'The United States and the Kurds', 70.

<sup>98</sup> LaFantasie E.A., 'Memorandum From the Joint Chiefs of Staff to Secretary of Defense McNamara', *FRUS, 1961-1963, Volume XVIII, Document 311*, 673; and Pelletiere, *The Kurds*, 136.

<sup>99</sup> CIA, 'Central Intelligence Bulletin, 17 June 1963,' in *CREST: 25-Year Program Archive, State Department Electronic Reading Room*, <http://www.foia.state.gov>, 8.

[http://www.foia.cia.gov/sites/default/files/document\\_conversions/5829/CIA-RDP79T00975A007100030001-9.pdf](http://www.foia.cia.gov/sites/default/files/document_conversions/5829/CIA-RDP79T00975A007100030001-9.pdf)

<sup>100</sup> LaFantasie E.A., *FRUS, 1961-1963, Volume XVIII, Document 311*, 674.

<sup>101</sup> *Ibid.*, 674-675.

In fact, shortly after the new Ba'athist regime came to power in Iraq, Washington had already started delivering weapons to Baghdad.<sup>102</sup> As soon as the anti-Communist nature of the Iraqi regime had been confirmed, U.S. policy was directed at consolidating its position while friendly relations between Iraq and U.S. allies in the region had to be encouraged.<sup>103</sup> Basically, the U.S. wanted the rebellious Kurds to work out an agreement with the Ba'athist government. If such a settlement wouldn't suffice, American interests would be better served if the new Iraqi regime could somehow control the Kurds. This would be much more preferable than an ongoing Kurdish revolt which could lead to Soviet or Iranian interference.<sup>104</sup>

### 2.3 General Abdul Salam Arif's regime

Eventually the Ba'athist regime didn't succeed in completely defeating the Kurdish revolt. On November 18th 1963 Baghdad was confronted with yet another military coup, and once again General Abdul Salam Arif was involved, but this time assisted by a coalition of anti-Ba'athist officers.<sup>105</sup> Arif immediately proclaimed his own eagerness to end the war. Due to the difficult terrain in northern Iraq and Kurdish guerrilla tactics, it was very hard to deliver the final blow to the Kurdish resistance. Besides, the Iraqi army had been seriously weakened due to the previous coups and purges.<sup>106</sup>

Arif eventually succeeded in arranging a ceasefire which was concluded on 10 February 1964. Interestingly, Barzani claimed afterwards that he had signed the ceasefire at the behest of Washington, because allegedly Arif's regime would be a good 'instrument' to promote regional U.S. objectives. Unfortunately, Barzani had no written or recorded verbal communication with the U.S. ambassador to prove this, since contacts were maintained by

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<sup>102</sup> LaFantasie E.A., 'Memorandum From Harold H. Saunders to Bundy', *FRUS, 1961-1963, Volume XVII, Document 204*, 445-446.

<sup>103</sup> LaFantasie E.A., 'Memorandum From the Joint Chiefs of Staff to Secretary of Defense McNamara', *FRUS, 1961-1963, Volume XVIII, Document 184*, 408.

<sup>104</sup> LaFantasie E.A., *FRUS, 1961-1963, Volume XVIII, Document 204*, 445-446.

<sup>105</sup> Little, 'The United States and the Kurds', 70.

<sup>106</sup> Farouk-Sluglett and Sluglett, *Iraq since 1958*, 102-103.



using third parties.<sup>107</sup> The 10 February agreement was in fact a tactical move, which provided both parties with a break in order to regroup and consolidate their respective positions. The cease-fire would thus be only temporary and finally, after multiple armed confrontations in the winter of 1964-1965, the war would be resumed in April 1965.<sup>108</sup>

During 1964 the United States had changed its position of neutrality to one more sympathetic to Arif's government. Even though General Arif had agreed to negotiate with Barzani about possible Kurdish autonomy, no further progress on the issue was made so discussions finally collapsed in June 1964. Once again the Iraqi Kurds immediately requested U.S. support for the Kurdish rebellion, but without success.<sup>109</sup> However, before Iraqi-Kurdish hostilities resumed, Washington did become diplomatically involved again in trying to solve the Kurdish problem, in spite of its official non-involvement policy.

In these diplomatic contacts, U.S. ambassador Strong informed both parties that the U.S. wished for a peaceful negotiated agreement within the framework of the country of Iraq, which should be achieved without foreign interference. He also stated that the Kurds should cooperate in trying to achieve an agreement since they had nothing to lose, should be patient during complicated negotiations, and be willing to 'compromise their extreme demands.'<sup>110</sup> In addition, the U.S. thought that the Kurdish struggle for autonomy could be seriously harmed if it appeared as if they were acting as agents of foreign powers; therefore the Kurds were advised to avoid becoming entangled in the interests of external players.<sup>111</sup>

There was indeed serious risk that the Iraqi Kurds would be used by Iraq's enemies for their own interests. Israel for example started providing large scale aid to the Iraqi Kurds shortly after general Qasim's regime had been toppled in February 1963.<sup>112</sup> The Israelis hoped that if the Kurdish rebellion would resume, this would keep the Iraqi army bogged down thereby preventing that Salam Arif could send a considerable Iraqi military contribution during a new

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<sup>107</sup> Pelletiere, *The Kurds*, 141 and 149-150.

<sup>108</sup> Farouk-Sluglett and Sluglett, *Iraq since 1958*, 103.

<sup>109</sup> Pelletiere, *The Kurds*, 154-155; and N. D. Howland and D. S. Patterson ed. 'Telegram From the Department of State to the Embassy in Iraq', *FRUS, 1964-1968, Volume XXI, Document 165* (Washington 2000) 337.

<sup>110</sup> Patterson E.A., 'Telegram From the Embassy in Iraq to the Department of State', *FRUS, 1964-1968, Volume XXI, Document 167*.

<sup>111</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>112</sup> Rubin, 'Abd al-Karim Qasim and the Kurds of Iraq', 373.

Arab-Israeli war. So by the mid-1960s, Israel was providing the Iraqi Kurds with extensive assistance because of its strong strategic interests in weakening one of its many Arab enemies.<sup>113</sup>

The Iraqi Kurds were also being backed by the Shah of Iran. Tehran perceived Iraqi nationalism as a threat to Iran, especially since Arif's regime maintained close ties with the Shah's regional rival Nasser. Next to this, Iran wanted to regain full access to the Shatt al-Arab, a waterway at the Iraqi-Iranian border. The Shah regarded the KDP rebels as vital for his campaign to destabilize Iraq's military regime. While a ceasefire was just about to be signed (on 10 February 1964), Iran started delivering vast amounts of military supplies to the Kurdish rebels.<sup>114</sup>

According to Douglas Little both Israel and Iran were encouraged by the CIA to support the Kurdish rebels in northern Iraq from 1964 onwards.<sup>115</sup> However, official U.S. Department of State documents declare that Israeli and Iranian support for Kurdish rebels was, particularly at that time, contrary to U.S. interests,<sup>116</sup> and Little fails to present any document or evidence which proves that the United States backed the Kurdish rebels through these third countries because allegedly the CIA had encouraged them to do so, nor does he explain U.S. motives. According to Alvandi, Little mixed up Israeli and Iranian support for the Iraqi Kurds, which had started at the beginning of the 1960s in line with the 'periphery pact' between both countries, 'with "indirect U.S. intervention" in Kurdistan'.<sup>117</sup> Subsequently Alvandi also argues that the available evidence indicated that Washington was troubled about Iranian and Israeli efforts to destabilize Iraq, which resulted in even more Iraqi dependence on the Soviet Union and thus increased Communist influence. In fact, the U.S. Government had little influence over Iranian or Israeli policy regarding the Kurds at all. As a consequence, Tel

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<sup>113</sup> Little, 'The United States and the Kurds', 71.

<sup>114</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>115</sup> *Ibid.*, 71-72.

<sup>116</sup> Patterson E.A., 'Airgram from the Embassy in Iraq to the Department of State', *FRUS, 1964-1968, Volume XXI, Document 177*; and Patterson E.A., 'Telegram From the Embassy in Iraq to the Department of State', *FRUS, 1964-1968, Volume XXI, Document 171*.

<sup>117</sup> Alvandi, H-Diplo Article Review: Douglas Little, 'The United States and the Kurds: A Cold War Story', 3.

Aviv's and Tehran's support for the Kurdish rebels during the 1960s can't possibly be identified as indirect U.S. intervention in Iraq like Little does.<sup>118</sup>

However, one cannot fully exclude the possibility that the CIA might have been conducting secret operations in Iraq involving the Kurds, without informing the State Department. Nevertheless, Alvandi argues that 'no documentary evidence has yet emerged to support this argument.'<sup>119</sup> Gibson agrees with Alvandi that Little's claim about the CIA encouraging Iran and Israel to back the Iraqi Kurds cannot be proven, simply because 'there is no evidence to support this conclusion.'<sup>120</sup> Gibson even argues that the U.S. had not provided any assistance, nor had it encouraged the Iraqi Kurds to rebel, before 1972.<sup>121</sup> So there is currently no evidence available which would suggest that the U.S. secretly encouraged the Iraqi Kurds to rebel, nor any sources that would show U.S. encouragement for Israel or Iran to support or even stir up the Iraqi Kurds. It seems rather implausible, especially since State Department documents declared such assistance to be contrary to U.S. interests and due to the fact that State Department officials were advising the Iraqi Kurds by December 1964 not to listen to the Iranians who encouraged the Kurds to resume the rebellion.<sup>122</sup>

#### **2.4 Resumption of the Iraqi-Kurdish Conflict during the presidencies of the brothers Arif**

By fall 1965 a detailed U.S. analysis of the Iraqi Kurdish problem was presented. The analysis had as its central conclusion that a great amount of autonomy or even independence for the Iraqi Kurds would upset the stability of the entire region, most importantly affecting U.S. allies Iran and Turkey, and in the end would therefore be contrary to American interests.<sup>123</sup> A protracted Kurdish revolt was seen as harmful for American interests as well. However, it seemed unlikely that Iraqi communists or the USSR would exploit such a situation and take

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<sup>118</sup> Alvandi, H-Diplo Article Review: Douglas Little, 'The United States and the Kurds: A Cold War Story', 3.

<sup>119</sup> Ibid.

<sup>120</sup> Gibson, *U.S. Foreign Policy*, 275-276.

<sup>121</sup> Ibid., 16-17.

<sup>122</sup> Patterson E.A., *FRUS, 1964-1968, Volume XXI, Document 171*; and Patterson E.A., *FRUS, 1964-1968, Volume XXI, Document 177*.

<sup>123</sup> Patterson E.A., *FRUS, 1964-1968, Volume XXI, Document 177*.

command of a major insurgency. A successful Kurdish attempt to install an independent regime also seemed improbable, so a major U.S. intervention wasn't deemed necessary.<sup>124</sup>

Although all for different reasons, the United States, the Soviet Union and the United Arab Republic wanted a peaceful and negotiated agreement. However Iran and Israel, and possibly the British as well, preferred a continuation of the Iraqi-Kurdish conflict due to its destabilizing effect on the Arab country.<sup>125</sup> The American position in Iraq would be harmed by Iranian and Israeli support for the Kurdish rebels, but the U.S. government believed that neither state would conform to U.S. interests in this conflict. Because U.S. officials regarded the Kurdish problem as long-term and one which could not be solved by force from either side, Washington's policy on the issue remained that the conflict was an internal Iraqi problem which could probably only be solved with a negotiated political settlement.<sup>126</sup>

President Abdul Salam Arif had commenced a new Iraqi army offensive in spring 1965. However, another Iraqi offensive in the winter of 1965-1966 was eventually ended due to president Arif's sudden death in a helicopter crash in April 1966.<sup>127</sup> He was succeeded by his brother Abdul Rahman Arif, but when the Iraqi army suffered a crushing defeat against the *peshmergas* (Kurdish insurgents) in May 1966, Iraq's prime minister Abd al Rahman Bazzaz sent a 15-point offer for settling the Kurdish question to Barzani, which the Kurdish leader accepted on 30 June 1966. In addition Rahman Arif signed a ceasefire with the Kurds which would last for almost two years. However, in the end this Bazzaz Declaration was never implemented.<sup>128</sup>

Once again a stalemate had developed by October 1966, and this situation practically remained the same throughout 1967 and 1968. Essentially Arif's regime could not defeat the Kurdish insurrection through force because it failed to prevent Israeli and Iranian assistance from reaching the Kurdish rebels.<sup>129</sup> Ultimately, the position of Rahman Arif's government had been severely weakened by its failure to solve the Kurdish question and because of its

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<sup>124</sup> Patterson E.A., *FRUS, 1964-1968, Volume XXI, Document 177*.

