

Kissinger and the Kurdish War: October 1973–March 1975

During the period between the October War in 1973 and the Algiers Accord in March 1975, Secretary Kissinger, who was also a national security adviser, and his deputy, Brent Scowcroft, took on a significant role in directing and managing the CIA's Kurdish intervention, often acting outside of normal diplomatic channels. Throughout this time, Kissinger continued to show a strong commitment to the Kurdish intervention, often ignoring the CIA's numerous warnings about the operation by ordering further US assistance, including finding ways to transfer to the Kurds Soviet-made arms captured by the Israelis during the October War. After President Nixon's resignation in August 1974, Kissinger stayed in his dual roles, and kept the new president, Gerald R. Ford, apprised of the Kurdish intervention on a "need-to-know" basis.¹ At the same time, Kissinger hid details of the operation from the State Department, which was hoping to build upon Iraq's positive gestures toward the United States during 1973.² This meant that a small, secretive group of US officials—Kissinger, Helms, the CIA station chief in Tehran (Arthur Callahan), and his deputy station chief—ran the Kurdish intervention. When the Kurdish War resumed in March 1974, three separate dynamics—the Arab-Israeli conflict, Iran-Iraq rivalry, and Cold War interventionism—all coalesced to ensure that it would have a violent conclusion. Of these, the Ford administration's policy continued to be driven by the Cold War thinking. The United States was backing the Kurds in a war against the Soviet-supported Iraqi regime. As with 1963, the Kurdish War once again took on Cold War dimensions; only this time the superpowers had switched sides.

Like Nixon's decision to support the Kurds, the highly controversial and tragic end of the Kurdish War in March 1975 has been the product of much discussion among scholars. This was because when the Shah terminated his support to the Kurds, the US and Israeli operations to support the Kurds came to an abrupt halt. The dominant argument is that the United States abandoned the Kurds without warning, ignored Barzani's heartfelt pleas to assistance, and failed to provide humanitarian assistance in the aftermath. The leading proponent of this view was Representative Otis Pike, who led the House Select Committee on Intelligence, which was charged with investigating the financial side of covert action. Pike and

his committee were determined to show that the Kurdish intervention was illegal because the Nixon administration had bypassed the 40 Committee.³ While the *Pike Report* provided valuable information on aspects of the Kurdish intervention, declassified documents reveal that the report was subjective. According to Gerald Haines, Pike had once admitted privately that he wanted to use the report to expose the CIA as an out-of-control “rouge elephant.”⁴ Kissinger modestly believed that Pike wanted “to show that [he was an] evil genius.”⁵ To a degree he was right. In January 1976, when Congress voted to keep the *Pike Report* secret, members of the committee leaked the report to the press.⁶ On February 4, William Safire published an article in the *New York Times* that accused the Ford administration of selling out the Kurds. The accusations in the article, “Mr. Ford’s Secret Sellout,” clearly reflect the conclusions of the *Pike Report*.⁷ Even though the State Department dismissed Safire’s article as “a collection of distortions and untruths unsupported by any documents or the record,”⁸ a full copy of the *Pike Report* was published in the *Village Voice* on February 16, which has had a distorting effect on our understanding of America’s actual role in the end of the Kurdish War. The following chronicles the formulation and execution of the US policy during the 1974–75 Kurdish War and argues that the Ford administration’s actions were reflective of a realistic analysis of its overt and covert capabilities.

Tying Down Iraq

During the five months between the October War and the outbreak of the Kurdish War in March 1974, the United States faced a number of problems, ranging from the skyrocketing price of oil to negotiating Israel’s disengagement from Egyptian and Syrian territories. Meanwhile, Iraq continued to show interest in improving its relations with the West (especially France),⁹ while its relations with the Soviets deteriorated due to Moscow’s failure to consult with it prior to the October War.¹⁰ Even America’s relations with Iraq improved during this period, as the regime continued to award US firms with important contracts. However, just as Iraq was improving relations with the West, Kissinger concocted a scheme designed to secure Israel’s disengagement from Egypt and Syria at Iraq’s expense.

During the war, the Saudis led the Organization of Petroleum Exporting Countries (OPEC) in an oil embargo that targeted nations that had supported Israel during the war, while at the same time cutting oil production. Unlike during the 1967 war, when the United States was a net exporter of oil, OPEC’s efforts to use oil as a weapon against the United States had only a limited effect on the American economy. However, by 1973, the United States had become a net importer of oil, giving the oil-producing Arab states significant leverage over the United States, Western Europe, and Japan. The embargo and the cuts in production meant that oil prices in the United States and around the world skyrocketed from \$3.01 per barrel to \$5.11, and then doubled again on January 1, 1974, when OPEC increased the price to \$11.65.¹¹ The quadrupling of the price of oil in just four months shocked the US economy, and sent it into a tailspin. America’s gross domestic product (GDP) dropped from 7.2 percent in 1972, to 4 percent in 1973,