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Britain, Iraq, and the Politics of Genocide: The 1963 Ba'ath Government Campaign Against the Kurds

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ABSTRACT

The Kurds of Iraq were the victims of a claimed genocide during the rule of the Ba'ath regime in Iraq in 1963. The Iraqi Ba'ath Party first came to power in February of 1963 and was ousted in November of that year; between June and October, it conducted military offensives against the Kurdish minority in Iraq in the name of destroying the Kurdish autonomy movement, then spearheaded by the nationalist Kurdistan Democratic Party (KDP). No estimated numbers exist on how many people were killed in that period, but an array of international and other reports, presented in this research, concurrently stated that the Iraqi government's mass violence against the Kurds amounted to genocide. These included private recognition by the relevant UK diplomats and officials. This article examines the foreign policy of the UK in relation to that reported genocide. It explores how the Cold War, regional interests, and a long-held aversion to Kurdish desires for self-rule led Britain not only to overlook the mass violence perpetrated by the Ba'ath government against Iraq's Kurdish minority in 1963 but also to support the regime. This policy was adopted in the face of credible information available to British officials reporting the Iraqi actions as a genocide. Britain continued to take the public position that the Kurdish issue in Iraq was an internal Iraqi matter while simultaneously seeking to foster good relations with the Ba'ath government by providing it with arms and diplomatic protection and seeking to undermine the Kurdish autonomy movement. Thus, a case study in the politics of genocide and how politics determines the response to these is investigated.

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Introduction

Many studies have examined how politics in international relations affects different states' responses to genocide and mass violence committed around the world. It has been widely recognized that states calculate their self-interest and respond in ways that prioritize their own pragmatic concerns. Scholars have argued that the most powerful states

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ignore atrocities and mass violence when this benefits them and that client states commit mass violence – including genocide – with impunity, protected by their patrons. Consequently, for the most powerful states, there are genocides to be condemned, but there is also mass violence that can be overlooked, even facilitated. Where a state's particular interests lie determines which of these paths it will take.¹

In relation to the UK's foreign policy, previous events of mass violence studied show how politics affected Britain's response to them. Examples have included the mass violence committed in Biafra (1967–70) and East Pakistan (Bangladesh, 1971). Scholars have argued that it was a calculated political interest as opposed to ethics that determined Britain's responses in these cases. In both cases, Britain was accused of turning a blind-eye to accusations of genocide to safeguard British interests. In Biafra, it empowered the perpetrating side – the government of Nigeria – while it was accused of carrying out a genocide in Biafra.²

This article examines Britain's response to a little-studied case of mass violence perpetrated by the Iraqi Ba'ath government in 1963. In the context of Kurdish struggle and desires for self-rule, between June to November 1963, the Ba'ath regime launched a military offensive that featured indiscriminate attacks and the targeting of Kurdish civilians. This was embedded in a broader process of Arabization against the Kurds. As shown here, diplomats and officials from the UK, the US, and the USSR as well as independent eye-witness sources all construed the attacks as amounting to a genocide.³

Adding another case to the study of the politics of genocide, this research explores how, motivated by what were perceived as its political interests, Britain adopted a policy of overlooking the mass violence and backed the Iraqi state. This policy included providing the Ba'ath regime with diplomatic protection against the charge of genocide brought to the UN by the USSR, supplying arms used against the Kurds, and seeking to restrict the movement of Iraq's nationalist Kurdish leaders, essentially to render them unable to publicize their cause, especially in Britain. British officials deemed that Britain's support for Iraq would be an embarrassment for them were this to be publicized by Kurdish leaders, particularly in Britain, and, indeed, they succeeded in preventing publicity. This policy was adopted in spite of British diplomats privately noting that a genocide was being perpetrated. Yet, appeasing and enabling Iraq was deemed to be in Britain's political interests and was thus pursued. Since its invasion of the former Ottoman vilayets of Baghdad, Basra and Mosul (which included southern Kurdistan), Britain had long-lasting economic and security interests in Iraq and in the region. This included oil reserves

¹ A. Dirk Moses, "Diplomacy of Genocide," in *The Oxford Handbook on History and International Relations*, ed. Mlada Bukovansky et al. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2023), 281–95.

² See Karen E. Smith, "The UK and 'Genocide' in Biafra," in *Postcolonial Conflict and the Question of Genocide: The Nigeria- Biafra War, 1967–1970*, ed. A. Dirk Moses and Lasse Heerten (New York: Routledge, 2018) 137–55; A. Dirk Moses, "Civil War or Genocide? Britain and the Secession of East Pakistan in 1971," in *Civil Wars in South Asia: State, Sovereignty, Development*, ed. Aparna Sundar and Nandini Sundar (Los Angeles: SAGE Publications, 2014), 142–64.

³ See for example O371/170515: EQ2281/9, "Kurdish Problem in Iraq"; FO317/170488: EQ1019/21, "Confidential"; FO371/170515: EQ2281/8, "Request for an Additional Item in the Agenda [...]," 9 July 1963; FO371/170515: NO. 2119, "Confidential: From Foreign Office to New York," 12 July 1963; Editorial, "Iraq Army Battles Kurds in War of Extermination," *Washington Post*, 5 June 1963; Alex Efty, "Eye-witness Details Civil War in Iraq: Thousands Killed in Fighting," *The Chicago Tribune*, 14 September 1963, A4; also Bryan R. Gibson, *Sold Out? US Foreign Policy, Iraq, the Kurds, and the Cold War* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2015), 72; Hawraman Ali, *The Iraqi Kurds and the Cold War: Regional Politics, 1958–1975* (Abingdon: Routledge, 2020), 51.

in the Mosul vilayets and attaching southern Kurdistan to Iraq as a buffer to secure Arab Iraq from the Turks.⁴

The primary data used in this research are sourced from British, Kurdish, UN, and US archives, along with other independent reports. Declassified British governmental documents from the National Archives in Kew comprise the main source materials.⁵ These are supplemented by the accounts of various contemporary individuals, including eye-witnesses. These include an interview with the prominent veteran Kurdish politician Dr Mahmoud Ali Othman and the memoirs of the two major Kurdish leaders in Iraq at the time, Jalal Talabani and Masoud Barzani, the memoir of Kader Kokoy, a Peshmerga (Kurdish military units) in 1963, and of the prominent Kurdish intellectual and politician Rafiq Hilmi. Dr Othman was a Peshmerga physician in 1963 and represented the Kurds on numerous occasions abroad in the 1960s and 1970s, including in the UK.⁶

Other sources that have been drawn on in the development of this research include, among others, recorded interviews (in Kurdish) with three former high-ranking Kurdish officials of the once vigorous Iraqi Communist Party (ICP): Karim Ahmad, Ibrahim Sofi and Mukaram Talabani.⁷ Ahmad served as the ICP secretary at one point, while the other two held senior positions in the party. Added to these are the memoirs of four Britons serving in southern Kurdistan after WWI as political officers: Col. Wallace Lyon, Rupert Hay, Major Ely B. Soane, and C. J. Edmunds.⁸

Mass Violence, Politics, and the Kurds

Several different but overlapping categories of literature are relevant to this study. They include the literature on various aspects of genocide (including in relation to UK foreign policy), on the Cold War and its impact on nations of the Third World, and on the history of the Kurds. Studies related to mass killing and genocide have included the effect of politics on reactions to them and issues around recognition after the crimes have become known. Examples of these works include those authored by Jeffrey S. Bachman, Hannibal Travis, Noam Chomsky and Edward S. Herman, Herman with David Peterson, Karen Smith, and various works by A. Dirk Moses.⁹

⁴ See David McDowall, *A Modern History of the Kurds* (London: I.B. Tauris, 2004), 143; Stacy Holden, ed., *A Documentary History of Modern Iraq* (Gainesville: University Press of Florida, 2012), 39 and Adeed Dawisha, *Iraq: A Political History from Independence to Occupation* (New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 2009), 26.

⁵ All cited sources starting "FO" are from the Kew archive.

⁶ Primary sources: Mahmoud Othman, telephone interview, 20 October 2022; Kader Kokoy's (deceased) unpublished, untitled memoir (access enabled by Aram Kader Kokoy). Published works: Mes'ud Barzanî, *Barzanî Û Bzutnewey Rizgarîxwazî Kurd: Bergî Sêyem, Beşî Yekem 1961–1975* [Barzani and the Kurdish Liberation Movement], Part II and Part III (Vols. i, ii) (Erbil: Çapxaney wezaretî perwerde [Ministry of Education Printing House], n.d. and 2012; Rafiq Hilmi, *Yad-dashî [Memoir]*, (Slemani: *Dezgay çap û pexşîti serdem* [Serdam Printing and Publishing House], 2003); Selah Reşîd, *Mam celal: didarî temen, le lawêtyewe bo koşki komarî [Mam Jalal: Meeting life, from youth to presidential palace]* (Karo: Kurdistan, Iraq, 2017).