<sup>125</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>126</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>127</sup> McDowall, *A Modern History of the Kurds*, 317.

<sup>128</sup> Little, 'The United States and the Kurds', 73; and Farouk-Sluglett and Sluglett, *Iraq since 1958*, 104.

<sup>129</sup> McDowall, 'A Modern History of the Kurds', 320.

damaged prestige after the Arab defeat in the Six Day war with Israel. This weakness was exploited by the Ba'ath Party and the Iraqi armed forces which conducted another successful coup in July 1968, expelling Arif from power in Baghdad.<sup>130</sup>

## **2.5 U.S. policy interests with the Iraqi Kurds from Salam Arif's regime until July 1968**

Washington shared Baghdad's concern that the Kurdish independence movement might be used by the Soviet Union as a tool to infiltrate the Near East.<sup>131</sup> Eventually, by August 1965, the U.S. also received Iraqi government requests to support their efforts to stop Iranian assistance of the Kurdish rebels in Iraq. Washington complied and U.S. government policy remained consistent in declaring that the Kurdish revolt was an internal Iraqi problem, so Iranian support to the Iraqi Kurds violated this principle and was incompatible with Washington's goal of area stability.<sup>132</sup>

Because of Iraq's knowledge of the extent of Iranian support, Washington feared Iraqi-Iranian relations would deteriorate fast.<sup>133</sup> Therefore the U.S. had to intervene by expressing their concerns to Tehran over Iraqi annoyance, also towards the U.S., because of Iranian support for the Kurds. So this Iranian policy could harm U.S.-Iraqi relations as well, and Tehran was informed that resulting limited U.S. influence on the Iraqi government was also harmful for Iran's interests.<sup>134</sup> Washington's position towards Iraq was further complicated by the fact that many Iraqi officials really believed that the U.S. was capable of making the Shah change his policy on the Iraqi Kurds,<sup>135</sup> which obviously was not the case.

Washington's lack of enthusiasm to go to greater lengths in mediating between Baghdad and the Kurdish rebels could also be explained by its official United States Policy for the Near East, introduced in April 1964. This policy declared that the U.S. tries to conduct its relations

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<sup>130</sup> McDowall, 'A Modern History of the Kurds', 320.

<sup>131</sup> Patterson E.A., 'Memorandum of Conversation', *FRUS, 1964-1968, Volume XXI, Document 169*.

<sup>132</sup> Patterson E.A., 'Telegram From the Department of State to the Embassy in Iran', *FRUS, 1964-1968, Volume XXI, Document 175*.

<sup>133</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>134</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>135</sup> Patterson E.A., 'Telegram From the Embassy in Iraq to the Department of State', *FRUS, 1964-1968, Volume XXI, Document 173*.

with Middle Eastern states on a strictly bilateral basis and that Washington tries to avoid being sucked into conflicts which are either in an inter-Arab or an Arab-Israeli context, 'except where vital United States interests are affected.'<sup>136</sup> Although Iran is technically speaking not an Arab state (but Persian), this U.S. policy does of course also relate to Iran. As a consequence, because of the important Iranian and Israeli role in the Iraqi-Kurdish conflict from 1964 onwards, Washington possibly might have been less inclined to intervene. Besides, in the event of Kurdish unrest in Iran, the United States would regard this, just like in the case of Iraq, as an internal issue.<sup>137</sup>

By November 1966, U.S. policy on Iraq was basically built on trying to establish an effective Western presence in the country in order to limit Soviet influence as much as possible. Despite the short-lived Ba'athist government of 1963, the Communist presence in Iraq still remained large but this time centered on official Soviet missions in the country.<sup>138</sup> However, the U.S. was simultaneously trying 'to offset Soviet influence in the Kurdish areas by maintaining a friendly though correct relationship with the main body of the Kurds,' since the Iraqi Kurds constituted a considerable share of Iraq's population and inhabited a strategic part of the country (near Kirkuk and Mosul oil installations). The U.S. Government also pursued policies designed to enhance nationalistic groups in Iraq that wished to avoid too much reliance on the Soviet Union or the UAR.<sup>139</sup> U.S.-Kurdish relations would practically remain limited to Washington's concern on a strictly humanitarian basis for their struggle.<sup>140</sup>

When Washington received intelligence in September 1967 on a possible resumption of the Kurdish rebellion, this was seen as particularly dangerous due to the already tense situation in the Middle East so shortly after the June 1967 Six-Day War.<sup>141</sup> Therefore, the United States was strongly opposed to a resumed Kurdish rebellion and feared the consequences if

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<sup>136</sup> Patterson E.A., 'Background Paper Prepared in the Department of State', *FRUS, 1964-1968, Volume XXI, Document 3*.

<sup>137</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>138</sup> Patterson E.A., 'Memorandum From Atherton to Hare', *FRUS, 1964-1968, Volume XXI, Document 185*.

<sup>139</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>140</sup> Patterson E.A., 'Memorandum From Read to Rostow', *FRUS, 1964-1968, Volume XXI, Document 189*.

<sup>141</sup> Patterson E.A., 'Intelligence Note From the Director of the Bureau of Intelligence and Research (Hughes) to Secretary of State Rusk', *FRUS, 1964-1968, Volume XXI, Document 197*.

Israeli and Iranian support to the Kurdish rebels would become public.<sup>142</sup> Eventually, Rahman Arif's government severed its diplomatic relations with Washington because of the Six-Day war.<sup>143</sup>

## **2.6 Conclusion U.S. foreign policy on the Iraqi Kurds from February 1963 until July 1968**

So what were the main U.S. policy interests in relation to the Iraqi Kurds from general Qasim's overthrow until the July 1968 *coup d'etat* by the Ba'ath Party in Iraq? And how were these interests pursued? The United States was engaged in a fierce Cold War competition with the Soviets over influence in Iraq, especially since the previous Iraqi administration of General Qasim was under strong influence from Moscow.<sup>144</sup> The new Ba'athist regime was essentially ideal for the promotion of U.S. policy interests in the Middle East and especially in Iraq, because it successfully eliminated the threat of a Communist takeover of Iraq. In addition, Iraqi oil deliveries to the West continued.<sup>145</sup>

Basically, U.S. policy was aimed at consolidating the power of this new Iraqi regime. Regarding the Kurdish question, the U.S. didn't want a resumption of the Kurdish revolt, since this could destabilize the new anti-Communist Ba'athist regime. In addition, the U.S. feared that a prolonged Arab-Kurdish conflict could cause spill-over to its allies Iran and Turkey. Such a situation could be exploited by the Soviet Union through meddling in the conflict, by possibly backing the Kurds, and thus trying to expand its Communist influence in Iraq and the Middle East once again.<sup>146</sup> Kurdish requests for American support were consequently turned down. However, when Iraqi-Kurdish negotiations eventually broke down, U.S. officials tried very hard, in spite of their official strict 'hands-off policy', to prevent a resumption of the war through diplomatic pressure.<sup>147</sup>

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<sup>142</sup> Patterson E.A., *FRUS, 1964-1968, Volume XXI, Document 197*.

<sup>143</sup> H. Brands, 'Making the Conspiracy Theorist a Prophet: Covert Action and the Contours of United States-Iraq Relations', *The International History Review*, Vol. 33, No. 3 (September 2011) 384.

<sup>144</sup> CIA, 'The Soviet Role in the Arab World', *DNSA, Soviet Estimate Collection, Item Number: SE00382, 4-5*.

<sup>145</sup> Mufti, 'The United States and Nasserist Pan-Arabism', 180.

<sup>146</sup> LaFantasie E.A., *FRUS, 1961-1963, Volume XVIII, Document 311, 674*; and CIA, 'The Soviet Role in the Arab World', *DNSA, Soviet Estimate Collection, Item Number: SE00382, 5*.

<sup>147</sup> LaFantasie E.A., *FRUS, 1961-1963, Volume XVIII, Document 208, 451-452*.

When U.S. diplomatic efforts failed and the Iraqi-Kurdish conflict continued in June 1963, the Kennedy administration practically started backing the Ba'athist government in this conflict with American weapons.<sup>148</sup> Clearly Washington had decided that the Kurdish quest for autonomy was subordinate to the greater U.S. goals of reducing Communist influence in the Middle East and winning back Iraq to the Western sphere of influence. Washington believed that if the Iraqi Kurds were not prepared, or unable to achieve a compromise with Baghdad, U.S. interests would be better served if the Ba'athist government could somehow contain Iraq's Kurdish population.<sup>149</sup>

During the presidencies of the brothers Arif the American position remained that a great amount of autonomy for Iraq's Kurds or a protracted Kurdish revolt was contrary to American interests, because of their destabilizing effects on the region. Washington still wished for regional stability, so the oil deliveries to the West wouldn't be disrupted and Communism couldn't infiltrate the Middle East.<sup>150</sup> In 1964 the U.S. also tried with diplomatic pressure to prevent a resumption of the Iraqi-Kurdish conflict and solve the Kurdish problem, again in spite of its official non-involvement policy. However, both Israel and Iran had serious interests in destabilizing Arif's regime with a Kurdish rebellion and were therefore unwilling to conform to American interests of achieving regional stability.<sup>151</sup> Still, the new U.S. Policy for the Near East introduced in 1964 could explain Washington's reluctance to intervene more decisively in the Iraqi-Kurdish conflict, especially since the main threat of a Communist takeover of Iraq, a vital U.S. interest, seemed to be averted. Besides, strong U.S. intervention in the Iraqi-Kurdish conflict could seriously complicate relations with Washington's crucial allies Israel and Iran.<sup>152</sup>

During Rahman Arif's presidency, Washington's policy on Iraq had become primarily directed at establishing a strong Western presence, while the U.S. simultaneously tried to

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<sup>148</sup> LaFantasie E.A., *FRUS, 1961-1963, Volume XVIII, Document 293*, 638.

<sup>149</sup> LaFantasie E.A., *FRUS, 1961-1963, Volume XVIII, Document 204*, 445-446.

<sup>150</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>151</sup> Patterson E.A., *FRUS, 1964-1968, Volume XXI, Document 177*.

<sup>152</sup> *Ibid.*



offset Soviet influence in the Kurdish areas as well.<sup>153</sup> However, American-Kurdish relations remained strictly humanitarian because direct diplomatic relations could seriously harm U.S. relations with Iraq's regime.<sup>154</sup> Basically, during Salam Arif's and Rahman Arif's presidencies, U.S. officials regarded the Kurdish problem as long-term and they no longer believed it could be resolved by force from either side,<sup>155</sup> while at the time of the Ba'athist regime in 1963 the U.S. still believed that Baghdad could force a military solution for the Kurdish autonomy problem.<sup>156</sup> Finally, from the year of 1967 onwards, the U.S. had definitely returned to its earlier stance during Qasim that the Iraqi-Kurdish conflict was an internal Iraqi issue, which could probably only be solved through a negotiated political arrangement.<sup>157</sup>

During the period from general Qasim's overthrow in February 1963 until the July 1968 Ba'athist coup, the United States faced many problems in developing and implementing a consistent and clear policy regarding the Iraqi-Kurdish conflict over more Kurdish autonomy. Probably the most important issue was the fact that Washington was competing with the Soviet Union for influence on the governments of Iraq, while contending for influence among the Iraqi Kurds as well. The U.S. had strong interests in developing friendly relations with Iraqi governments during this period, especially when they seemed to be anti-Communist. However, Washington had important regional allies (Turkey, Israel, and Iran) which all had different interests in the Iraqi-Kurdish conflict. Therefore Washington had to carry out a careful balancing act regarding the Iraqi-Kurdish conflict, eventually in order to be able to maintain its influence on both Baghdad and the Kurds, without offending or alienating its regional Arab and non-Arab allies. This ambiguous policy was ultimately aimed at preventing the expansion of Soviet influence in Iraq or among the Kurdish resistance.

In the end, because of the extremely tense situation in the Middle East and the many international players and allies involved with interests that conflicted with those of

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<sup>153</sup> Patterson E.A., *FRUS, 1964-1968, Volume XXI, Document 185*.

<sup>154</sup> Patterson E.A., *FRUS, 1964-1968, Volume XXI, Document 189*.

<sup>155</sup> Patterson E.A., *FRUS, 1964-1968, Volume XXI, Document 177*; and Patterson E.A., *FRUS, 1964-1968, Volume XXI, Document 185*.

<sup>156</sup> LaFantasie E.A., *FRUS, 1961-1963, Volume XVIII, Document 311, 674-675*.

<sup>157</sup> Patterson E.A., *FRUS, 1964-1968, Volume XXI, Document 185*.