⁷ Rudaw, *Mukaram Talabani 2* (interview, https://youtu.be/1_xRHrePn3w, 2017); *Ebu Tara 3, ibrahim sofi (ebutara)* (interview, <https://youtu.be/5PzlgM-jbTg>, 2018); *Karim Ahmad 3*, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=J6lDpBhGcDU>

⁸ David K. Fieldhouse, *Kurds, Arab and Britons: The Memoir of Col. W.A. Lyon in Kurdistan, 1918-1945*; Rupert Hay, *Two Years in Kurdistan* (Washington, DC: Westphalia Press, 2016); Ely B. Soane, *To Mesopotamia and Kurdistan in Disguise* (London: Weşanxaney Azad, 2013); Cecil J. Edmonds, *Kurds, Turks and Arabs: Politics, Travel and Research in North-Eastern Iraq, 1919–1925* (London: Oxford University Press, 1957).

⁹ Jeffrey S. Bachman, *The Politics of Genocide: From the Genocide Convention to the Responsibility to Protect* (New York: Rutgers University Press, 2022); Hannibal Travis, *Genocide, Ethnonationalism, and the United Nations: Exploring the Cases of Mass Killing Since 1945* (New York: Routledge, 2013); Noam Chomsky and Edward S. Herman, *Counter-Revolutionary Violence: Bloodbaths in Fact and Propaganda* (Andover, MA: Warner Modular Publications, Inc., 1973);

Examining the impact of politics on genocide and considering a number of cases, Jeffrey S. Bachman observes how the UN Convention on the Prevention and Punishment of the Crime of Genocide (1946, adopted 1948) was developed and written by the five permanent members of the UN Security Council “(P-5)” in a way that omitted protection for political groups, and how it defines genocide as “an internal matter when the crime does not cross state borders.”¹⁰ Bachman notes that the convention was agreed upon in a way that prioritizes state sovereignty and territorial jurisdiction over considering the crime of genocide as a threat to international peace and security – and thus requiring Security Council intervention. This has resulted in the P-5 being able “to establish a culture of impunity for themselves (as well as other states when their interests align), specifically in relation to the crime of genocide.”¹¹

The P-5 members, Bachman maintains, have exploited “loopholes and blind spots written into the Genocide Convention” to “narrate, frame, and name violence in ways that situate it out-side of the scope of the convention” and leading to the Convention’s “discretionary nonapplication,”¹² In addition, the P-5 ensured that the Convention was formulated in a way that essentially gave them impunity from accusations of historical genocides, including cultural genocide. In this way, the P-5 “respond according to their individual narrow interests when cases of genocide find their way onto the Security Council’s agenda.”¹³

Bachman’s analysis applies to how the UK responded to accusations of genocide in Kurdistan in 1963. Actually, as Bachman argues, in the *Bosnia v. Serbia* (2007) ruling, the International Court of Justice noted that states have an obligation to use their influence to prevent genocide.¹⁴ As this article shows, in the case of the Iraqi Kurds and the UK in 1963, however, the UK did the opposite; it shielded Iraq diplomatically, backed it militarily and sought to undermine Kurdish efforts at publicization.

Hannibal Travis makes a similar observation to that of Bachman, commenting on the “more fundamental problem” that “the most powerful members of the Security Council have themselves participated in, or at least funded and excused, major episodes in which civilians were attacked and slain by states or non-state actors.”¹⁵ Herman and Peterson are among others whose analysis follows the observation that, for the US, depending on where its interest lies, there are “good and bad bloodbaths.”¹⁶ What these authors agree on, therefore, is that the most powerful states in the UN, the P-5, name, frame and describe mass violence in accordance with what suits their individual interests as perceived.

In relation to the UK – a permanent member of the Security Council and an international power – a number of studies have examined how it has responded to reports of genocide around the world. For example, Karen Smith has looked at how Britain

Edward S. Herman and David Peterson, *The Politics of Genocide* (New York: Monthly Review Press, 2010); Smith, “The UK and ‘Genocide’ in Biafra”; Moses, “Civil War or Genocide?”; “Diplomacy of Genocide”; and *The Problem of Genocide: Permanent Security and the Language of Transgression* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2021).

¹⁰ Bachman, *The Politics of Genocide*, 2.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, 2.

¹² *Ibid.*, 116.

¹³ *Ibid.*, 96.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, 40. For more on this, see the same source.

¹⁵ Travis, *Genocide, Ethnonationalism*, 1.

¹⁶ Noam Chomsky, Foreword, in Herman and Peterson, *The Politics of Genocide*, 16.

responded to accusations of genocide in Biafra by Nigeria. During 1967–70, Biafran activists in the West alleged that Nigeria was committing genocide in Biafra when it was using force to prevent it from breaking away and that the UK was empowering the military government of Nigeria (by selling it British weapons). Smith has observed that it was only the intense public outcry and pressure on the UK government that forced Britain and Nigeria to sponsor an international observer team to travel to Nigeria to investigate. The team found what was occurring in Biafra to not constitute genocide. Importantly here, Britain's sponsorship of the observer team was due to public pressure and not determined by morality.¹⁷

In another pertinent case, the historian A. Dirk Moses has studied Britain's response to the mass violence in East Pakistan (now Bangladesh) in 1971 when (West) Pakistan invoked claims to territorial integrity and used force to block East Pakistan's secession. The crackdown that followed there resulted in an estimated one-and-a-half to three million deaths. Many different sources noted this as a genocide.¹⁸ Analyzing how politics affected Britain's response, Moses has observed that

The official British line was riddled with contradictions concealed by self-interest and the norms of state legitimacy and non-interference. It saw Pakistan state as vulnerable and wanted to prevent its dissolution to safeguard British interests. Stability was the imperative.¹⁹

One overarching factor common to these cases – and that of the Iraqi Kurds – is that they all involved movements aiming for self-rule. The same considerations noted by Moses above applied when it came to the case of Britain and the Iraqi government's actions in Kurdistan in 1963. Britain saw its Cold War and regional interests to be best served by winning the Iraqi government over to its side and thus sought to appease Iraq in its asymmetrical war with the Kurds. Further, unlike the public pressure exerted over Biafra, British officials sought and succeeded in preventing British public knowledge of the mass violence in Kurdistan so that no potential public pressure could be exerted on the British government to change its position.

Scholars have established that during the Cold War, strategic interests played a major (or primary) role in the most powerful states' decisions on how to respond to and also frame crimes of mass violence, including genocide. In relation to this, for example, Moses has stated that “[w]hen Western client states killed millions of civilians, like [in] Indonesia in 1965, they too would be shielded from genocide accusations.”²⁰ Various sources have also noted the impact of the Cold War on the Kurds. Brandon Wolfe-Hunnicuttt has written on the Cold War and the Kurds in the context of American involvement in Iraq. Focusing on the Kennedy administration's policy towards the 1963 Ba'ath regime, for example, he explains how US military assistance was “one contributing factor to the Ba'ath decision to seek a military solution to the Kurdish problem.”²¹ Bryan R. Gibson

¹⁷ On the observer team, see Moses and Heerten, *Postcolonial Conflict*, 148.

¹⁸ See Travis, *Genocide, Ethnonationalism*, 108.

¹⁹ Sundar and Nandini Sundar, *Civil Wars*, 150.

²⁰ Bukovansky et al., *The Oxford Handbook*, 290. For more on the Nigeria-Biafra War, see Moses and Heerten, *Postcolonial Conflict*.

²¹ The sizable force, including 40 tanks, was later supplemented with napalm. Brandon Wolfe-Hunnicuttt, “The End of the Concessionary Regime: Oil and American Power in Iraq, 1958–1972” (PhD thesis, Stanford University, 2011), 151; see also *The Paranoid Style in American Diplomacy: Oil and Arab Nationalism in Iraq* (California: Stanford University Press, 2021).

has also considered how Iraq became a Cold War battleground during 1958–75, especially in relation to US foreign policy. With reference to the events considered here, Gibson states that “by definition, Iraq was committing genocide.”²²

These studies are in line with Odd Arne Westad and Paul Thomas Chamberlin’s works on the effects of the Cold War on Third World nations and countries as the USSR and the West (led by the US and including the UK) competed for power and influence around the world. This rivalry had profound implications for the peoples of the Global South, including, often, a devastating effect on civilians and their lives. These Cold War “killing fields,” argues Chamberlin, caused the deaths of “more than fourteen million people.”²³ As this study shows, the Kurds of Iraq in 1963 were another people whose lives were impacted – devastated, ended – by Cold War politics. Accordingly, concerning states and mass violence, there is wide recognition in the literature that, as Herman and Peterson asserted with regard to the US response to mass killings worldwide, “there would be good and bad bloodbaths – those that should be ignored and those that should be focused on with indignation.”²⁴

In the case of mass violence and the Iraqi Kurds, research has primarily focused on another Iraqi military campaign against the Kurds, widely known and much publicized as the notorious “Anfal Campaign” of the late 1980s. The Anfal has been recognized as “the crime of genocide” by Human Rights Watch (HRW), which included the “use of chemical weapons against non-combatants in dozens of locations.”²⁵ In terms of its brutality, the HRW compared the Anfal to the Holocaust. The Anfal itself was part of the process of Arabization begun in 1963, intended to Arabize Kurdish lands, and continued to the Anfal.²⁶

Prompted, in particular, by Iraq’s use of chemical weapons and well-funded investigations, scholarly works have documented various aspects of the Anfal. This has resulted in an over-shadowing and neglect of the study of the earlier (1963) mass violence. Studies by Bahar Baser with Mari Toivanen, Michael J. Kelly, Ibrahim Sadiq, and Sherko Kirmanj are among those to have focused on different aspects of the Anfal.²⁷ Herman and Peterson, and Kerim Yildiz are among other scholars that have focused on the Anfal when it comes to mass violence against the Kurds.²⁸ Alluding to the Anfal, Bachman has also stated that Iraq “committed genocide in 1988”²⁹ against the Kurds. Other notable works on the Kurds

²² Gibson, *Sold Out*, 70. Other relevant studies include another work by the present author, see Ali, *The Iraqi Kurds*.