Washington, the U.S. was unable to implement a consistent and clear policy regarding the Iraqi-Kurdish conflict during the period from General Qasim's overthrow until the July 1968 Ba'athist coup in Iraq. Despite its official non-involvement policy, the U.S. did become involved but failed twice to prevent a resumption of the Kurdish rebellion. Washington was eventually more inclined during this period to let its geopolitical interests regarding Iraq's governments prevail over its interests regarding the Iraqi Kurds. This was mainly due to the fact that a great amount of Kurdish autonomy was contrary to U.S. interests since it could considerably disrupt the stability of the entire region, something the Soviet Union could exploit.<sup>158</sup>

### **3. U.S. policy interests in relation to the Iraqi Kurds from the installation of the Iraqi Ba'athist regime in 1968 till the 1975 Algiers Agreement**

#### **3.1 The March Manifesto and U.S. non-involvement**

Immediately after the Baathists had succeeded in their coup against Abdul Rahman Arif in July 1968, they began preparations for installing a powerful Ba'athist regime. Eventually, by April 1969, the Ba'athists launched another military offensive against Barzani's KDP.<sup>159</sup> Subsequently the KDP threatened that if the U.S. was unwilling to give direct clandestine support to the Kurds, Barzani would target Iraq Petroleum Company (IPC) oil installations. However U.S. officials declined and recommended the Iraqi Kurds to seek Iranian and Israeli support, whose help was according to the KDP insufficient.<sup>160</sup>

Finally Barzani had to accept a ceasefire and in March 1970 the Ba'athist government issued a directive, the March Manifesto, which outlined Baghdad's new policy to accommodate Kurdish national wishes. The most important points included the recognition of Kurdish as the official language in predominantly Kurdish regions, and the constitutional

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<sup>158</sup> Patterson E.A., *FRUS, 1964-1968, Volume XXI, Document 177*.

<sup>159</sup> Little, 'The United States and the Kurds', 73.

<sup>160</sup> *Ibid.*, 73-74.

recognition of the Kurdish nation being equal in bi-national Iraq.<sup>161</sup> In return, the Kurdish rebels had to resign their heavy weapons and should formally recognize Baghdad's sovereignty over Iraqi Kurdistan. However, as soon as this transitional agreement was signed, the Kurds had already started looking for foreign support for another Kurdish rebellion. Eventually the March Manifesto failed to define the geographic area destined for the Kurdish autonomy provisions, and soon the war was resumed.<sup>162</sup> First violence was limited, but when in the spring of 1974 Baghdad's Autonomy Law was formally rejected by the KDP, the Ba'athists finally ordered a massive Iraqi offensive against the Kurds.<sup>163</sup>

Unlike the preceding Ba'athist government of 1963, this new Ba'athist regime headed by president Bakr developed into one of the most fanatical anti-U.S. governments in the Middle East. Ba'ath ideology profited from the extreme anti-U.S. sentiments in Iraq and the Arab world, due to growing American support for Israel in the 1960s and the Arab defeat in the Six Day War of June 1967. As a consequence of the Six Day War, many Arab nations, as well as Abdul Rahman Arif's Iraq, had severed their diplomatic relations with the U.S.<sup>164</sup> Basically U.S. relations with the new Ba'athist government of Iraq were also very limited. However, when the Iraqi government agreed upon a fifteen-year Soviet-Iraqi treaty on friendship and cooperation in April 1972, and Baghdad decided to nationalize Western-owned oil companies in 1972-1973 without providing any compensation, Iraq and the Kurdish rebellion once again required Washington's serious attention.<sup>165</sup>

### **3.2 Renewed U.S. involvement in the Iraqi-Kurdish conflict**

As a matter of fact, during Nixon's presidency, U.S. policy toward Iraq was drastically changed. During its first years the Nixon administration avoided White House involvement in regional policies and chose to focus on the main U.S. policy problems, like the opening of

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<sup>161</sup> N. Entessar, 'The Kurds in Post-Revolutionary Iran and Iraq', *Third World Quarterly*, Vol. 6, No. 4 (October, 1984) 918-919.

<sup>162</sup> *Ibid.*, 919; and Little, 'The United States and the Kurds', 74.

<sup>163</sup> Brands, 'Making the Conspiracy Theorist a Prophet', 387.

<sup>164</sup> *Ibid.*, 384.

<sup>165</sup> *Ibid.*, 384-387. Little, 'The United States and the Kurds', 74-76

China, U.S. disengagement from the Vietnam War, and achieving détente with Moscow. Consequently, the Persian Gulf and the Middle East were not a first concern until the end of Nixon's first term.<sup>166</sup> The Nixon administration was more inclined to let Iran deal with regional problems in the Gulf, and backed the Shah in his hostile policy towards Iraq. However, the Shah wanted more American involvement with Iraq. Therefore Iran (and Israel) claimed that the March Accord was a Soviet plot to increase Moscow's influence over Iraq. But the Nixon administration regarded their intelligence as manipulative, since the Ba'athist regime had just commenced a repressive campaign in March 1970 against communist elements in Iraq.<sup>167</sup>

In the end, Washington's views on Iraq and the Persian Gulf significantly changed due to the British military withdrawal from the Gulf in December 1971. American support for the Kurdish rebellion from 1972 onwards was also motivated by this significant change in the geopolitical constellation of the Persian Gulf and Washington's changed policy towards the region.<sup>168</sup> Hostile states like Ba'athist Iraq, or possibly even the USSR itself, could profit from the ensuing power vacuum in the Middle East. Towards the end of the 1960s Egypt, Syria and Iraq already housed several thousand Soviet military advisers. Furthermore, Washington feared that the Soviets would also try to install a strategic presence in the Persian Gulf.<sup>169</sup> The Nixon administration was also alarmed that Iraq had signed a secret arms deal with the Soviet Union in November 1971, followed by an Iraqi halt of prosecuting domestic communists. However, the critical juncture for Washington was of course the signing of the

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<sup>166</sup> Gibson, U.S. Foreign Policy, 276.

<sup>167</sup> *Ibid.*, 277.

<sup>168</sup> Brands, 'Making the Conspiracy Theorist a Prophet', 386. For more information on the British military withdrawal from the Persian Gulf in December 1971, Britain's motivation for doing so and Washington's change in regional policy in response to this unexpected British move see: Gibson, U.S. Foreign Policy, 164-199; Nigel Ashton (ed), *The Cold War in the Middle East: Regional Conflict and the Superpowers, 1967-73* (London: Routledge, 2007); Saki Dockrill, *Britain's Retreat from East of Suez: The Choice between Europe and the World?* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2002); and David McCourt, "What was Britain's 'East of Suez Role'? Reassessing the Withdrawal, 1964-1968", *Diplomacy and Statecraft*, 20/3 (2009).

<sup>169</sup> Brands, 'Making the Conspiracy Theorist a Prophet', 386; and Gibson, U.S. Foreign Policy, 277.

Soviet-Iraqi Treaty of Friendship and Cooperation in April 1972. In Washington's view, this treaty meant that Iraq had now effectively become a Soviet ally in the Cold War.<sup>170</sup>

However, the Ba'ath Party's closer cooperation with the Soviet Union in 1972 was pragmatic rather than ideological. Baghdad basically wanted Soviet support for building up its army with advanced Soviet weaponry, and for improving Iraqi technological and economic development as well. For Moscow the treaty meant that the Soviets could obtain more influence in the Middle East, that it gained a strategic access to the Persian Gulf, and that it could discuss a better position for domestic Communists in Iraq.<sup>171</sup>

Because of the Vietnam War, American military resources were already stretched, so the U.S. was unable to take over the British security commitments in the Persian Gulf. Therefore the Nixon administration had to rely on the so-called Twin Pillar policy, which meant that Iran and Saudi Arabia would receive considerable U.S. support in order to function as regional bastions against Arab radicalism or Communist expansion.<sup>172</sup> Meanwhile, the U.S. provided the more powerful Iran with a bigger share of U.S. support.<sup>173</sup> This American policy of building up Iran as a regional policeman was accelerated by the British military withdrawal, and was also part of the Nixon Doctrine. This U.S. policy was announced in July 1969, and basically called on the U.S. to support its regional allies in taking on the main responsibility for their self-defence. Nixon wanted Tehran to succeed the British as the main regional power to maintain stability in the area. In addition, Nixon relied on Iran to protect U.S. interests in the Persian Gulf as well.<sup>174</sup>

By March 1972 however, the Iranians and Israelis began pressing Washington to participate in supporting the Kurdish rebellion in Iraq, so the Ba'athist regime couldn't take advantage of the power vacuum after the British had withdrawn from the Gulf. They believed the

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<sup>170</sup> Gibson, *U.S. Foreign Policy*, 277; and Brands, 'Making the Conspiracy Theorist a Prophet', 387.

<sup>171</sup> Brands, 'Making the Conspiracy Theorist a Prophet', 387.

<sup>172</sup> *Ibid.*, 386-387; and L. W. Qaimmaqami, A. M. Howard and E.C. Keefer ed., 'Memorandum From the President's Assistant for National Security Affairs (Kissinger) to President Nixon', *FRUS, 1969-1976, Volume XXIV, Document 89* (Washington 2008) 280-281.

<sup>173</sup> Keefer E.A., *FRUS, 1969-1976, Volume XXIV, Document 89*, 280-281 ; and Keefer E.A., 'National Security Decision Memorandum 92', *FRUS, 1969-1976, Volume XXIV, Document 91*, 285-286.

<sup>174</sup> Brands, 'Making the Conspiracy Theorist a Prophet', 387; and Gibson, *U.S. Foreign Policy*, 180.

Soviets were deliberately building up Iraq for that specific purpose.<sup>175</sup> In addition, the Soviet Union tried to convince Barzani to join a national front government in Baghdad which, when installed, would be a 'preponderantly communist government'. The National Security Council (NSC) thought this development could be of considerable geopolitical importance, because if the Kurdish revolt would thus be stopped, Iraqi forces would be available for military-political operations in the Persian Gulf, possibly aimed at Western oil interests.<sup>176</sup>

Still the Nixon administration hesitated about supporting the Iraqi Kurds because of concerns about Barzani's ties to the Soviet Union, doubts about the strength of the Kurdish movement, and U.S. confidence that Iran and Israel were perfectly able to support the Kurdish rebels without Washington's involvement.<sup>177</sup> Basically, the State Department was opposed to any operation that could endanger future opportunities for improving relations with Iraq.<sup>178</sup> In addition, it was inconceivable that a Kurdish-led administration in Baghdad could succeed; it would be very hard to keep an U.S. assistance operation secret<sup>179</sup>; if U.S. support to the Kurds would become known, relations with Arab allies could become seriously damaged; and finally it would improve the chances of forming a separate Kurdish state, which would lead to further disintegration of an already unstable region.<sup>180</sup>

Meanwhile, the CIA was not enthusiastic about supporting the Iraqi Kurds either. It believed that the odds of successfully toppling the Ba'athist government by Kurdish rebels were slim. In addition, the CIA warned that U.S. involvement in such a plan could be interpreted by the Soviets as an action directed against them. This could harm recent American diplomatic efforts to achieve détente with Moscow. Due to this broad opposition to U.S. involvement in the Kurdish revolt, the Nixon administration kept pursuing a non-intervention policy.<sup>181</sup>

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<sup>175</sup> Gibson, *U.S. Foreign Policy*, 199; and M. Belmonte and E.C. Keefer ed., 'Memorandum From Harold Saunders to Haig', *FRUS, 1969-1976, Volume E-4, Document 301* (Washington 2006) 1-3.

<sup>176</sup> Keefer E.A., *FRUS, 1969-1976, Volume E-4, Document 301*, 1-6.

<sup>177</sup> Brands, 'Making the Conspiracy Theorist a Prophet', 387; and Gibson, *U.S. Foreign Policy*, 201.

<sup>178</sup> Gibson, *U.S. Foreign Policy*, 201.

<sup>179</sup> Brands, 'Making the Conspiracy Theorist a Prophet', 388; and Keefer E.A., 'Memorandum from Harold Saunders to Haig', *FRUS, 1969-1976, Volume E-4, Document 318*, 1-2.

<sup>180</sup> Gibson, *U.S. Foreign Policy*, 201.

<sup>181</sup> *Ibid.*, 202; Keefer E.A., *FRUS, 1969-1976, Volume E-4, Document 301*, 1-2.