²³ Paul Thomas Chamberlin, *The Cold War’s Killing Fields: Rethinking the Long Peace* (USA: HarperCollins Publishers, 2018), 1. Also see Odd Arne Westad, *The Global Cold War: Third World Interventions and the Making of Our Time* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2007).

²⁴ Herman and Peterson, *The Politics of Genocide*, 16.

²⁵ HRW, “Genocide in Iraq,” <https://hrw.org/reports/1993/iraqanfal/>; see also KRG, “Anfal Campaign and Kurdish Genocide,” <https://us.gov.krd/en/issues/anfal-campaign-and-kurdish-genocide/>.

²⁶ HRW, *Genocide in Iraq*. For more on these see the same source and also KRG, “Anfal Campaign and Kurdish Genocide,” <https://us.gov.krd/en/issues/anfal-campaign-and-kurdish-genocide/> and Chamberlin, *The Cold War’s Killing Fields*, 535.

²⁷ Bahar Baser and Mari Toivanen, “The Politics of Genocide Recognition: Kurdish Nation-building and Commemoration in the Post-Saddam Era,” *Journal of Genocide Research* 19, no. 3 (2017): 404–26; Michael J. Kelly, *Ghosts of Halabja: Saddam Hussein and the Kurdish Genocide* (Connecticut: Greenwood Publishing Group, 2008); Ibrahim Sadiq, *Origins of the Kurdish Genocide: Nation Building and Genocide as a Civilizing and De-Civilizing Process* (Lanham: Lexington Books, 2021); Sherko Kirmanj, “The Kurdish Genocide in Iraq: The Security-Anfal and the Identity-Anfal,” *National Identities* 23, no 2 (2021), 163–83.

²⁸ Herman and Peterson, *The Politics of Genocide*, 87–88; Kerim Yildiz, *The Kurds in Iraq: The Past, Present and Future* (London: Pluto Press, 2007).

²⁹ Bachman, *The Politics of Genocide*, 88.

in general have included books by Edgar O'Ballance, David McDowall, Michael Eppel, and Michael M. Gunter.³⁰ Evidently, the Anfal has overshadowed the mass violence of 1963 committed against the Kurds of Iraq. This research aims to add another case study of mass violence to the literature, specifically in relation to Britain's foreign policy, which, due to the factors related to the Anfal, has been understudied and even neglected.

The 1963 Mass Violence Against the Kurds

Believed to number some twenty-four to forty-five million people,³¹ the Kurds live in a geographical region – Kurdistan – that straddles Iran, Iraq, Syria, and Turkey, in each of which they thus constitute an ethnic minority. These international borders were determined in the First World War division of the former Ottoman Empire territories by the colonial powers. Left without a state of their own, numerous and ongoing Kurdish movements, armed and civilian, have since striven for self-rule. The Kurds see these movements as attempts to acquire or practice the self-determination they have been denied, while the named states see them as separatist and existential threats to their territorial unities.

After Britain's takeover of the Mesopotamia region by the end of WWI, its geostrategic and economic interests and the safeguarding of the state it created (Iraq) called for the Kurds of the southern part of Kurdistan to be brought under Arab rule from Baghdad. Against Kurdish protests, this was ensured by Britain's military might and direct intervention in support of the state of Iraq. From the creation of Iraq, as Middle East and British Empire historian Stefanie K. Wichhart has commented, "Nascent Kurdish nationalism posed a direct threat to the state-building project that tied Iraqi and British interests together."³² Thus, during Iraq's monarchy era until the revolution of 1958, London's support was vital in the overpowering of Kurdish autonomy movements, as unequivocally recognized by British sources.³³

In February 1963, the Ba'ath Party of Iraq overthrew the government of Prime Minister Abd al-Karim Qasim and murdered the latter. The Iraqi army under the Ba'ath government then initiated military offensives in Kurdistan from June to November of 1963. Many British and US diplomatic sources reported the attack as a genocide, but since their countries were backing the Iraqi Ba'ath government, this recognition was concealed and limited to internal communications. The UK further sought to undermine and isolate the Iraqi Kurds' nationalist movement led by the Kurdistan Democratic Party (KDP). In this regard, the aim was to prevent internationalization and public knowledge of the mass violence faced by the Kurds. Foreign Office officials deemed publicization of the mass violence an embarrassment.³⁴

³⁰ Edgar O'Ballance, *The Kurdish Struggle, The Kurdish Struggle, 1920–94* (Basingstoke: Palgrave MacMillan, 1996); McDowall, *A Modern History*; Michael Eppel, *A People Without A State: The Kurds From the Rise of Islam to the Down of Nationalism* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 2016); Michael M. Gunter, ed., *Routledge Handbook on the Kurds* (Oxon: Routledge, 2019).

³¹ See Baser and Toivanen, "The Politics of Genocide," 407.

³² Stefanie K. Wichhart, "A 'New Deal' for the Kurds: Britain's Kurdish Policy in Iraq," *The Journal of Imperial and Commonwealth History* 39, no. 5 (2011): 815–31, 825. For more on the background history, see for example McDowall, *A Modern History*, 115; Holden, ed., *A Documentary History*, 53–160; Dawisha, *Iraq*, 8–92.

³³ See for example Fieldhouse, ed., *Kurds, Arabs, and Britons*, 98, 117 and 192; also Channel 4. "Birds of Death: RAF and The Kurds," 21 April 1996, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Y4g5pFggpVQ&ab_channel=DocuFilms.

³⁴ For FO371/170515: NO. 2119, "Confidential: From Foreign Office to New York," 12 July 1963. Also see FO371/170515: EQ2281/9, "Kurdish Problem in Iraq: Soviet Approach to the Security Council," 29 July 1963.

For a number of practical and political reasons, no estimated numbers appear to exist on how many lives were lost in the military offensive ordered by the Iraqi Ba'ath government. There are, however, indications revealing its intensity and the reported intention. According to one source, for example, a "total force of 12 divisions" supported by air-power, tanks, and artillery was used against the KDP and the Peshmerga, then estimated to number around 15,000 lightly armed men.³⁵ The Iraqi army was also reported to have targeted non-combatant Kurds and their property with the aim of destroying the Kurdish population to the extent desired by the then government.

Regardless of the lack of scholarly studies and its legal categorization – such as "genocide" or "war crime" – what occurred in 1963 was extreme and mass violence that targeted Kurdish Peshmerga and civilians alike. On 9 June 1963, for example, in a military compound in the Kurdish city of Sulaimani, deep inside the Kurdish territory (see [Figure 1](#)), the Iraqi army killed an estimated 80–150 or more non-combatant Kurds. Hundreds of males, consisting of teachers, artisans, boys, and city businessmen, among others, were rounded up during a citywide curfew; many were shot in the compound's "Death Valley" and then buried there with bulldozers. Kurds call this the "Sulaimani Hamye Massacre."³⁶

This was not an isolated incident. As, for example, a practicing Peshmerga physician at the time explains, the army would destroy anything in its path and bomb villages as it wished.³⁷ These reports are in accordance with the ways in which British, US, USSR, and other non-Kurdish sources described the Iraqi military campaign against the Kurds in 1963.

Britain and Others on the Judgment of Genocide

The judgment of a genocide ongoing in Kurdistan was publicly recognized at the time by the USSR and privately but clearly by British and US officials and diplomats. It was also clearly stated as the intention by various high-ranking Iraqi government officials. The question, therefore, was not whether those great powers considered the attack and mass killing a genocide but how and why they responded the way they did. While the USSR spoke out against the atrocities, albeit in the context of political opportunity rather than human rights, it suited the other parties to only mention the issue in internal correspondences and to shield and support Iraq.

In relation to genocide, for instance, less than two months after it was reported to have begun, a "secret" internal Foreign Office memo at the end of July 1963 recognized the following:

[T]he Iraq campaign against the Kurds is being conducted with great ruthlessness and may represent an attempt to settle the Kurdish problem once and for all by force of arms. There may be evidence to support a charge of genocide.³⁸

³⁵ Edgar O'Ballance, *The Kurdish Struggle*, 66.

³⁶ Mahmoud Othman, telephone interview. One prisoner who survived puts the number of those arrested at 640 men and boys, see Haji Akram, "Slemani jaran – man'î tajawl 1963 [Sulaimani then – Curfew 1963]," https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=S5kRMedwq8g&ab_channel=SherzadKarim. For the testimony of another survivor, see Awene, "Yadewerxeyani girtûxaney hamye, tewîlexaneke sallî (09 June 1963) [Memories from the hamye prison, the 1963 barn]," <https://www.awene.com/detail?article=64086>. Also, GK Sat, "Gik le hamyey slêmanî lenoy huzeyranî 1963 jmareyek hawllati şehîdkran [GK Sat in the hamye of Sulaimani on the 9th of June a number of citizens were martyred]," https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=e0eQJZKyT4&ab_channel=GKsat.

³⁷ Othman, telephone interview.

³⁸ FO371/170515: EQ2281/9, "Kurdish Problem in Iraq."



Figure 1. CIA map showing Kurdistan and areas with a majority Kurdish population and their proximity to the USSR. [Courtesy of the University of Texas Libraries, The University of Texas at Austin, 1986].

Note: CIA, “Kurdish areas in the Middle East and the Soviet Union” [map].

While the judicial (diplomatic, political) usage of “may” exhibits a careful use of language, the phrase “once and for all” clearly evokes a *final solution*. This was recognized as a calculated attempt to deal with a political issue – *settle a problem* – by killing as many as necessary in order to empty a territory of its people or at least to such a degree that the remaining population was no longer perceived as a threat. The policy of the stronger party in pursuing a final solution aims to achieve what has been called “permanent security.” Despite the anodyne formulation, this calls for mass violence and destruction, “total domination,”³⁹ and an “end of politics,” where the end justifies the means as construed by the dominant actor(s).⁴⁰

The phrase appears again a week later in a memo from the British embassy in Baghdad to the Foreign Office, where the Iraqi Foreign Minister is reported as having told the British ambassador to Baghdad that it would be better to settle the Kurdish problem “once and for all” than to “patch up some sort of agreement which might not last.” The minister was quite explicit on the Iraqi preference. The memo then detailed the Iraqi methods:

³⁹ Moses, *The Problem of Genocide*, 276.

⁴⁰ For more on permanent security, see Moses, *Ibid.*, 1 and 272.

There is no doubt at all of the Government's deliberate destruction of villages where these are accessible to mechanized forces, i.e. in the lowland areas, especially around Kirkuk and wherever there are accessible villages in the interior of Kurdistan [...]. At the outset of operations, the Government issued a warning that they would destroy all villages from the vicinity of which fire was opened on the armed forces. This phraseology was probably chosen mainly with an eye to their international public relations position, but their subsequent destruction of villages was much too systematic to have been mere reprisals.⁴¹

Air bombardments, meanwhile, were carried out by "medium and heavy bombers as well as ground attack aircraft" with "no prior warning given to the inhabitants."⁴² British Hawker Hunter aircraft were used to devastating effect in these bombings, and this was well known to the British. In May, a US embassy report cited Iraqi Air Force commander Hardan al-Tikriti as stating that the "Kurds should either accept [the] 'opportunity to become Arabs', or face 'extermination.'" The implicit phrasing of genocide was again used when it also noted that the Iraqi government appeared to "favor 'a final solution' of the Kurdish problem."⁴³ Citing "reliable sources," in July 1963, the *Washington Post* described the Iraqi methods used against the Kurds under the banner of a "War of Extermination," thus:

Reliable sources reaching here said more than half of Iraq's army is waging a war of extermination against the Kurds in the north, shelling and razing villages, shooting civilians and burning crops [...] The sources said Iraqi troops confiscated all vehicles and farm machinery, looted money and women's jewellery, pillaged churches, [and] strung male villagers by their heels and whipped them. Two women who protested were executed.⁴⁴

These methods have been confirmed by civilian survivors and members of the Peshmerga. The intention was to kill as many Kurds as deemed necessary and, where possible, to Arabize their land.⁴⁵ The approach was so brutal that at least some army Arab officers even distanced themselves from what their military was requiring them to do. One officer, for instance, said the methods were "inhuman."⁴⁶ Meanwhile, the British ambassador to Baghdad acknowledged the Iraqi intention to "drastically reduce the Kurdish population"⁴⁷ and repopulate their lands with Arabs. In a memo written in July by James Spain of the State Department's Policy Planning Staff, the words "come close" – to genocide – were entirely superfluous since the Iraqi military was quite clear on what was being done and why:

[The] policy of the nationalist Arabs who dominate the Baghdad government does, in fact, come close to genocide. According to a senior Iraqi army officer, it consists of taking only such Kurdish prisoners as may supply information and then shooting them, ultimately reducing the adult male Kurdish population to one-tenth of what it now is, letting the women and children fend for themselves, and repopulating the area with Arabs.⁴⁸

Thus, words and phrases indicating genocide like "inhuman," "drastically reduce," "extermination," "massacre," and "reduce the Kurdish population" were quantified – ninety per

⁴¹ Quoted in FO317/170488: EQ1019/21, "Confidential," 6 August 1963.

⁴² Ibid.

⁴³ Quoted in Wolfe-Hunnicut, *The Paranoid Style*, 127.

⁴⁴ Editorial, "Iraq Army Battles Kurds in War of Extermination."

⁴⁵ For more see for example HRW, "Genocide in Iraq," For Kurdish eyewitness accounts see Kurdistan Memory Programme, "Stories," <https://kurdistanmemoryprogramme.com/stories/>.

⁴⁶ FO317/170488: EQ1019/21, "Confidential." See also Gibson, *Sold Out*, 72.

⁴⁷ FO317/170488: EQ1019/21, "Confidential."

⁴⁸ Quoted in Gibson, *Sold Out*, 72.

cent of adult males were to be killed – and accompanied by the explicit intention of Arabization. This provides a full picture of the Ba’ath government’s programme – as it was judged in Britain, the US, and others.

Kader Kokoy, a Peshmerga in the vicinity of the Kurdish town of Halabja, recorded in his Kurdish memoir that in July 1963, when the Iraqi army finally reached the Kurdish town of Halabja, the army’s Kurdish mercenaries, backed by the army, looted and burned down many Kurdish shops and homes of those whom they suspected to have Peshmerga associates. A local farmer that attended his field at night was killed by the army.⁴⁹ Elsewhere, as another Kurd from the town of Koya explains, the government

[...] used special forces to blow up known Kurds’ homes [...]. When the able-bodied fled [from Koya], the military came in and killed all of the elderly who were left behind. They hanged some people on the electric power poles, very cowardly, very unmanly.⁵⁰

While these Iraqi government actions were being carried out in Kurdistan, as corroborated by a multitude of sources, the Iraqi Ambassador and Permanent Representative (1959–65) to the UN, Adnan al-Pachachi, states in his memoir that he was fighting very hard against anti-colonialism and racism at the UN and “involved in the international efforts to expedite the historic march towards freedom,”⁵¹ including for the Palestinians and other non-independent peoples. Back in Iraq, evidently, the Kurds were excluded from such consideration.

Despite all the contemporary observations, the reports of the Ba’ath intentions to destroy the Kurds, and the intricate details reaching the Foreign Office from its diplomats, the measures that the UK government took were aimed at appeasing the regime in Baghdad. Thus, in the context of the reports of mass violence and genocide, as A. Dirk Moses has put it, we observe how “external intervention only occurs when it is aligned with *Realpolitik*.”⁵²

Isolating the Kurds

From the summer of 1962, negotiations between the KDP and the Ba’athists and Nasserites led to the latter two promising, among other things, a high level of autonomy for Kurdistan along with democracy for Iraq, as demanded by the Kurdish leadership, if they succeeded in overthrowing Qasim.⁵³ Meanwhile, privately, at least some of the Ba’ath leaders also harboured another idea, that if the Kurds did not accept what the Ba’ath offered them, then, when the time came, they would, in the words of one Ba’ath Party leader, “finish them off in about two to four weeks.”⁵⁴ When the putsch succeeded and Qasim was killed by the Ba’athists and the new rulers felt secure, they did indeed act on that desire to “finish off” the Kurds. The Iraqi (Ba’ath) defence minister, Salih Mahdi Ammash, declared that “we will destroy them in a few days.”⁵⁵

⁴⁹ Kader Kokoy (unpublished memoir).

⁵⁰ Rudaw, *Syamend Benna* (interview, <https://youtu.be/P6Ox-y37xog>, 2023).

⁵¹ Adnan Pachahi, *Living to Some Purpose: Memoirs of a Secular Iraqi and Arab Statesman* (London: Arabian Publishing, 2003), 68.

⁵² Moses, “Diplomacy of Genocide,” 286.

⁵³ Reşid, *Mam celal*, 210.

⁵⁴ *Ibid.*, 217; for details of the negotiations see 210–17.

⁵⁵ Rudaw, *Syamend Benna*.