Yet, by the summer of 1972, the Nixon administration started a covert operation in Iraqi Kurdistan in order to weaken the Ba'athist regime in Baghdad, so Soviet influence in the Persian Gulf could also be restrained. This sudden U.S. policy shift was primarily motivated by the signing of the Soviet-Iraqi Treaty of Friendship and Co-operation in April 1972.<sup>182</sup> The stated American objectives of this operation were turning Baghdad's radical regime's military strength inward, focused on the Kurdish insurgents, and preventing the Soviets from achieving their regional goals.<sup>183</sup>

During a visit to Tehran in May 1972, Nixon and Kissinger agreed with the Shah that something needed to be done about the close Soviet-Iraqi relationship. Already prior to this meeting Nixon had received a briefing paper from the NSC staff, which informed the President of the great risk which the present Ba'athist regime of Iraq posed for regional stability.<sup>184</sup> It was acknowledged that the Soviets would exert considerable influence because Baghdad was in need of their assistance. This Soviet influence could increase even further when Iraq's internal stability could be improved in combination with shared interests in Baghdad's ambitions in the region.<sup>185</sup> However, this automatically also meant that a continuous state of internal instability in Iraq would be harmful for Soviet interests.

In addition, the briefing paper warned that Iraq had the potential for disturbing stability in the Gulf if it could efficiently use Soviet support.<sup>186</sup> Despite Baghdad had already received some 1 billion U.S. dollars in Communist military assistance since 1958, the Iraqi forces had not been notably successful in operating sophisticated weaponry, and had limited offensive capabilities.<sup>187</sup> However, the Americans were alarmed due to certain new developments. The Ba'ath regime had negotiated the largest Soviet economic and military commitments that had ever been made to Iraq. In addition, Soviet-Iraqi military cooperation was now officially implemented in the 1972 Soviet-Iraqi Treaty, while Soviet military training in

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<sup>182</sup> Gibson, *U.S. Foreign Policy*, 277; and Brands, 'Making the Conspiracy Theorist a Prophet', 387.

<sup>183</sup> Brands, 'Making the Conspiracy Theorist a Prophet', 381.

<sup>184</sup> Little, 'The United States and the Kurds', 75.

<sup>185</sup> Keefer E.A., 'Briefing Paper Prepared for President Nixon, May 18, 1972', *FRUS, 1969-1976, Volume E-4, Document 308*, 7.

<sup>186</sup> *Ibid.*, 8.

<sup>187</sup> *Ibid.*, 4-5.

sophisticated weapon systems continued. The language in the Soviet-Iraqi Treaty was also formulated in a way which might enable Soviet military facilities in Iraqi harbours.

Washington argued that the Ba'athists, because Soviet support had now been formalized in a treaty, would feel more powerful in the Middle East and act accordingly.<sup>188</sup> Finally, because of the large oil revenues, the Ba'athist regime had already initiated in November 1971 a major expansion of its military, with large amounts of sophisticated and offensive Soviet weapons.<sup>189</sup>

When during their meeting in Tehran Kissinger asked for policy suggestions, the Shah replied that Iran 'had to have the most modern weapons', and that in addition 'Iran can help with the Kurds'. The Shah also feared that if the KDP would join a national unity government, 'the Kurdish problem instead of being a thorn in the side could become an asset to the Communists',<sup>190</sup> and that Iran could no longer use the Iraqi Kurds as leverage against the Iraqi government.<sup>191</sup>

A State Department report from May 31, 1972, called *The Kurds of Iraq: Renewed Insurgency?* concluded that Barzani would be able to attract sufficient support for a renewed Kurdish rebellion. Besides, a 'long-drawn-out insurgency might indeed bring down the already unpopular Ba'th government'.<sup>192</sup> NSC-staff member Harold Saunders also warned Kissinger that even though the greatest achievement for the Kurds could be preservation of Kurdish autonomy, if the Kurdish rebellion would fail the U.S. would neither have the means nor the interest to provide conclusive support.<sup>193</sup> It was also unlikely that the Kurds could

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<sup>188</sup> Keefer E.A., *FRUS, 1969-1976, Volume E-4, Document 308*, 5-6.

<sup>189</sup> Brands, 'Making the Conspiracy Theorist a Prophet', 387-388; and Little, 'The United States and the Kurds', 74-75.

<sup>190</sup> Keefer E.A., 'Memorandum of Conversation, Tehran, May 30, 1972, 5:35 to 6:35 p.m.', *FRUS, 1969-1976, Volume E-4, Document 200*, 2.

<sup>191</sup> Brands, 'Making the Conspiracy Theorist a Prophet', 388; Gibson, *U.S. Foreign Policy*, 277; and Little, 'The United States and the Kurds', 75.

<sup>192</sup> Department of State, 'The Kurds of Iraq: Renewed Insurgency?' 31 May 1972, in *Pol 23-9 Iraq, State Department, Alpha-Numeric File, RG59, NARA*, IV-8.

<http://2001-2009.state.gov/documents/organization/70896.pdf>.

<sup>193</sup> National Security Council, Memorandum, Saunders to Kissinger, 'Message from Shah on Kurds', 7 June 1972, in *Nixon Presidential Library and Museum (NPLM)*, Yorba Linda, California, 1-3.



have real influence on the character of a successor regime. But on the bright side, Iraqi relations with the Soviets could become troubled, and the controversial Soviet-Iraqi treaty 'might become a dead letter'.<sup>194</sup>

In the end, the Nixon administration had plenty of reasons for supporting the Kurdish rebellion after the Soviet-Iraqi treaty was signed, and which were now deemed more important than the possible risks. Eventually, Nixon's decision to start supporting the Kurdish rebels was probably motivated by a combination of Washington's concern about the growing importance of Iraq as a strategic ally for the Soviet Union after the British withdrawal from the Gulf, and appeasing the Shah's desire to become the major power in the Persian Gulf, which also had to prevent the spread of Soviet influence.<sup>195</sup> Other factors which contributed to Nixon's approval of the Kurdish Operation were: American concerns about Baghdad's nationalization of the IPC in June 1972; the fact that Iraq had become even more important to the USSR since Soviet personnel was withdrawn from Egypt in July 1972<sup>196</sup>; plans from the Ba'athist regime to legalize the ICP and bring it into a government coalition<sup>197</sup>; and finally a realization that the Iraqi Kurds could be used as leverage to weaken the Soviet-friendly Ba'athist regime.<sup>198</sup>

### **3.3 The Nixon administration and the implementation of the Kurdish Operation**

National Security Adviser Kissinger feared that the Soviet-Iraqi partnership would also enable the Soviet Union to strengthen its position towards Iran, while it could additionally encourage Iraq to threaten its neighbours. However, U.S. support for the Kurds could result in constant pressure on Baghdad, so the Ba'athist regime would be entangled in domestic

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[http://www.nixon.archives.gov/virtuallibrary/documents/mr/060772\\_iraq.pdf](http://www.nixon.archives.gov/virtuallibrary/documents/mr/060772_iraq.pdf); and Patterson E.A., 'Telegram from the Embassy in Saudi Arabia to the Department of State', *FRUS, 1964-1968, Volume XXI, Document 313*.

<sup>194</sup> Department of State, 'Iraq: Renewed Insurgency?', 8.

<sup>195</sup> Gibson, *U.S. Foreign Policy*, 178 and 277-278.

<sup>196</sup> *Ibid.*, 210-211; and Little, 'The United States and the Kurds', 77.

<sup>197</sup> Pelletiere, *The Kurds*, 167.

<sup>198</sup> Gibson, *U.S. Foreign Policy*, 277-278.

problems. Therefore U.S. support for the Iraqi Kurds was not merely about curbing Soviet influence, but also about sabotaging the Ba'athist government.<sup>199</sup>

Already prior to Kissinger's decision to secretly assist the Kurdish rebels, serious risks and problems for the operation were identified. Probably the most important one was that direct Soviet intervention could not be excluded, since they had invested so much in their position in Iraq. This could also possibly lead to an even stronger Soviet presence in Iraq.<sup>200</sup> Another problem was Turkish concern of Kurdish nationalism spreading to its own territory. In addition, there was the problem of Kurdish factionalism. Also troublesome was the fact that the State Department wished to open a U.S. Interests Section in Baghdad in fall 1972, a development which probably had to be cancelled if U.S. support for the Kurds would become known.<sup>201</sup> Another problem was the fact that U.S. assistance should be limited to such an extent that plausible denial was still possible. Besides, the American support had to be coordinated with third parties: the Israelis, Iranians and the Kurds, which entailed even more security problems. Significantly, in this whole operation Iran was essential as an intermediary in delivering U.S. financed weapons because of its geographical location.<sup>202</sup> However, already in 1972 the Shah had a reputation as an unreliable and ambitious ruler, who could eventually decide to sacrifice the Iraqi Kurds.<sup>203</sup>

Director of Central Intelligence Richard Helms submitted a detailed proposal on U.S. support to the Kurds for the Nixon administration in a memorandum on 18 July 1972, which concluded that 'The threat to moderate Middle-Eastern governments and to Western interests posed by the Soviet-backed Iraqi Ba'thi regime warrants helping Barzani maintain his opposition to that regime.'<sup>204</sup> It was very important 'to see the Ba'thi regime in Iraq kept off balance and if possible overthrown, if this can be done without increasing Soviet

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<sup>199</sup> Brands, 'Making the Conspiracy Theorist a Prophet', 388.

<sup>200</sup> Keefer E.A., 'Prospects and Problems of Assistance to the Kurds, 18 July 1972' attached to 'Memorandum From Haig to Kissinger', *FRUS, 1969-1976, Volume E-4, Document 321*, 7.

<sup>201</sup> Keefer E.A., *FRUS, 1969-1976, Volume E-4, Document 321*, 7-8

<sup>202</sup> *Ibid.*, 6-19. See especially pages 17-19.

<sup>203</sup> Brands, 'Making the Conspiracy Theorist a Prophet', 388.

<sup>204</sup> Keefer E.A., *FRUS, 1969-1976, Volume E-4, Document 321*, 26.

influence in Iraq or escalating hostilities to a dangerous international level.<sup>205</sup> Eventually, the Cold War argumentation in Helms' proposal persuaded Nixon and Kissinger to approve his plans on 31 July 1972.<sup>206</sup>

In order to fight a defensive campaign, it was estimated that the Kurds would need 18 million U.S. dollars per year. The Nixon administration would deliver one-sixth of this amount in weapons and cash, while the Shah would pay 9 million U.S. dollars. The declassified memorandum which contains this particular assistance proposal does not reveal who would pay the other 6 million U.S. dollars for the Kurdish Operation, but this specific information has probably been blurred.<sup>207</sup> However, it seems probable Israel had been the third party financially involved since the Israelis, in cooperation with the Iranians, were already closely engaged in supporting the Iraqi Kurds since the 1960's.<sup>208</sup>

The ultimate goal of U.S. and Iranian support was not to immediately depose the Ba'athists in Baghdad, nor was it to enable the Kurds to establish an independent Kurdistan in Iraq, like Barzani by that time wanted. U.S. allies Iran and Turkey vehemently opposed such Kurdish independence. Its goal was in fact to provide Barzani with the minimum amount of support needed to preserve the Kurdish rebels as a defensive guerrilla army, capable of restraining the Ba'athist government and prevent aggressive Iraqi adventures in the region.<sup>209</sup> U.S. assistance was intended to continue Kurdish guerrilla operations at which they excelled, since a massive Kurdish military offensive might lead to direct intervention from the Soviets. Furthermore, the huge amount of U.S. support necessary for such a Kurdish offensive could never be kept secret.<sup>210</sup>

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<sup>205</sup> Keefer E.A., *FRUS, 1969-1976, Volume E-4, Document 321*, 9.

<sup>206</sup> Keefer E.A., 'Memorandum From the President's Assistant for National Security Affairs (Kissinger)', *FRUS, 1969-1976, Volume E-4, Document 322*; and Little, 'The United States and the Kurds', 77.

<sup>207</sup> Keefer E.A., 'Memorandum From Haig to Kissinger' and attached Memorandum prepared by Helms 'Assistance to Iraqi Kurdish Leader, Mulla Mustafa Barzani', *FRUS, 1969-1976, Volume E-4, Document 321*, 1-5.

<sup>208</sup> CIA, National Intelligence Estimate (NIE) 36.2-72, 'Iraq's Role in Middle Eastern Problems,' in Keefer E.A., *FRUS, 1969-1976, Volume E-4, Document 330*, 6-7; and Little, 'The United States and the Kurds', 77-78.

<sup>209</sup> Brands, 'Making the Conspiracy Theorist a Prophet', 388; and Keefer E.A., *FRUS, 1969-1976, Volume E-4, Document 321*, 12-13.

<sup>210</sup> Keefer E.A., *FRUS, 1969-1976, Volume E-4, Document 321*, 3-8.