Regarding the nature of the Iraqi government's campaign in Kurdistan, Alex Efty, in an article (*The Chicago Tribune*, 14 September 1963), vividly described what he had seen as an "eye-witness" while travelling 400 miles through Kurdistan for eight weeks. In a "scorched earth policy," he explained, "Government planes bomb villages to ruins, set fire to vast tracts of the green countryside, and machine-gun anything that moves." Efty reported that he "watched planes dropping napalm and incendiary bombs and saw miles of green mountain land burned to a black-end wasteland of windblown ash" and that "Hundreds of villages are in ruins, and hardly a hamlet in Kurdistan is not scarred with bomb craters" – all in an "attempt to settle the Kurdish problem once and for all."⁵⁶

In October, Kamuran Ali Bedirxan, acting on behalf of the KDP, forwarded this article on the atrocities that the new Iraqi regime was committing in Kurdistan to British diplomats. In a letter, he requested UK "intervention with all international organisations, so that an end be made to the oppression and massacre of the Kurdish civilian population, and steps be taken for the recognition of their national rights."⁵⁷

Badrkhan requested that at least "a fact-finding mission be sent to Iraq, as have been sent to other areas of conflict." He suggested that British "intervention at this international juncture" would also "cause the Iraqi Government to become aware of its own paradoxical attitude in denouncing imperialism on the one hand and practicing it in its worst form themselves."⁵⁸

His entreaty fell on deaf ears. Overall, Britain's response to this and other Kurdish pleas apropos the Ba'ath government was not only to do nothing but to proactively work to deny them support from elsewhere and also restrict their leaders' movements outside their landlocked region. Notably, in Iran, then an ally of the West, British diplomats consistently advised the Shah of Iran, in the words of one diplomat, that "it would be dangerous to side with the [Iraqi] Kurds." The Iranian monarch was also an antagonist of Kurdish nationalism but considered the Iraqi Kurds "a weapon"⁵⁹ to be used against Nasser and Arab nationalism as needed, and thus proportionately supported the Kurds for this purpose. He also wanted to entice the KDP, so that they did not turn to the USSR or Nasser for help in their fight against the Iraqi Ba'ath regime. In the Shah's view, the USSR and/or Nasser could exploit the Kurdish issue in the region, including in Iran, potentially leading to an independent Kurdistan. Thus, to pre-empt this possibility, he sought closer relations with the KDP. The British warned him away from that course of action.

In fact, not only did the British want the Shah not to back the Kurds, but they desired him to have no contact with their leaders (such as Talabani). On one occasion, for example, the UK ambassador to Tehran, Denis Wright, tried to have Iran deny Jalal Talabani a visa. Talabani was in Europe advocating for the Kurdish cause and often travelled via Iran. Ambassador Wright advised that "any contact" by Iranians with Talabani "would arouse Iraqi suspicion."⁶⁰

⁵⁶ Alex Efty, "Eye-witness Details Civil War in Iraq: Thousands Killed in Fighting," *The Chicago Tribune*, 14 September 1963, A4.

⁵⁷ See FO371/170450: EQ1019/64, "Your Excellency, enclosure 2," 16 October 1963.

⁵⁸ Ibid.

⁵⁹ See FO371/170456: EQ102134/6, "Confidential: From Tehran to Foreign Office," 29 May 1963. Jalal Talabani also confirms the Shah's dislike of Nasser: see Reşid, *Mam celal*, 262.

⁶⁰ Ibid. Also see FO371/170456: EQ103134/5, "Confidential: From Tehran to Foreign Office," 20 May 1963. For more on Iran-KDP relations, see Ali, *The Iraqi Kurds*, and Roham Alvandi, *Nixon, Kissinger, and the Shah: The United States and Iran in the Cold War* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2014).

There was a further, particular reason why the ambassador wanted Talabani's movements restrained. In a British Movietone radio interview given while in Paris, the articulate Talabani expressed the Kurdish aims for Kurdish autonomy within an Iraqi democracy, stated that the Iraqi government had commenced a "mass-extermination war ... bombing the civilian people of Kurdistan, killing women and children," and lamented that the "British government is supplying [the] Baghdad government and giving them the arms [used against the Kurds] like Hawker Hunter [aircraft] and light tanks,"⁶¹ among others. Such words could clearly be embarrassing for British officials, yet instead of hearing the message, British officials chose to target the messenger (Talabani in this case) by seeking to restrain his movements in and out of Kurdistan via Iran.

Iran was not the only country with whom the British pursued this undermining policy; even during Qasim's regime, it had done the same. In 1962, for instance, according to the representative of KDP leader Mustafa Barzani, the Kurds had asked Kuwait for assistance and been refused. This was confirmed by the British Embassy in Baghdad, which also reported back to London that it had advised Kuwait to "give no money to [the Kurdish] rebels."⁶²

Just the word "rebels" here indicates the British perspective on the Iraqi Kurds as a problematic element in their geopolitical strategy than a people with a moral claim. This is only emphasized by the fact that Qasim was regarded by the West as sympathetic to communism; since he had also laid a claim to Kuwait as part of Iraq, there was more than one reason for him to be disliked by Britain. However, British officials did not want Kuwait to support the Kurds even though that offered the potential advantage of weakening Qasim. This testifies to the depth, continuity and endurance of Britain's view on Kurdish nationalism and autonomy and its preparedness to thwart such endeavours across successive Iraqi governments.

Three immediate factors combined to promote the British preference to isolate the Kurds during the 1963 Ba'ath era. First, the UK appeared to consider the Kurds essentially as a loose cannon, a destabilizing force in Iraq and the region as a whole. Second, not only had the Ba'ath overthrown the unfavoured regime of Qasim, but also it was strongly anti-communist. After the Ba'ath took power, many Iraqi communists were killed or imprisoned while others, including ICP leaders, fled to Kurdistan, seeking sanctuary in areas under KDP and Peshmerga control. Thus, the Ba'ath appeared to prevent Soviet entry.⁶³ And third, the new regime offered an alternative to Nasser's version of pan-Arab nationalism. It was uninterested in the Iraqi Nasserites' desire for Iraq to join the United Arab Republic (UAR) under Egypt's leadership. Thus, the Ba'ath were liked not only by the UK but also by the Kennedy administration, which also supported the Ba'ath, including with arms and ammunition.⁶⁴

For the UK, the Kurds' winning autonomy in Iraq would invite the same in Iran, Turkey, and Syria, giving the communists a situation to exploit in these countries. Evidently, a

⁶¹ AP Archive, "Kurdish Leader – Sound," <https://newsroom.ap.org/editorial-photos-videos/detail?item=dc26812bb4d24a10bd5b948fef229246&mediatype=video>.

⁶² "Telegram From the Embassy in Iraq to the Department of State," (Foreign Relations of the United States, 20 September 1962).

⁶³ See Rudaw, *Ebu Tara 3* and Wolfe-Hunnicut, *The Paranoid Style*.

⁶⁴ See Ali, *The Iraqi Kurds*, 53; Jacobsen, "A Coincidence of Interest," and Weldon C. Matthews, "The Kennedy Administration, Counterinsurgency, and Iraq's First Ba'athist Regime," *International Journal of Middle East Studies* 43, no. 4 (2011): 635–53.

stability that kept the Soviets and Nasser away had priority over all else. The Kurds still had to be dealt with, however, so Britain worked to isolate the Kurds and undermine their autonomy movement. It would be happy if a settlement between the KDP and Baghdad could be reached, but that did not imply autonomy, and it was up to the Ba'ath regime to do what it wanted with the Kurds.⁶⁵ The more important policy was to strengthen and appease the Iraqi government, which included undermining and isolating the Kurds, and to keep Iraq distant from the USSR and Egypt.

A “War of Annihilation Against Kurds” Versus Political Exploitation: The USSR and Britain at the UN

From the early 1960s, especially after the death of Qasim and the Ba'athist suppression and killing of Iraqi communists, the KDP and its leaders enjoyed close relations with the USSR. One reason for this was that the KDP had given sanctuary to Iraqi communists fleeing to Kurdistan.⁶⁶ The Soviets were also inclined to build better relations with the Kurds since they were at war with the Ba'ath, who were feted by the West.⁶⁷ It was in these circumstances that, in 1963, the USSR took the issue of the Iraqi army's military offensives in Kurdistan to the UN. On 9 July, the Soviet delegation to the Economic and Social Council requested that “the policy of genocide which is being pursued by the Government of the Republic of Iraq against the Kurdish people” be put on the agenda of the thirty-sixth session of the Council. According to the memorandum it submitted, “the Government of Iraq is carrying out a criminal policy of genocide – a policy which involves the physical extermination of the whole Kurdish people.” The memorandum continued thus:

In the first few days of the fighting alone, raids by Iraqi military aircraft on the Kurdish areas resulted in the destruction of 21 Kurdish villages and the death of more than 150 women and children [...] The demands put forward by the Kurdish people are legitimate demands. Every people has a right to self-determination and to respect for its national interests and aspiration [...] The bloodthirsty acts of the Government of Iraq against the Kurdish population are nothing but genocide.⁶⁸

The Soviet Union later submitted a draft resolution condemning Iraq “for military operations [in Kurdistan] which by their nature constitute an act of genocide, i.e. a policy aimed at the destruction of an entire national ethnic group within the Iraqi population.” The resolution called upon Iraq to immediately end its military operations against the Kurds.⁶⁹

The USSR followed up its request for a Security Council hearing in a letter to the Council's president in which it essentially accused Iraq, backed by the Central Treaty Organization (CENTO), of genocide in Kurdistan. Formed in 1955 with the aim of containing the expansion of Soviet influence, CENTO was a UK-led security alliance grouping Turkey, Iran, and Pakistan (it had included Iraq before its withdrawal in 1958 upon the overthrow of the monarchy; from that year, however, it also had US involvement). In their missive, the Soviets stated that “external forces” were backing Iraq in their military action and that

⁶⁵ FO371/170456: EQ103134/7, “Your Telegram 470; Kurds,” 13 June 1963.

⁶⁶ Reşid, *Mam celal*, 256.

⁶⁷ *Ibid.*, 240.

⁶⁸ FO371/170515: EQ2281/8, “Request for an Additional Item in the Agenda [...],” 9 July 1963. The Soviet delegation made it clear that “self-determination” here meant self-rule for the Kurds within Iraq.

⁶⁹ *Ibid.*

this must come to an end (or else the issue might have to be taken up at the Security Council).⁷⁰

In response, the UK spearheaded CENTO in outmanoeuvring the Soviet efforts. The UK Mission to the UN decided that if the issue were discussed by responding to the USSR there, the effect would be to internationalize the Kurdish issue on the UN stage. The British aimed to prevent this, to derail the Soviet move by having CENTO respond and thus shifting the issue away from the UN – which is exactly what happened. Once again, the British chose to target the messenger rather than hearing the message. In fact, CENTO portrayed itself as having been victimized by the USSR.

Adding to this, some Arab states, such as Syria and Algeria, took an aggressive stance in opposition to the Soviet efforts, which they took as an attack on a fellow Arab country (Iraq).⁷¹ Meanwhile, Outer Mongolia, a Soviet proxy, requested that “Genocide in Kurdistan” be placed on the agenda of the Eighteenth Session of the General Assembly – but this was also withdrawn, at least partly due to Arab pressure.⁷² Other pro-Soviet organizations also vigorously petitioned the UN Secretary-General, U Thant. One telegram to him implored “all people of good will to come out in defense of [the] Kurdish people and to demand immediate stopping of [this] war of annihilation against Kurds,” who were fighting “an arduous defensive battle against ... total annihilation.”⁷³ The KDP sent a similar cable to U Thant, but it, too, bore no fruit.⁷⁴

In July, the President of the Republic of Ghana, Kwame Nkrumah, was among others that made similar requests. The response from U Thant to Kwame ran thus:

[S]everal communications have been submitted by Member States relative to this question. Your Excellency is also no doubt aware that this subject has been proposed [by Outer Mongolia] as an item for the consideration of the Eighteenth Session of the General Assembly.⁷⁵

These pleas did not lead to any material benefit for the situation of the Kurds.

Arms Supplies and Blaming the USSR

Notwithstanding all the reports of a genocide being committed against the Kurds in Kurdistan, the UK had already agreed “in principle” during the previous May to sell Iraq ammunition, rockets, and arms, along with Saracen armoured personnel carriers and Hawker Hunter aircraft.⁷⁶ Again, the immediate reason for Britain providing arms that would be used against the Kurds was to secure better relations with the Ba’ath, motivated by the UK’s regional and international (Cold War) interests.

Such considerations were explicit in a Foreign Office memo which also suggested that Ankara may have cooperated with Baghdad in suppressing the Iraqi Kurds, and Damascus,

⁷⁰ FO371/170515: EQ2281/a (C), “From New York to Foreign Office,” 19 July 1963.

⁷¹ See EQ2281/7 (B), “CENTO,” 22 July 1963.

⁷² Ali, *The Iraqi Kurds*, 51.

⁷³ Soviet Afroasian Solidarity Committee, “M 172ACR G19.21,” United Nations, <https://search.archives.un.org/uploads/r/united-nations-archives/4/9/2/4923e45f933f4d987276489441ca9daebe9ead354dce5e20e4e73cd353a6c4ae/S-0884-0010-11-00001.PDF>. For more petitions and subsequent UN sources that follow see the same link.

⁷⁴ Jalal Talabani, “To: The President of the Security Council,” United Nations (28 June 1963).

⁷⁵ Alex Quaison-Sackey, “Permanent Mission of Ghana to the United Nations,” United Nations (8 July 1963). For the response, see U Thant, “Excellency,” United Nations (16 July 1963).

⁷⁶ FO371/170515: EQ2281/9, “Kurdish Problem in Iraq.”

too. This would not be surprising given the antipathy of Turkey and Syria (and Iran) towards any notions of Kurdish independence. In the case of Syria, its aircraft were involved in bombing raids over Kurdistan, and one of its brigades had joined the fight in support of Iraq.⁷⁷ Confirming that both the UK and the US had repeatedly urged the Ba'ath government for a negotiated settlement, the same Foreign Office memo reported that the British were "anxious to seize the opportunities offered since the February revolution for better relations [with the Ba'ath regime], in particular the need to wean the Iraqis away from dependence on Russian arms."⁷⁸

For the UK, like the US, there was an opportunity to exploit, which was to use the Ba'ath regime's need for weaponry both to win them over to the side of the West against the East and also to prize them away from Nasser's influence.⁷⁹ This entailed the provision of (limited but impactful) arms to the Iraqis that were clearly to be used against the Kurds, which was considered a matter of insufficient consequence – which underscored the need to marginalize any talk of genocide and prevent the international community from turning its attention to the issue. The UK was backing a state that it knew to be carrying out what was reported to be a genocide, and it was providing some of the diplomatic shield required for this. Yet, London blamed Moscow for the conflict and also for providing Iraq under Qasim with the weapons now being used by Baghdad against the Kurds. Apparently, according to the UK, the USSR was provoking the Kurds to agitate and rebel. Britain was thus focused on appeasing Iraq and shifting the blame to the USSR. In order to justify its position – and to convince the Kurds to accept the rejections of their pleas they received from London – the UK took the line that the Kurdish issue was solely an Iraqi matter.⁸⁰

A further instance of this duplicity is evident in the characterization of the situation given by the Foreign Office in a telegram to its Mission at the UN:

There is disquieting evidence that Iraqi methods in the present campaign have gone well beyond immediate military requirements and may sustain a change of deliberate attempt to suppress the Kurds as a racial minority.⁸¹

The final phrasing here, "suppress the Kurds as a racial minority," obviously stands as diplomatic language for genocidal actions. But again, nothing was to be done:

Our basic position on the Kurdish question must be that this is an internal Iraqi matter in which we are not prepared to be involved. We wish to prevent this issue upsetting our present good relations with the Iraqis and the other Arab Governments, but we must be careful not to express any approval of the Iraq Government's policy.⁸²

The overriding concern to maintain the "good relations" required that recognition of the Iraqi actions stay private and, in fact, that steps taken to please that regime.⁸³

⁷⁷ Michael Eppel, *A People Without a State*, 213. Also, Rudaw, *Syamend Benna*.

⁷⁸ FO371/170515: EQ2281/9, "Kurdish Problem in Iraq."

⁷⁹ For the US policy, see Jacobsen, "A Coincidence of Interest," and Weldon C. Matthews, "The Kennedy Administration."

⁸⁰ See for example FO371/170515: NO. 2119, "Confidential."

⁸¹ FO371/170515: NO. 2119, "Confidential."

⁸² *Ibid.* See also FO371/170515: EQ2281/9, "Kurdish Problem in Iraq."

⁸³ See for example FO317/170488: EQ1019/32, "Confidential," 16 August 1963. Also, Othman, telephone interview.

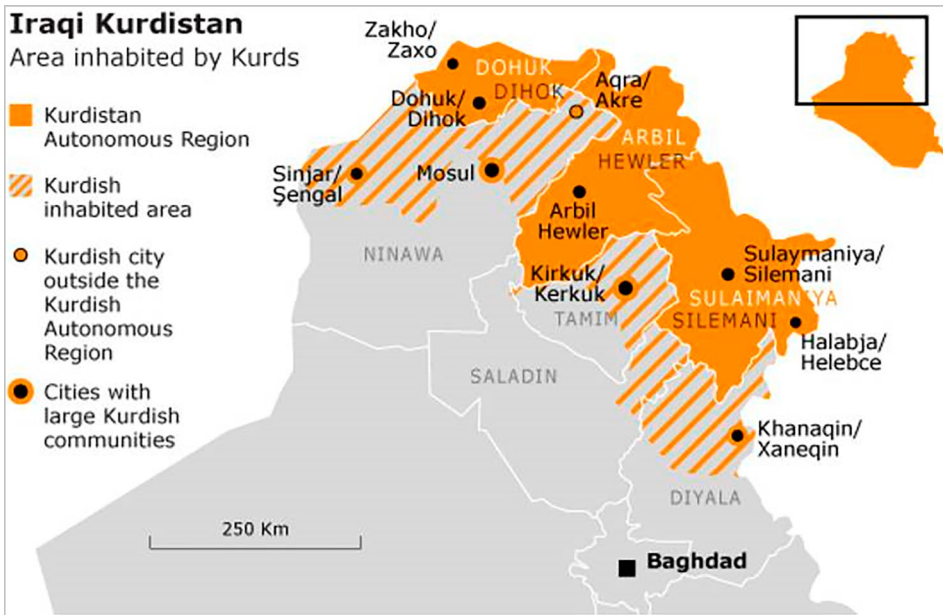


Figure 2. This figure was originally published on *Jadaliyya* on December 21st, 2016, <https://www.jadaliyya.com/Details/33849>. Kurdistan Autonomous Region was established in the aftermath of the 1990–1991 Gulf War.