So basically, U.S. policy on supporting the Kurds was devised at achieving a scenario in which the Kurds would not be defeated, but in which they were not supposed to win either. In addition, the CIA believed that the KDP's ability to resist Baghdad was probably their only chance to sabotage the Ba'athist regime and might contribute 'to its replacement by elements less hostile to our interests'.<sup>211</sup> Besides, according to Kissinger it was the Nixon administration's general strategy to weaken any country which had close relations with the USSR, so therefore in the case of Iraq the U.S. Government was very susceptible to supporting the Kurds.<sup>212</sup>

As a result of U.S.-Israeli-Iranian support, Barzani was eventually able to force two-thirds of Iraq's army to be stationed near Kurdish territory, thus frustrating Baghdad's ability to conduct destabilizing operations in the region.<sup>213</sup> However, Iraq succeeded in extracting even more military hardware from its Soviet allies because of the threat of a full-scale Kurdish rebellion. And by September 1973 American intelligence reported that practically all of the Baath's opponents, only the Kurds excluded, had been neutralized.<sup>214</sup> Washington's hope of contributing to the Ba'athist regime's replacement by other domestic parties was now useless.

Basically, from the onset of the covert Kurdish Operation in July 1972, this 'no-win, no-lose approach' determined U.S. policy on the Kurdish question for the following three years. However, the first year of the operation till the Yom Kippur War of October 1973, was somewhat of an exception. During this year, U.S. policy toward Iraq was essentially bifurcated because it followed two different and incompatible tracks. The State Department went ahead with its policy of promoting friendly U.S.-Iraqi relations and its plans to establish an interest section in Baghdad in fall 1972. This conflicted with the White House's policy of sabotaging the Ba'athist regime.<sup>215</sup> However, in spring 1973 and especially after the October War, Kissinger eventually authorized a major increase in U.S. assistance to the Kurds, thus

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<sup>211</sup> Keefer E.A., *FRUS, 1969-1976, Volume E-4, Document 321*, 12-13.

<sup>212</sup> Little, 'The United States and the Kurds', 77-78.

<sup>213</sup> Keefer E.A., 'Memorandum From the President's Assistant for National Security Affairs (Kissinger) to President Nixon, October 5, 1972', *FRUS, 1969-1976, Volume E-4, Document 325*, 1-2.

<sup>214</sup> Little, 'The United States and the Kurds', 78-79.

<sup>215</sup> Gibson, *U.S. Foreign Policy*, 215.

ruining chances for improving U.S.-Iraqi relations. Consequently, the White House's policy of sabotaging the Ba'athist regime prevailed.<sup>216</sup>

As tensions in Iraq rose, Washington's support to the Kurdish rebels was upgraded in March 1973 to five million U.S. dollars a year, while the Iranians increased their aid to thirty million U.S. dollars.<sup>217</sup> Kissinger's motivation was that Iraq had become the most important client of Moscow in the Middle East; that the Ba'athist regime was funding terrorist organizations and that it was the major power behind Arab attempts to block Arab-Israeli peace initiatives. Basically, by raising support to the Kurds while warning Barzani not to start a military offensive, Kissinger tried to control the Iraqi Kurds just like the Shah did.<sup>218</sup>

Meanwhile, during 1973-1974, Washington rejected two separate proposals for Barzani to change its tactics from defensive to offensive operations.<sup>219</sup> In October 1973, Kissinger urged Barzani not to initiate a major offensive against the Iraqi military. The Kurdish leader was incited to do so by the Israelis, who were entangled in the Yom Kippur War and wanted to prevent Iraq from sending more troops to the Syrian front. According to authors Michel G. Nehme and Lokman I. Meho 'Kissinger observed how American interests would suffer if the Kurds would gain the upper hand over the Iraqis militarily', and subsequently ordered the CIA to urge the Kurds not to take any offensive actions.<sup>220</sup> However, Bryan R. Gibson's explanation for this American advice, that the Kurdish rebels were not sufficiently equipped for such an operation making a Kurdish offensive 'suicidal', seems much more plausible. Besides, according to Gibson, Kissinger feared that such an offensive would also lead to massive retaliation from Baghdad.<sup>221</sup>

It is unclear why Nehme and Meho would presume that poorly armed Kurdish rebels, only trained in guerrilla warfare, could possibly defeat the heavily Soviet-equipped Iraqi army in a

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<sup>216</sup> Gibson, *U.S. Foreign Policy*, 232-233. For more information on the two separate and conflicting tracks of the State Department and the White House regarding U.S. policy on Iraq, during the first year after the implementation of the Kurdish Operation see Gibson, *U.S. Foreign Policy*, 215-233.

<sup>217</sup> *Ibid.*, 222-223.

<sup>218</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>219</sup> Brands, 'Making the Conspiracy Theorist a Prophet', 389.

<sup>220</sup> L.I. Meho and M.G. Nehme, 'Pawns in a Deadly Game: Iraqi Kurds and the United States, 1972-1975', *International Studies*, Vol. 32, No. 1 (January 1995) 53.

<sup>221</sup> Gibson, *U.S. Foreign Policy*, 231-232.

conventional war, let alone why Kissinger would have believed this. Besides, Iraq had sent only one battalion to the Syrian front,<sup>222</sup> so the vast majority of the Iraqi army was still deployed at the borders of Iraqi Kurdistan. Nehme and Meho also fail to present any primary sources which could confirm that Kissinger thought that the Kurds would be able to gain the upper hand in a military conflict with Baghdad, nor do they explain why this would be harmful for American interests. However, according to Gibson, Kissinger did instruct the U.S. Ambassador to Iran to consult with the Shah, who agreed that the Israeli proposal was suicidal. Kissinger felt the same and subsequently informed Barzani that a Kurdish military offensive was not advisable.<sup>223</sup> Therefore Gibson's explanation of U.S. advice for Barzani against an offensive military action seems much more credible. In addition, by 1974, Kissinger also talked Barzani out of assaulting Iraqi oil installations because Washington feared that this would intensify international concerns about sufficient access to energy resources.<sup>224</sup>

Particularly the Yom Kippur War of October 1973 seems to have convinced Kissinger of the importance of the Kurdish rebels, because he believed that their presence had prevented Baghdad from sending a considerably larger military contribution to the Syrian front. Furthermore, in the aftermath of the Yom Kippur War, Kissinger and Egypt's president Sadat came up with a plan in which Iran would stir up trouble in Iraqi Kurdistan in the winter of 1973-1974, so Iraq would withdraw its forces from Syria. This plan was eventually successfully implemented, resulting in Iraqi-Iranian tensions in February 1974.<sup>225</sup> When the Israelis informed Kissinger in March 1974 that the Kurds needed more help, the latter's reply revealed his true intentions, that is securing Arab-Israeli disengagement: 'You can tell them we have already taken action because it is in our interest to keep the Iraqis distracted while

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<sup>222</sup> Meho and Nehme, 'Pawns in a Deadly Game', 53.

<sup>223</sup> Gibson, *U.S. Foreign Policy*, 231-232.

<sup>224</sup> Brands, 'Making the Conspiracy Theorist a Prophet', 389.

<sup>225</sup> The White House, 'Kissinger-Meir Memorandum of Conversation', 7 May 1974, includes Israeli Memorandum entitled 'The Situation in Kurdistan', *DNSA, Kissinger Transcripts Collection, Item Number: KT01143*, 12. <http://nsarchive.chadwyck.com.ezproxy.leidenuniv.nl:2048/nsa/documents/KT/01143/all.pdf>

we are working on the Syrians.<sup>226</sup> Even though this strategy of inciting the Kurds helped Kissinger in convincing Israel to pull back its troops from Syria as well, this plan also contributed to the resurgence of the Kurdish War.<sup>227</sup> Interestingly, the Israeli Prime Minister Golda Meir informed Kissinger in May 1974 that Moscow's position on the Iraqi-Kurdish conflict had changed. The Soviets had always tried to remain an intermediary. However, by 1974 the Soviets seemed to have decided to give their full support to the Ba'athist government.<sup>228</sup>

### 3.4 Collapse of the Kurdish Operation during the Ford administration

On 11 March 1974, the Ba'athist regime published its Autonomy Law and gave Barzani two weeks to accept and enter the National Front. Eventually, Barzani refused to accept this law hoping that with the promised support from the U.S, Iran and Israel he could negotiate a better autonomy deal or even independence for the Kurds.<sup>229</sup> Long afterwards, Mulla Mustafa claimed that: 'Without American promises we would not have acted the way we did.' However, in 1974 Barzani hadn't grasped yet that neither Iran nor the U.S. actually wanted Kurdish autonomy.<sup>230</sup>

Kurdish-Iraqi violence increased significantly after Barzani's rejection of the Autonomy Law. So the new American President Gerald Ford approved a scheme during the summer of 1974 whereby Israel supplied the Kurds with twenty-eight million U.S. dollars in captured Soviet weaponry in exchange for American financial compensation. This was on top of the other American support. Meanwhile, Iran would give direct assistance with Special Forces and

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<sup>226</sup> The White House, 'Kissinger-Dinitz Memorandum of Conversation', 21 March 1974, *DNSA, Kissinger Transcripts Collection*, Item Number: KT01078, 6.

<http://nsarchive.chadwyck.com.ezproxy.leidenuniv.nl:2048/nsa/documents/KT/01078/all.pdf>

<sup>227</sup> Gibson, *U.S. Foreign Policy*, 238 and 278-279.

<sup>228</sup> Meir, 'The Situation in Kurdistan', 7 May 1974, Israeli Memorandum attached to 'Kissinger-Meir Memorandum of Conversation', 7 May 1974, *DNSA, Kissinger Transcripts Collection*, Item Number: KT01143, 14.

<sup>229</sup> Entessar, 'The Kurds in Post-Revolutionary Iran and Iraq', 920; and McDowall, *A Modern History of the Kurds*, 335-336.

<sup>230</sup> McDowall, *A Modern History of the Kurds*, 336.

artillery support.<sup>231</sup> Nevertheless, during the winter of 1974-1975 the Kurdish situation had become so desperate that Iran would have to make a major troop commitment into Iraqi territory in order to sustain Kurdish resistance, something the Shah eventually declined.<sup>232</sup> Despite the fact that U.S. Ambassador Helms lobbied extensively in Tehran to continue the Israeli-Iranian-U.S. project of secretly arming the Kurds, the Shah could not be persuaded and on 19 February 1975 Kissinger informed President Ford that the Iranian leader had plans to meet Iraq's Vice-President, Saddam Hussein, probably for negotiations on resolving the Kurdish issue. The next day Kissinger sent a reassuring message to Barzani, without mentioning the Shah's plans of cutting a deal with Baghdad.<sup>233</sup>

Eventually, on 5 March 1975, during an OPEC Summit Conference in Algiers, Saddam Hussein and the Shah signed an agreement which granted Iran favourable resolution of boundary disputes at the Shat-al-Arab waterway in exchange for Iran ending its support to the Kurdish rebellion.<sup>234</sup> Kissinger was deeply annoyed over the Shah's decision to abandon the Kurds. He felt that the Algiers-Accord would empower a radical pro-Soviet regime and would enable Iraqi communists to consolidate their influence, which would frustrate Washington's Cold War strategy in the Persian Gulf and the Middle East as well.<sup>235</sup> However, the Ford administration was not prepared to make a much greater commitment to the Kurdish resistance, of which Kissinger estimated that it would cost Washington between 300 and 500 million U.S. dollars annually, while the feasibility of such an operation was very uncertain. So in March 1975, both the U.S. Government and the Israelis decided to limit the damage and ceased their support to the Kurdish rebels.<sup>236</sup>

There is some discussion among scholars about whether the U.S. deliberately sold out the Kurds or whether they had no choice in ending their support. The primary argument is Washington abandoned Barzani without warning, ignored desperate Kurdish pleas for support, and failed to deliver humanitarian assistance after the Kurdish rebellion was finally

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<sup>231</sup> Brands, 'Making the Conspiracy Theorist a Prophet', 389.

<sup>232</sup> *Ibid.*; and McDowall, *A Modern History of the Kurds*, 337-338.

<sup>233</sup> Little, 'The United States and the Kurds', 81.

<sup>234</sup> *Ibid.*; and Brands, 'Making the Conspiracy Theorist a Prophet', 390.

<sup>235</sup> Gibson, *U.S. Foreign Policy*, 258-259.

<sup>236</sup> Brands, 'Making the Conspiracy Theorist a Prophet', 390.



put down.<sup>237</sup> The leading supporter of this view is Representative Otis Pike, who was the chairman of the House Select Committee on Intelligence, a congressional investigation into CIA operations and their costs. Leaking to the press of the conclusions from the so-called *Pike Report* in February 1976 eventually revealed the details of the Kurdish Operation.<sup>238</sup>

According to the Pike Committee, evidence suggested that ‘the project was initiated primarily as a favour to our ally [Iran]’.<sup>239</sup> U.S. assistance could also be seen as ‘largely symbolic’, because Iran’s support was significantly larger. However, it was also concluded that ‘the U.S. acted in effect as a guarantor that the insurgent group would not be summarily dropped by the foreign head of state.’<sup>240</sup> Still, the U.S was unable to prevent the Shah from abruptly cutting off his aid to the Kurds. The Pike Committee reasoned that if the U.S. had not supported Iran’s prodding of the Iraqi Kurds, eventually the insurgents might have reached an agreement with Baghdad over some form of autonomy. Furthermore, the high amount of secrecy encompassing the operation was because the State Department, strongly opposed to such interference in the region, was not supposed to be informed.<sup>241</sup> On the ‘no win, no lose’ approach of U.S. policy the *Pike Report* said: ‘Even in the context of covert action, ours was a cynical enterprise.’ The Pike Committee also acknowledged that because all U.S. support was channelled through Iran, direct assistance to the Kurds would have been impossible without Iranian logistical help. So the *Pike Report* concluded that when Iran reached an agreement with Iraq and stopped their own support for the Kurds, ‘the U.S. had no choice but to acquiesce.’<sup>242</sup>

Many authors, such as Ismett Sheriff Vanly, Stephen C. Pelletiere, Michel G. Nehme and Lokman I. Meho, adhere to the arguments and conclusions of the *Pike Report* when Washington’s decision to suddenly end its support to the Kurdish rebels is explained.<sup>243</sup>

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<sup>237</sup> Gibson, *U.S. Foreign Policy*, 235; and United States Congress, House of Representatives, House Select Committee on Intelligence, *CIA: The Pike Report* (Nottingham, U.K.: Spokesman Books, 1977) 195-198, 211-217.

<sup>238</sup> Gibson, *U.S. Foreign Policy*, 235.

<sup>239</sup> House Select Committee on Intelligence, *The Pike Report*, 196.

<sup>240</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>241</sup> *Ibid.*, 196-197.

<sup>242</sup> *Ibid.*, 197-198.

<sup>243</sup> Vanly, ‘Kurdistan in Iraq’, 184-186 and 189-190; Pelletiere, *The Kurds*, 166-171; Meho and Nehme, ‘Pawns in a Deadly Game’, 52-55.

Douglas Little is somewhat of an exception, because he claims that by January 1975 Israeli and American weapon deliveries to the Kurds began to wane, suggesting that Washington had only a limited capacity to sustain the Kurdish resistance.<sup>244</sup> However, just like the *Pike Report* Little acknowledges that the Shah was primarily responsible for the fact that the Ford administration also had to give up its support to the Kurds, and he is very critical on the Ford administration regarding the Kurdish crisis as well.<sup>245</sup> Significant is Little's reference to a U.S. intelligence report called *The Implications of the Iran-Iraq Agreement*. This report explains how Iran since the mid-1960s had facilitated and even incited the Israelis in supporting the Kurdish rebels. It was concluded that without Iranian help, 'there is little chance that Tel Aviv will continue to aid the Kurds'. Also, without Iranian logistical support, U.S. assistance to Barzani was severely hindered and 'armed resistance by Kurds on the scale of 1974 is now out of the question.'<sup>246</sup>

According to Bryan R. Gibson, the actions of the Ford administration regarding the Iraqi Kurds were a deliberate result of a realistic analysis of overt and clandestine U.S. capacities. Gibson argues that Kissinger, who was already aware prior to the Algiers Agreement of the Shah's doubts about the Kurdish Operation, believed he had persuaded the Shah to continue his support. Gibson grounds this assumption on a letter which Kissinger had sent to Barzani on 20 February 1975, because 'The fact that Kissinger responded positively to Barzani's request to send an emissary' to Washington would suggest that Kissinger would have believed that he had dissuaded the Shah from abandoning the Kurds.<sup>247</sup> However, this positive response from Kissinger can never be justified in itself as evidence for the assumption that Kissinger would have believed that he had dissuaded the Shah like Gibson does. Therefore Gibson's claim that Kissinger thought he had dissuaded the Shah from betraying the Kurds is unreliable.

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<sup>244</sup> Gibson, *U.S. Foreign Policy*, 236; and Little, 'The United States and the Kurds', 80-81.

<sup>245</sup> Little, 'The United States and the Kurds', 80-85; and House Select Committee on Intelligence, *The Pike Report*, 198.

<sup>246</sup> CIA, 'The Implications of the Iran-Iraq Agreement', 1 May 1975, *CIA FOIA Electronic Reading Room*, <http://www.foia.cia.gov>, FOIA Collection, DCI/NIO 1039-75, 6- 8. [http://www.foia.cia.gov/sites/default/files/document\\_conversions/89801/DOC\\_0001115997.pdf](http://www.foia.cia.gov/sites/default/files/document_conversions/89801/DOC_0001115997.pdf); and Little, 'The United States and the Kurds', 82.

<sup>247</sup> Gibson, *U.S. Foreign Policy*, 261-262.

Gibson goes to great lengths to criticize the *Pike Report* and other authors for adhering to the arguments and conclusions of this report, especially for the widely held opinion that the U.S. had sold out the Iraqi Kurds in March 1975 after the Algiers Agreement.<sup>248</sup> Ironically, Gibson omits to mention that Kissinger deliberately failed to warn Barzani already in February 1975 that the Shah was about to abandon the Kurds and sign a deal with Baghdad,<sup>249</sup> while he accuses the Pike Committee himself of ignoring ‘inconvenient truths.’<sup>250</sup> Conveniently, Gibson also makes no mention of Barzani’s claim that one of the main reasons for the Iraqi Kurds to reject the Autonomy Law of 1974 was the promised support from Iran, Israel and Washington.<sup>251</sup> If you take these cases into account, there is certainly some truth in claiming that the U.S. had sold out the Kurds in March 1975.

Furthermore, Gibson enthusiastically argues that the *Pike Report* has distorted the study of U.S.-Iraqi relations and the Kurdish Operation. Gibson keeps continuing his argument that the U.S. couldn’t continue supporting the Kurds because the Shah’s decision to drop his support for the Kurds was basically presented as a *fait accompli*. Because now neither Iran nor Turkey allowed Israel or the U.S. to use their territory for delivering support to the Iraqi Kurds, Tel Aviv and Washington had according to Gibson no other option but to terminate their secret operations.<sup>252</sup> Gibson subsequently uses the *fait accompli* argument as evidence to disprove the widely held opinion that the U.S. betrayed the Kurds in March 1975.<sup>253</sup> Gibson suggests that this latter view is one of the *Pike Report’s* ‘most controversial assertions.’<sup>254</sup> However, regarding the sudden stop of U.S. assistance, the Pike Committee had basically come to a similar conclusion in its report as Gibson, in which it acknowledged that the U.S. had to rely exclusively on Iran for delivering its support to Barzani, so direct assistance to the Iraqi Kurds would have been impossible without the Shah’s cooperation.<sup>255</sup>

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<sup>248</sup> Gibson, *U.S. Foreign Policy*, 279-281.

<sup>249</sup> Little, ‘The United States and the Kurds’, 81.

<sup>250</sup> Gibson, *U.S. Foreign Policy*, 280.

<sup>251</sup> Entessar, ‘The Kurds in Post-Revolutionary Iran and Iraq’, 920; and McDowall, *A Modern History of the Kurds*, 335-336.

<sup>252</sup> Gibson, *U.S. Foreign Policy*, 236

<sup>253</sup> *Ibid.*, 19-20 and 279-280.

<sup>254</sup> *Ibid.*, 20.

<sup>255</sup> House Select Committee on Intelligence, *The Pike Report*, 197-198.

As a consequence, when the Shah abruptly cancelled his own support to the Kurds, the *Pike Report* already concluded that 'the U.S. had no choice but to acquiesce.'<sup>256</sup> This seems awfully similar to a *fait accompli*.

So in fact, Gibson claims that the *Pike Report* has distorted the study of Washington's relations with Iraq and the Kurdish Operation by suggesting among other things that the Pike Committee didn't take into account this *fait accompli* argument and thus harming Kissinger,<sup>257</sup> while effectively the *Pike Report* did elaborate on this specific issue that the U.S. was practically forced to abandon the Kurds. Nevertheless, the *Pike Report* simply came to a different conclusion about Washington's role. Also Gibson states that the Ford administration had no choice in ending their support to the Kurds after the Algiers Agreement.<sup>258</sup> However, in theory Washington still had an option to save them. There was still the alternative, although costly and uncertain, of considerably expanding the U.S. commitment to save the Kurdish resistance. Consequently, technically speaking the U.S. did have a choice in ending their support. However, the Ford administration was unwilling to make such a large sacrifice for the Kurds, and thus finally chose to cancel its Kurdish Operation.<sup>259</sup>

In the end, the Kurdish rebellion quickly disintegrated after foreign assistance was ended. The Ba'athist regime exploited the situation by launching a devastating offensive, followed by forced resettlements. If one looks at whether Washington accomplished its stated objectives with the Kurdish Operation, U.S. policy produced mixed results. Although increased Iraqi-Kurdish hostilities had limited Iraq's contribution to the Syrian front during the Yom Kippur War to just one division, the Iraqi army was not capable of sending much more troops anyway due to logistical problems.<sup>260</sup> Because U.S. support had to be limited to such a degree that plausible denial was still possible, Iran had to bear the brunt of the Kurdish Operation. As a consequence of the rebellion, Baghdad became even more dependent on Soviet weapon deliveries which led to tensions with Moscow, because the

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<sup>256</sup> House Select Committee on Intelligence, *The Pike Report*, 198.

<sup>257</sup> Gibson, *U.S. Foreign Policy*, 20.

<sup>258</sup> *Ibid.*, 236.

<sup>259</sup> Brands, 'Making the Conspiracy Theorist a Prophet', 390.

<sup>260</sup> *Ibid.*, 389-390.

Iraqis thought the Soviets weren't delivering supplies fast enough.<sup>261</sup> In the end Kissinger succeeded in his aim to cripple the Iraqi Ba'athist regime with internal conflicts, so Iraq would be less valuable to the Soviets and the country couldn't destabilize the region with military adventures,<sup>262</sup> while Iran did in fact most of the dirty work.

However, on the downside, U.S. policy had also become extremely dependent on what turned out to be unreliable regional partners, like the Shah. Particularly in March 1975 this problem became acute. When the costs and risks of sustaining the Kurdish revolt became too high, the Shah decided to negotiate an agreement with Baghdad, which had disastrous consequences for U.S. and Israeli support to the Kurds.<sup>263</sup> The second major liability of the Kurdish Operation was the fact that in the end it could not be kept secret. Barzani made indiscreet comments about U.S.-Kurdish relations. On top of that, the *Pike Report's* publication in *The Village Voice* in 1976 exposed many details of secret U.S. support to the Kurds. Eventually, after the Kurdish insurrection had collapsed, the United States drastically changed their policy towards Iraq. Instead of putting pressure on Iraq, Kissinger and the Ford administration now basically tried to reduce Iraqi dependence on the Soviet Union by promising improved relations with Washington.<sup>264</sup>

### **3.5 Conclusion U.S. foreign policy on the Iraqi Kurds from 1968 until the 1975 Algiers Agreement**

During its first years the Nixon-administration chose to focus on the major U.S. Cold War policy problems. As a direct result the Middle East and the Iraqi-Kurdish conflict in particular, were not a priority until the end of Nixon's first term.<sup>265</sup> This non-involvement policy regarding Iraq and the Iraqi Kurds was also in line with Washington's Twin Pillar policy and the Nixon Doctrine of building up Saudi Arabia, and especially Iran, as powerful bastions

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<sup>261</sup> Brands, 'Making the Conspiracy Theorist a Prophet', 389.

<sup>262</sup> Ibid., 391.

<sup>263</sup> Ibid., 389-390.

<sup>264</sup> Ibid., 390-392.

<sup>265</sup> Gibson, *U.S. Foreign Policy*, 276.

against Communist expansion or Arab radicalism in the region.<sup>266</sup> Basically, the Nixon-administration chose to let Iran deal with the Gulf and supported its hostile policy towards the Ba'athist regime in Iraq. However the sudden British military withdrawal from the Persian Gulf in December 1971, and the fact that Ba'athist Iraq or the USSR could exploit the ensuing power vacuum, would eventually become a significant motive for direct clandestine American support to the Kurdish rebellion from 1972 onwards.<sup>267</sup>

Still, the critical turning point for Washington was the signing of the Soviet-Iraqi Treaty of Friendship and Cooperation in April 1972. According to the U.S., Iraq had now practically become a Communist ally of Moscow in the Cold War. Subsequently this led to a major shift in U.S. policy and a clear break with its non-involvement strategy, because the Nixon administration became directly engaged in supporting the Kurdish rebels.<sup>268</sup> In the end Washington's objectives of its Kurdish Operation, which was approved on 31 July 1972, were directing the Ba'athist regime's military strength inward, concentrated on the Kurdish rebels, while preventing Moscow from reaching its regional goals.<sup>269</sup> Eventually, the Nixon administration had many reasons for supporting the Kurdish rebellion after the April 1972 Soviet-Iraqi Treaty was signed, and which now outweighed the possible risks and disadvantages.<sup>270</sup> Basically, Kissinger and Nixon's decision to start supporting the Kurdish rebels was probably motivated by a combination of American concern about the growing significance of Iraq as a strategic Soviet ally, and appeasing the Shah's wish to become the foremost power in the Persian Gulf.<sup>271</sup> Another important factor was U.S. concern about Iraqi nationalization of the IPC in June 1972.<sup>272</sup>

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<sup>266</sup> Brands, 'Making the Conspiracy Theorist a Prophet', 387; and Gibson, *U.S. Foreign Policy*, 180.