Britain's Interests and the Kurdish Issue in Iraq During the Ba'ath Regime of 1963

In relation to the mass violence committed in 1963, Britain helped to provide the diplomatic shield at the UN and some of the practical and political means necessary for Ba'ath Iraq to perpetrate its genocidal policy while actively seeking to isolate and silence the Kurds. This policy was adopted in light of regional politics and the Cold War. The Cold War political considerations included the UK (and US) seeking closer relations with Iraq in order to forestall any revival of the Moscow-Baghdad axis and ensure both that Iraqi communists had no chance of coming to power in Iraq and also that independence-seeking Kurds did not succeed in CENTO countries (Iraq, Turkey, or Iran).

Britain perceived that a Kurdish entity would provide the USSR with an opportunity to exploit in the region and that Iraqi Kurdistan could act as a Soviet forward base in the region. It was feared that this will result in the destabilization of Iran and Turkey. In addition, access to oil in the Persian Gulf was a vital British and, indeed, Western interest in the Cold War, and it was perceived that an independent Kurdistan could give the USSR a land-bridge for access to the Middle East, including to its oil (Figure 2). In fact, Soviet occupation of northern Iran in 1941 had led to the 1946 establishment of a Kurdish republic in Mahabad city in Iran's Kurdistan region under the nationalist Kurdish leader Qazi Mohammed. After the Soviet Union's withdrawal, the Iranian government destroyed the republic and publicly hanged its founders. In reality, the USSR did not even sustain a small Kurdish republic, let alone help create a greater Kurdistan.⁸⁴

⁸⁴ For more, see for example *Westad, The Global Cold War*, 60–64.

Accordingly, Iran and Turkey, exploiting an opportunity and perceiving any notions of Kurdish nationalism as existential threats to themselves, inflated this threat of a greater Kurdistan and the Kurds as a Soviet Trojan horse. The intention behind exaggerating this threat was to demonize Kurdish nationalism and aspirations for statehood in the eyes of the UK and US.⁸⁵ In truth, Soviet-Kurdish relations in Iraq were not based on ideology; rather, they were inversely dependent on relations between Baghdad and Moscow, on the one hand, and Baghdad and the West, on the other. The Soviets vocalized the Kurdish issue within Iraq only when this was deemed politically desirable, as means of pressuring Iraq, as was the case during the 1963 Ba'ath regime.⁸⁶ According to the Mitrokhin Archive, this was part of an "aggressive global grand strategy devised by KGB Chairman Aleksandr Shelepin and approved by Khrushchev in the summer of 1961 [which] envisaged the use of national liberation movements as the basis of a forward policy in the Third World."⁸⁷ This strategy did not offer the Kurds the type of backing needed to form a state.

For the Ba'ath government itself, the war with the Kurds was politically useful in two different ways, as it not only placated hardliners but also occupied the army. Fearing a putsch by elements of the army – as had befallen both Qasim and the monarchy before – it suited the Ba'ath leadership for the bulk of the army to be kept away from Baghdad. A protracted war in Kurdistan was ideal for this, as it kept two adversaries busy fighting each other.

Avoiding Embarrassment

Despite its diminishing role in the region after the 1956 Suez Crisis and in Iraq after the 1958 revolution, the UK still had the status of a great power and enjoyed significant influence in the Middle East during the late 1950s and early 1960s. Noting this continuing sway, the KDP repeatedly endeavoured to win tangible British sympathies – to no avail. In June 1963, when Jalal Talabani was in France representing the KDP and the UK ambassador in Tehran sought to deny him any audience in Iran, the Kurdish leader had been planning a visit to the UK. This, of course, could be awkward. In order to grant him entry, the Foreign Office wanted Talabani to acquiesce to its demand that he would not engage in any public campaigns on behalf of the Kurds. As very plainly stated in a Foreign Office memo, this "could be embarrassing to us both in our relations with the Iraqi Government and vis-à-vis public opinion here [in the UK] in the context of our decision to supply arms to Iraq."⁸⁸ The same logic applied to Kamuran Ali Bedirxan's plan to visit the UK in August to lobby for the Kurdish cause, which again, according to the Foreign Office, would "embarrass us in our relations with the government of Iraq."⁸⁹

⁸⁵ Ali, *The Iraqi Kurds*, 26. For Britain's interest in the Gulf, see Uzi Rabi, "Britain's 'Special Position' in the Gulf: Its Origins, Dynamics and Legacy," *Middle Eastern Studies* 42, no. 3 (2006): 351–64.

⁸⁶ See Ali, *The Iraqi Kurds*. For more on the Iraqi Kurds and the Cold War, see the same source and Gibson, *Sold Out*; Douglas Little, "The United States and the Kurds: A Cold War Story," *Journal of Cold War Studies* 12 (2010): 93–93.

⁸⁷ Christopher Andrew and Vasili Mitrokhin, *The World Was Going Our Way: The KGB and the Battle for the Third World* (New York: Basic Books, 2005), 150. See Westad, *The Global Cold War* for an excellent history of the Cold War and how it affected the Middle East.

⁸⁸ FO317/170488: SD.36588, "Passport Control Department," June 1963.

⁸⁹ FO317/170488: EQ1019/32, "Confidential."

Even when these Kurdish leaders and emissaries, whose people British diplomats reported to be facing genocide, made it to the UK, receiving them on official premises was considered likely to cause offense, both to Iraq's government and to the wider Arab world. Thus, they were met in informal places, such as the hotels where they were residing, and even then, only by public servants below head-of-department level.⁹⁰ In addition to blocking Kurdish advocacy in the UK to avoid awkward political situations and opposition at home, a general lack of recognition was deemed important for the benefit of observers and players in the Middle East. On one occasion, in August 1963, a Kurdish emissary, Shawkat Akrawi, met a Foreign Office representative in London. If Britain could not support the Kurds, Akrawi implored British officials, it could at least remain neutral, by not providing arms and ammunition to Iraq that would end up being used against them. As Akrawi pointedly noted, the Kurds were willing to be flexible and compromise and "had asked for much less in the way of national rights than the Scots enjoyed."

Contrary to London's preference for some sort of acceptable resolution of the Kurdish "problem," the Iraqi government was not serious about negotiating; in fact, the British heard from Akrawi, the Iraqis were no better than "gangsters who ran a kind of S.S." and were now "carrying out a deliberate policy of genocide in Kurdistan." Thus, "on a moral issue like this," Akrawi insisted, Britain "could not take refuge behind the principle of non-interference in another country's internal affairs."⁹¹

In response, according to the record, the Foreign Office representative "made the customary point in reply." This included regretting the fighting in "Kurdistan," desiring a peaceful settlement, and stating that Britain would not pass moral judgment on other governments or interfere in others' internal affairs. As for the arms, it was stated that Britain had agreed to supply Iraq prior to the current fighting between the Ba'ath government and the KDP. In any case, Akrawi was unequivocally informed that the arms provisions could not be stopped, regardless of the reason.⁹² Clearly, a "customary" position on these issues was indeed maintained in London.

The Kurds beseeched British diplomats abroad while the Ba'ath were in power on a number of occasions, aiming to attain British sympathy or at least practical British neutrality in relation to their cause. In one of these instances, an emissary used the veiled threat of the supposed Kurdish option to turn to the USSR or Nasser when conveying that the Kurds were capable of holding out permanently against small arms, but "they were suffering heavily from tanks and aircraft," referring to those provided to the Iraqis, some from Britain. Hence the following entreaty: "If the British government had any feeling for humanity, and if it did not want to see the Kurds turn elsewhere for help, it should not supply the Iraqi government with tanks and aircraft."⁹³

Again, nothing came from this. London even declined to pass a peace message from the Kurdish leadership to the Iraqi government lest that might cause difficulties in its relationship with Baghdad.⁹⁴ In their meetings with British officials, KDP officials would recall Britain's role in the creation of Iraq, attaching southern Kurdistan to Iraq and how

⁹⁰ See for example FO317/170488: EQ1019/32, "Emir Badir Khan," 3 August 1963.

⁹¹ FO317/170488: EQ1019/35/G, "Secret," 27 August 1963.

⁹² *Ibid.*

⁹³ FO317/170488: EQ1019/40, "From Tehran to Foreign Office," 1 September 1963.