<sup>267</sup> Brands, 'Making the Conspiracy Theorist a Prophet', 386; Gibson, *U.S. Foreign Policy*, 277; and Keefer E.A., *FRUS, 1969-1976, Volume E-4, Document 301*, 1-3.

<sup>268</sup> Gibson, *U.S. Foreign Policy*, 277; and Brands, 'Making the Conspiracy Theorist a Prophet', 387.

<sup>269</sup> Brands, 'Making the Conspiracy Theorist a Prophet', 381; and Keefer E.A., *FRUS, 1969-1976, Volume E-4, Document 322*.

<sup>270</sup> Gibson, *U.S. Foreign Policy*, 210-211 and 277-278; Pelletiere, *The Kurds*, 167; and Little, 'The United States and the Kurds', 77

<sup>271</sup> Gibson, *U.S. Foreign Policy*, 178.

<sup>272</sup> *Ibid.*, 278.

The Nixon-administration's intention was to merely preserve the Kurdish insurgents as a defensive guerrilla army, which could restrain the Ba'athist regime.<sup>273</sup> Essentially, this cynical 'no-win, no-lose approach' would remain U.S. policy on the Kurdish rebellion for the next three years. In the end the Kurdish Operation produced mixed results. The U.S. Government had succeeded in their goal to cripple the Ba'athist regime with domestic conflicts, so Iraq wasn't capable of destabilizing the region with military-political operations. Besides, in this way Iraq had effectively been made less useful for the Soviet Union as an ally, like intended.<sup>274</sup> However, U.S. policy on the Iraqi Kurds had been extremely dependent on the Shah's cooperation. So after the Algiers Agreement was signed in March 1975, and the U.S. was no longer allowed to use Iranian, or Turkish territory for supporting the Kurdish Rebellion, this caused the Ford administration and Israel to cancel their secret assistance program as well, which ultimately ruined the Kurdish resistance.<sup>275</sup> Another problem of the Kurdish Operation was the fact that eventually it could not be kept secret.

Interestingly enough, among all the American motives for supporting the Iraqi Kurds there was none that pronounced sincere American concern for the Kurdish quest for more autonomy. Basically, one cannot deny the fact that the Ford- and Nixon-administrations had used the Kurds for promoting U.S. interests in Iraq and the Middle East at the expense of the Iraqi Kurds themselves. One example was Kissinger's strategy of letting Iran incite the Kurdish rebels after the Yom Kippur War of 1973 in order to secure an Iraqi military withdrawal and Israeli disengagement from Syria. However, this strategy also contributed to the revival of the Kurdish War.<sup>276</sup>

There is even some truth in claiming that the U.S. had sold out the Kurds in March 1975. Already prior to the start of the Kurdish Operation, Kissinger and Nixon were fully aware that if Iran would terminate its support and the Kurdish rebellion would fail, the U.S. would

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<sup>273</sup> Keefer E.A., *FRUS, 1969-1976, Volume E-4, Document 321*, 12-13.

<sup>274</sup> Brands, 'Making the Conspiracy Theorist a Prophet', 391.

<sup>275</sup> Gibson, *U.S. Foreign Policy*, 232; NSC, 'Message from Shah on Kurds', in *NPLM*, 1-3.; and Patterson E.A., *FRUS, 1964-1968, Volume XXI, Document 313*.

<sup>276</sup> Gibson, *U.S. Foreign Policy*, 238 and 278-279; and The White House, 'Kissinger-Meir Memorandum of Conversation', *DNSA, Kissinger Transcripts Collection, Item Number: KT01143*, 12.

neither have the means nor the interests to deliver conclusive support.<sup>277</sup> Also, when Kissinger found out in February 1975 the Shah was seriously contemplating to drop his support for the Kurdish rebels, he deliberately failed to warn Barzani.<sup>278</sup> Another example was Barzani's claim he would never have rejected the 1974 Autonomy Law were it not for the promised support from Israel, Iran and the United States.<sup>279</sup> Also, although expensive and uncertain, an alternative option of expanding U.S. support which might have saved the Kurdish resistance was not implemented.<sup>280</sup>

One of Kissinger's explanations for the Nixon- and Ford administration's enthusiasm for supporting the Iraqi Kurds was that the Kurdish Operation was in fact part of Washington's general strategy of the time to weaken any country which had strong relations with Communist Moscow.<sup>281</sup> Ultimately, the Iraqi Kurds were in the eyes of Kissinger the 'ultimate Cold War card', which were to be used to advance American interests at the expense of Soviet efforts to establish a strategic Communist presence and influence in Iraq, and the Middle East in general. In the end, Cold War strategy was the primary motivation behind Washington's policy towards Ba'athist Iraq, and by implication towards the Iraqi Kurds as well, during this period from summer 1972 till the collapse of the Kurdish insurgency in March 1975.<sup>282</sup>

#### 4. Conclusion

So what factors determined Washington's policy towards the Iraqi Kurds between 1958 and 1975? And what factors caused it to change? During General Qasim's presidency, Washington's relations with the Iraqi Kurds and with Baghdad were basically determined by

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<sup>277</sup> NSC, 'Message from Shah on Kurds', in *NPLM*, 1-3.; and Patterson E.A., *FRUS, 1964-1968, Volume XXI, Document 313*.

<sup>278</sup> Little, 'The United States and the Kurds', 81.

<sup>279</sup> Entessar, 'The Kurds in Post-Revolutionary Iran and Iraq', 920; and McDowall, *A Modern History of the Kurds*, 335-336.

<sup>280</sup> Brands, 'Making the Conspiracy Theorist a Prophet', 390.

<sup>281</sup> Little, 'The United States and the Kurds', 77-78; and Gibson, *U.S. Foreign Policy*, 278.

<sup>282</sup> Gibson, *U.S. Foreign Policy*, 280.



the U.S. main strategy for defending its interests in the Middle East after World War II and its two *primary objectives*.<sup>283</sup> With the 14 July Revolution in Iraq of 1958, a pro-Western government had been toppled and Iraq was eventually even withdrawn from the anti-Communist Baghdad Pact alliance. The U.S. feared that Iraq would become Communist-controlled, and therefore began to examine whether the Iraqi Kurds could be useful in promoting U.S. interests in Iraq and the region.<sup>284</sup> So American interest in Iraq from the installation of the Qasim government in July 1958, and attention for the Iraqi Kurds as well, was all in the context of the Cold War because of the fierce competition between the U.S. and the Soviet Union for influence in Iraq and in the Middle East in general.

Basically, the main policy interest for the U.S. regarding the Iraqi Kurds was that in theory the Kurds could be useful in expelling Qasim from power. Still, there were too many strategic reasons for Washington to refrain from supporting the Kurdish revolt against Baghdad in 1961, primarily because this would be contrary to the United States' two *primary objectives*.<sup>285</sup> Besides, a U.S. backed Kurdish rebellion in Iraq could also lead to Kurdish separatist activities in Turkey and Iran, crucial regional allies for the U.S.<sup>286</sup> While the U.S. wanted a pro-Western government, realistic alternatives to Qasim were unavailable. Therefore Washington had to maintain friendly relations with Qasim's regime so Soviet influence could be balanced.<sup>287</sup> As a consequence, the U.S. maintained a strict position of non-involvement in the Kurdish autonomy issue. The U.S. even feared that a Kurdish revolt could drive Qasim closer to the Soviet Union, so American support to the Kurdish rebels was very unlikely.<sup>288</sup>

Basically, during the period from the newly installed Ba'athist regime in February 1963 until the July 1968 Ba'athist coup, the U.S. was unable to implement a consistent and clear policy

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<sup>283</sup> LaFantasie E.A., *FRUS, 1958-1960, Volume XII, Document 51*, 189.

<sup>284</sup> Little, 'The United States and the Kurds', 67-68.

<sup>285</sup> Vanly, 'Kurdistan in Iraq', 164; McDowall, *A Modern History of the Kurds*, 299; and LaFantasie E.A., *FRUS, 1958-1960, Volume XII, Document 51*, 191.

<sup>286</sup> Rubin, 'Abd al-Karim Qasim and the Kurds of Iraq', 372

<sup>287</sup> LaFantasie E.A., *FRUS, 1958-1960, Volume XII, Document 51*, 189.

<sup>288</sup> 'Memorandum from Strong to Talbot', *Department of State, Central Files, 787.00/9-1162*; Pelletiere, *The Kurds*, 130; and Rubin, 'Abd al-Karim Qasim and the Kurds of Iraq', 372.

regarding the Iraqi-Kurdish conflict. Probably the most important problem was that Washington was fiercely competing with the USSR for influence on the various governments of Iraq, while it simultaneously had to contend with the Soviets for influence on the Iraqi Kurds as well.<sup>289</sup> During this period, Washington had strong interests in developing friendly relations with Iraqi governments, especially when they were anti-Communist like the Ba'athist regime of 1963. However, U.S. policy was particularly hindered by important regional allies (especially Israel and Iran) who all had different interests in the Iraqi-Kurdish conflict.<sup>290</sup> Therefore Washington was forced to carry out a careful balancing act on the Iraqi-Kurdish conflict, so influence on both the Kurds and Baghdad could be maintained, without antagonizing or alienating its regional Arab and non-Arab allies. This ambiguous policy was ultimately devised for denying the expansion of Communist influence in Iraq or among the Iraqi Kurds.

However, in the end this overambitious U.S. policy could not succeed because of the extremely tense situation in the Middle East and the many different interests of international players and allies involved in the Iraqi-Kurdish conflict, which often conflicted with Washington's interests. When from February 1963 until July 1968 U.S. diplomatic pressure failed twice to prevent a resumption of the Kurdish rebellion, Washington was eventually more inclined to let its geopolitical interests regarding Iraq's governments prevail over its interests regarding the Iraqi Kurds. This was probably mainly due to the fact that a great amount of autonomy for the Iraqi Kurds or a continued Kurdish rebellion were contrary to U.S. regional interests, because this could destabilize most of all its crucial allies Iran and Turkey.<sup>291</sup> This regional instability could also be exploited by the Soviet Union.<sup>292</sup>

During its first years the Nixon administration also conducted a non-involvement strategy regarding the Kurdish autonomy issue. Because the Nixon administration focused on the major U.S. policy problems, the Middle East was not a priority until the end of Nixon's first

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<sup>289</sup> Patterson E.A., *FRUS, 1964-1968, Volume XXI, Document 185*; Patterson E.A., *FRUS, 1964-1968, Volume XXI, Document 189*.

<sup>290</sup> Patterson E.A., *FRUS, 1964-1968, Volume XXI, Document 177*.

<sup>291</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>292</sup> Patterson E.A., *FRUS, 1964-1968, Volume XXI, Document 175*.

term.<sup>293</sup> However two crucial events, the sudden British military withdrawal from the Persian Gulf in December 1971 with its considerable geopolitical consequences, combined with the critical turning point of the Soviet-Iraqi Treaty of Friendship and Cooperation in April 1972, would eventually result in direct clandestine American support to the Kurdish rebellion from July 1972 onwards. Basically this treaty led to a major change in U.S. policy and a clear break with its non-involvement strategy regarding the Iraqi-Kurdish conflict.<sup>294</sup> Another important factor was U.S. concern about nationalization of the IPC by the Ba'athist regime in June 1972.<sup>295</sup> Washington's objectives of the Kurdish Operation were keeping the Ba'athists military power focused on the Kurdish rebels, so Iraq could not launch military-political actions in the Persian Gulf possibly targeting Western oil interests,<sup>296</sup> while preventing the Soviets from reaching their regional strategic goals.<sup>297</sup>

In fact, Kissinger and Nixon's decision to start supporting the Kurdish insurgents was probably motivated by a mixture of U.S. concern about Iraq's increased significance as a crucial ally for Moscow in the Cold War, and appeasing the Shah's ambition to become the main regional power in the Persian Gulf.<sup>298</sup> Basically, from the implementation of the Kurdish Operation in July 1972 until its collapse in March 1975 the U.S. maintained a cynical 'no-win, no-lose approach' concerning the Kurdish rebellion so the Ba'athist government would be destabilized.<sup>299</sup>

It's quite ironic that while Barzani believed he received support from the U.S. so he could fight for more autonomy, Washington was in fact only interested in the Iraqi Kurds as an instrument to promote its own geopolitical interests in Iraq and was actually opposed to Kurdish autonomy.<sup>300</sup> Among all the American motives for supporting the Kurdish insurgents, there was none that pronounced sincere American concern for the Kurdish autonomy cause.