⁹⁴ Ali, *The Iraqi Kurds*, 53.

promises of self-determination made to the Kurds after WWI, had not been fulfilled. For the British, however, this was now a forsaken history; what the Kurds thought carried moral weight had no effect on Britain's policy towards the mass violence that was reported as amounting to genocide. Commenting on the Kurds' argument, for instance, the Foreign Office source in the meeting with Akrawi later reported that Akrawi was "restrained and pleasant in manner and argued his case very effectively" – implying, one imagines, that nothing he said could make any difference.⁹⁵

On a different occasion, a group of forty Kurds, mostly members of the Kurdish Students Union in Europe and seeking to attract media attention, took over the Iraqi embassy building in London to protest against what was happening in Kurdistan. In the words of one of the participants,

We intended to go on hunger strike there. So that you know the extent that they [British] were supporting the Iraqi government, immediately – within an hour – the English police entered, arrested and manhandled us one by one. They took us to the Marylebone prison. We spent the night there [...] apart from the Daily Workers newspaper, no media gave us any attention at all ...⁹⁶

According to the same source, the number of Kurds living in the UK at this time was just above forty. Thus, there was no Kurdish community in the UK as such – certainly not one large enough to have any effect on policy.

The relevant British officials did have relations with the KDP, met Kurdish emissaries, and were well aware of their arguments. The UK did not consider the KDP to be communists, which they were not, but nationalists, fighting for a nationalist cause. As Mahmoud Othman explains, "They (the UK and US) knew that the Kurds (in Iraq) had nothing to do with communism and such, that the movement was a nationalist movement, it was a nation's movement."⁹⁷ And this was clearly of little consequence to the West, whose policy was driven by strategic interests in which relations with Baghdad were deemed important and the Kurds, simply, not. It would not be unreasonable to suggest that the UK governments and Kennedy administration were so sensitive about not offending the Iraqi government that they acted as if they were effectively under its direction regarding this issue.⁹⁸ In relation to the provision of US rockets and arms to the Iraqi government, as indicated in a memo to the State Department written by Robert Strong, US ambassador to Baghdad in August 1963, the concern was not the Kurds, their lives or how the US-supplied arms were being used by the Ba'ath regime – rather, as Strong tellingly noted, "the use of rockets in north [Kurdistan] to date has not brought forth adverse publicity."⁹⁹ Evidently, the political optics were a principal concern for the Americans, like the British.

The Iraqi government in 1963 supported its military offensive against the Kurds with a vigorous propaganda campaign portraying the Kurds as a savage, barbarous and uncivilized people. On one occasion, it had the British believing that the anti-government Kurds had cut the noses off of some forty to seventy government loyalist Kurds, who were supposedly treated in Baghdad. No evidence was provided for this, yet a British

⁹⁵ FO317/170488: EQ1019/35/G, "Secret."

⁹⁶ Rudaw, *Syamend Benna*.

⁹⁷ Othman, telephone interview.

⁹⁸ For more on the effects of the Cold War and the regional politics on the Iraqi Kurds, see Ali, *The Iraqi Kurds* and Gibson, *Sold Out*. Also, for example, FO317/170488: WQ1019/33(A), "Confidential."

⁹⁹ Quoted in Jacobsen, "A Coincidence of Interest," 1051.

memo, likely relaying what they had heard from the Iraqi government, still declared that “this barbarous custom is an old one in Kurdistan and indeed among other Aryan tribes.”¹⁰⁰ In the absence of corroboratory evidence of these claims (the practice of nose-cutting), it appears that the Iraqi government just wanted to legitimize its actions against the Kurds and thereby garner sympathy by manipulating the still-present colonial mentality in Britain. The claim appears to have been received by the UK as intended by the Iraqis, which was essentially to barbarize the Kurds in the eyes of British officials.

The Cold War and the regional political considerations during the reign of the Ba’ath regime of 1963 were important factors in UK policy in relation to Iraq’s Kurds – but this was also embedded in a well-established approach of siding with the state (Iraq) and forcing the Kurds into that state. That policy dated back to the aftermath of WWI and the creation of the state of Iraq, a backdrop that cannot be disregarded. It saw Britain’s interests to be congruous with empowering the Sunni-led Iraqi state and Iraq ruling over the Kurds. It was also significantly influenced by a historically strong pro-Arab lobby. The policy sought to empower Sunni Arabs who had allied with the British in expelling the Ottomans and who were considered to be better situated geographically to serve Britain’s imperial interests than the peoples in the remote highlands and mountains of southern Kurdistan. After WWI, many of the relevant British officials, including Sir Percy Cox, Sir Henry Dobbs, Gertrude Bell, and Kinahan Cornwallis, who served among the Arabs of Mesopotamia (later Iraq) and thus become Arabists, as David K. Fieldhouse has put it, “regarded the Kurds as a nuisance.”¹⁰¹ Mahmoud Othman also asserts that Britain had sided with the Iraqi state since its creation in relation to the Kurdish issue in Iraq.¹⁰²

Conclusion

Even prior to 1963, British officials and policy-makers equated Kurdish aspirations for statehood with “trouble,” meaning that this issue might be exploited by external powers and put British regional interests at risk. If that were to transpire, according to a policy recommendation paper in 1958, the UK should “give unconditional diplomatic and moral support to Iran and Turkey,” and potentially Iraq, “in order to gain credit for doing so.” The UK itself could also “foster trouble among the Kurds” if that was needed.¹⁰³

Viewing the Kurds as pawns in a political game, the major powers ignored and even facilitated injustices, the denial of rights, and violence. The West considered the Iraqi Kurds, their status, and conflict with Baghdad in terms of their own relations with the Iraqi state. Such, broadly, was the case in the mass violence perpetrated in Iraqi Kurdistan in 1963 and relayed to London explicitly and implicitly as genocide.

Examining the UK’s foreign policy in relation to the Iraqi Kurds during the short reign of the first Ba’ath regime in Iraq (February–November of 1963) shows that the UK saw that backing Iraq and portraying itself as backing Iraq against the Kurdish nationalists (under the KDP) offered an opportunity for better relations with the Ba’ath regime. On the one

¹⁰⁰ FO317/170488: EQ1019/39 (A), “British Embassy Baghdad,” 31 August 1963.

¹⁰¹ Fieldhouse, *Kurds, Arabs, and Britons*, 48; Othman, telephone interview. For more, see Leslie McLoughlin, *In a Sea of Knowledge: British Arabists in the Twentieth Century* (Reading: Garnet Publishing Limited, 2022); Wichart, “A ‘New Deal’ for the Kurd.”

¹⁰² Othman, telephone interview.

¹⁰³ “FO953/1861: P10048/3, Propaganda.”

hand, the Ba'ath were anti-communists, and, in the face of the rise of pan-Arab Nasserism in the region, they were not interested in joining a larger Arab state under President Nasser of Egypt. These were just what the UK wanted. In fact, the UK saw the Kurdish issue as an opening through which to seek closer relations with the Ba'ath, undermine the Kurds, the USSR and Nasser's influence in Iraq, and thus claim credit with the Ba'ath for doing so.

On the other hand, Kurdish nationalism in Iraq was deemed by the UK as susceptible to external exploitation, particularly by the USSR. Primarily, it was feared that the USSR might back the nationalist Kurds to establish an independent Kurdistan to gain a foothold in the Middle East and thereby destabilize both Iran and Turkey, allies of the West, and achieve land access to the natural resources of the Middle East. This threat was inflated by Iran and Turkey.

Under those circumstances, during the 1963 Ba'ath regime's military offensive (June–October) in Iraqi Kurdistan, there was clear recognition from multiple and even opposing actors, including the UK's own diplomats and the USSR, that the Iraqi Ba'ath regime was carrying out a genocide in Kurdistan. Nevertheless, for the reasons examined, the UK essentially sought to ignore and conceal the horrific events unfolding and instead back Iraq to tempt the Ba'ath regime away from the USSR and/or Nasser. Moreover, Britain oversaw the weakening of the Kurdish independence movement by isolating it from the outside world, importantly, to avoid what British officials deemed would be an embarrassment if the mass violence and the policy of backing the Ba'ath regime (by Britain) were publicized.

Briefly, the UK saw no UK or Western interests to be gained from the Kurds, looked the other way, and left Iraq to do as it chose, insofar as it could, while it also saw advantages in undermining Kurdish nationalism and appeasing the Iraqi Ba'ath regime. Iraqi Kurdistan in 1963 had become another Cold War killing field, with the UK, as shown here, knowingly enabling the perpetrating side. In the regional and international context, Britain's policy towards the mass violence against Iraq's Kurds thus constituted a foreign policy based on a strategic realpolitik that clearly eschewed ethical and legal questions around genocide just fifteen years after the international adoption of the UN Convention on the Prevention of the Crime of Genocide.

Essentially, political opportunity and the politics surrounding what was described to be a genocide mattered more than human lives, as was also the case elsewhere during the Cold War and other instances of mass violence. This research has demonstrated that even in the case of a reported genocide where a state's own diplomatic sources privately note that a genocide is taking place, states still consider their own pragmatic interests when formulating a response. This was the case with Britain and the Iraqi Kurds in 1963.

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