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<sup>293</sup> Gibson, *U.S. Foreign Policy*, 276.

<sup>294</sup> Ibid., 277; and Brands, 'Making the Conspiracy Theorist a Prophet', 386-387.

<sup>295</sup> Gibson, *U.S. Foreign Policy*, 277-278.

<sup>296</sup> Keefer E.A., *FRUS, 1969-1976, Volume E-4, Document 301*, 1-6.

<sup>297</sup> Brands, 'Making the Conspiracy Theorist a Prophet', 381; and Keefer E.A., *FRUS, 1969-1976, Volume E-4, Document 321*.

<sup>298</sup> Gibson, *U.S. Foreign Policy*, 178.

<sup>299</sup> Keefer E.A., *FRUS, 1969-1976, Volume E-4, Document 321*, 12-13.

<sup>300</sup> McDowall, *A Modern History of the Kurds*, 335-336.

There is even some truth in claiming that the U.S. had sold out the Kurds in March 1975 if one takes into account the dramatic collapse of the Kurdish rebellion.<sup>301</sup>

Essentially, Kissinger regarded the Iraqi Kurds as the 'ultimate Cold War card', which were to be used to promote American interests at the expense of Moscow's efforts to establish a strategic Communist presence and influence in Iraq, and the Middle East in general. In the end, Cold War strategy was the primary motivation behind U.S. policy towards Ba'athist Iraq, and by implication towards the Iraqi Kurds as well, during the period from the start of the Kurdish Operation until the collapse of the Kurdish rebellion in March 1975.<sup>302</sup>

So was the foreign policy of the United States towards the Iraqi Kurds contradictory or consistent between 1958 and 1975? One inconsistency in U.S. policy was that during the Nixon administration, especially after the British military withdrawal from the Persian Gulf, as well as during the beginning of the Ford administration, it was in Washington's interest that the Kurdish rebellion against Baghdad would continue because Iraq seemed to become Communist-controlled. In summary, supporting the Kurdish rebellion against Ba'athist Iraq was part of a general U.S. strategy of the time to weaken any country which had strong relations with the Soviet Union.<sup>303</sup> However, during the presidencies of Eisenhower, Kennedy and Johnson, the White House conducted an official policy of U.S. non-involvement in Iraq's Kurdish War, and Kurdish requests for Washington's support were constantly turned down.<sup>304</sup> During their presidencies it was in Washington's interest that the Kurdish autonomy issue would be solved and that there would be no resumption or continuation of the Kurdish rebellion. Especially a protracted Kurdish insurgency could cause major regional instability, so these U.S. governments feared that the Soviet Union could exploit this regional instability for expanding Communist influence in the Middle East.<sup>305</sup>

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<sup>301</sup> NSC, 'Message from Shah on Kurds', in *NPLM*, 1-3; Patterson E.A., *FRUS, 1964-1968, Volume XXI, Document 313*; Little, 'The United States and the Kurds', 81; and Brands, 'Making the Conspiracy Theorist a Prophet', 390.

<sup>302</sup> Gibson, *U.S. Foreign Policy*, 280.

<sup>303</sup> *Ibid.*, 278; and Little, 'The United States and the Kurds', 77-78.

<sup>304</sup> Alvandi, H-Diplo Article Review: Douglas Little, 'The United States and the Kurds: A Cold War Story', 3.

<sup>305</sup> Patterson E.A., *FRUS, 1964-1968, Volume XXI, Document 177*; and Patterson E.A., *FRUS, 1964-1968, Volume XXI, Document 175*.

Another inconsistency between 1958 and 1975 in U.S. policy on the Iraqi Kurds was that during General Qasim's regime the seemingly Communist nature of the KDP and its president Barzani were one of the primary reasons for the Eisenhower and Kennedy administrations for not supporting the Kurdish insurgents,<sup>306</sup> while the Nixon and Ford administrations no longer regarded this as an obstacle for providing U.S. assistance. However, during the latter administrations the Iraqi Kurds had become crucial for promoting American interests in the region. The Nixon and Ford administrations could not be picky, because the Ba'athist regime had practically neutralized all of its other domestic enemies by summer 1973, and unlike before 1972 a continued Kurdish rebellion had now become an American interest due to the pro-Communist policies of Baghdad.<sup>307</sup>

Also, despite of the fact that the Eisenhower, Kennedy, and Johnson administrations declared that Washington would conduct an official non-involvement policy on the Kurdish autonomy problem, only the Eisenhower administration largely succeeded in not getting involved.<sup>308</sup> Both the Kennedy- and Johnson-administration became diplomatically entangled, while the Kennedy government even covertly facilitated the 1963 Ba'athist offensive against the Kurds with U.S. weapons.<sup>309</sup> While the Nixon administration initially also followed a non-involvement policy on the Kurdish autonomy issue, it basically supported the Shah in his hostile policy against Ba'athist Iraq. However, the Nixon administration eventually initiated a major policy shift when it started direct clandestine U.S. support to the Kurdish rebels.<sup>310</sup> The Ford administration continued this involvement policy until U.S. support to the Kurds was cancelled after the Shah had signed the Algiers Agreement with Iraq in March 1975.

Another inconsistency in U.S. policy was the fact that during the presidencies of the brothers Arif in Iraq, U.S. officials regarded the Kurdish Question as a long-term problem and

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<sup>306</sup> Vanly, 'Kurdistan in Iraq', 164; and LaFantasie E.A., *FRUS, 1958-1960, Volume XII, Document 51*, 189-191.

<sup>307</sup> Keefer E.A., *FRUS, 1969-1976, Volume E-4, Document 321*, 12-13; and Little, 'The United States and the Kurds', 78-79.

<sup>308</sup> Alvandi, H-Diplo Article Review: Douglas Little, 'The United States and the Kurds: A Cold War Story', 3.

<sup>309</sup> LaFantasie E.A., *FRUS, 1961-1963, Volume XVIII, Document 293*, 638.

<sup>310</sup> Gibson, *U.S. Foreign Policy*, 276-277; and Brands, 'Making the Conspiracy Theorist a Prophet', 387.

they no longer believed it could be resolved by force from either side,<sup>311</sup> while during the Ba'athist regime of 1963 Washington still believed that Iraq could force a military solution for the Kurdish autonomy problem and contributed to this military option.<sup>312</sup> Eventually, by 1967, Washington had returned to its original stance during Eisenhower's presidency that the Iraqi-Kurdish conflict was an internal Iraqi affair which could probably only be solved with a negotiated political agreement.<sup>313</sup>

Still, despite of the many inconsistencies in U.S. foreign policy towards the Iraqi Kurds between 1958 and 1975, there are some factors within this policy, and also which determined this U.S. policy, that remained consistent. One consistent factor was the fact that all U.S. administrations between 1958 and 1975 were opposed to a great amount of autonomy, or even independence, of the Iraqi Kurds.<sup>314</sup> According to Kissinger, Washington had ultimately started supporting the Iraqi Kurds 'in order to absorb Iraqi energies', instead of promoting Kurdish self-determination.<sup>315</sup> Meanwhile, Washington's *primary objectives* from its central strategy for the Middle East remained a constant factor between 1958 and 1975 which basically determined U.S. foreign policy towards the Iraqi Kurds, as well as towards Iraq.<sup>316</sup> In the end every U.S. administration between 1958 and 1975 conducted a policy towards Iraq which had at its core the ultimate objective of preventing the Soviet Union from establishing control over Iraq, and thus withholding the Soviets a strategic base

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<sup>311</sup> Patterson E.A., *FRUS, 1964-1968, Volume XXI, Document 177*; and Patterson E.A., *FRUS, 1964-1968, Volume XXI, Document 185*.

<sup>312</sup> LaFantasie E.A., *FRUS, 1961-1963, Volume XVIII, Document 311, 674-675*.

<sup>313</sup> 'Memorandum from Strong to Talbot', *Department of State, Central Files, 787.00/9-1162*; and Patterson E.A., *FRUS, 1964-1968, Volume XXI, Document 185*.

<sup>314</sup> 'Memorandum from Strong to Talbot', *Department of State, Central Files, 787.00/9-1162*; LaFantasie E.A., *FRUS, 1961-1963, Volume XVIII, Document 204, 445-446*; Patterson E.A., *FRUS, 1964-1968, Volume XXI, Document 177*; Patterson E.A., *FRUS, 1964-1968, Volume XXI, Document 175*. Brands, 'Making the Conspiracy Theorist a Prophet', 388; and Keefer E.A., *FRUS, 1969-1976, Volume E-4, Document 321*.

<sup>315</sup> Kissinger Memorandum of Conversation, 31 October 1975, *DNSA, Kissinger Transcripts Collection, Item Number: KT01821, 2*. [http://gateway.proquest.com.ezproxy.leidenuniv.nl:2048/openurl?url\\_ver=Z39.88-2004&res\\_dat=xri:dnsa&rft\\_dat=xri:dnsa:article:CKT01821](http://gateway.proquest.com.ezproxy.leidenuniv.nl:2048/openurl?url_ver=Z39.88-2004&res_dat=xri:dnsa&rft_dat=xri:dnsa:article:CKT01821)

<sup>316</sup> LaFantasie E.A., *FRUS, 1958-1960, Volume XII, Document 51, 189*.

in the oil-producing Persian Gulf. The continued supply of Near Eastern oil also remained a priority.<sup>317</sup>

Because all these U.S. administrations believed that the USSR critically threatened Iraq's sovereignty, Washington's policy on Iraq between 1958 and 1975 was according to Gibson almost entirely focused 'on Iraq's perceived role in the Cold War'.<sup>318</sup> It is indeed evident that the Soviet Union and the United States were engaged in a fierce Cold War competition for geopolitical influence in the Middle East, and particularly for influence on Iraq after the pro-Western Hashemite government had been toppled in 1958. An American policy primarily driven by its Cold War strategy on winning back Iraq to the Western bloc and preventing its incorporation in the Soviet sphere of influence was only a logical consequence. Both the Soviet Union as well as Washington used the Kurds in this Cold War conflict over Iraq as regional proxies, whenever this suited their own interests, and in order to promote their respective strategic objectives.<sup>319</sup> So during the investigated period from 1958 till 1975, U.S. relations with the Iraqi Kurds were always directly dependent on Washington's relations with the ruling government in Baghdad of that time. Whenever an Iraqi regime seemed to be potentially anti-Communist, the U.S. conducted a policy of rapprochement, while trying to strengthen the regime's position.<sup>320</sup> In such a situation, the Kurdish threat of destabilizing such a favorable regime resulted in U.S. policy directly opposing Kurdish interests, like during the Ba'athist regime of 1963. Also when the Iraqi-Kurdish conflict could lead to a situation which could potentially be exploited by the Soviet Union, the U.S. conducted a policy which tried to prevent a resumption or continuation of the Kurdish rebellion. But when the Ba'athist regime that took power in 1968 eventually turned out to be pro-Communist in its policies, the U.S. changed its policy regarding the Iraqi Kurds and started backing their rebellion because it had now become in line with its Cold War strategy to do so. The Kurdish War in 1974-1975 had thus basically become a Cold War conflict with Washington arming and financing the Iraqi Kurds, while Moscow supplied weapons to the Ba'athist regime.<sup>321</sup>

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<sup>317</sup> Gibson, *U.S. Foreign Policy*, 281.

<sup>318</sup> *Ibid.*, 21 and 281.

<sup>319</sup> *Ibid.*, 281; Pelletiere, *The Kurds*, 171-173.

<sup>320</sup> Gibson, *U.S. Foreign Policy*, 273.

<sup>321</sup> Gibson, *U.S. Foreign Policy*, 271-273; and Brands, 'Making the Conspiracy Theorist a Prophet', 388-390.

So the primary constant factor in U.S. foreign policy towards the Iraqi Kurds was the fact that it was inseparably tied to deliberations regarding Iraq's perceived role by Washington in the Cold War. And paradoxically enough, the Cold War strategy towards Iraq that remained a consistent factor in determining U.S. policy on the Iraqi Kurds, also led to the inconsistency in Washington's position regarding U.S. support for the Kurdish rebellion. In the end, Cold War strategy was the common denominator in U.S. foreign policy towards the Iraqi Kurds between 1958 and 1975.



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