

The Secret Origins of the U.S.-Kurdish Relationship Explain Today's Disaster

The seeds of Washington's abandonment of the Kurds traces back to a classified document written in the 1970s by Henry Kissinger.

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Shah Mohammad Reza Pahlavi of Iran meets U.S. Secretary of State Henry Kissinger in Zurich in February 1975. JAMES ANDANSON/SYGMA VIA GETTY IMAGES

On June 30, 1972, two Kurdish men, Idris Barzani and Mahmoud Othman, arrived nondescriptly at the CIA's sprawling headquarters in Langley, Virginia, and were

led into the office of the agency's legendary director, Richard Helms. They discussed a stunning shift in U.S. policy. Henry Kissinger, President Richard Nixon's national security advisor, had personally authorized Helms to express American sympathy for the Kurds' plight and assure them of his "readiness to consider their requests for assistance." For more than a decade, the Kurds had been fighting against the Iraqi government and had made countless pleas for American assistance to no avail. Helms was now declaring that the United States had changed its mind. He failed to mention it would soon change again.

The long history of U.S. abandonment of the Kurds is well understood by most observers. What has mostly gone forgotten is that such eventual betrayals were entirely predictable given the way the two sides came together in the first place. Indeed, it's impossible to understand President Donald Trump's decision to support Turkey in waging war in Syria against U.S.-allied Kurds without understanding the largely untold origins of the U.S.-Kurdish relationship.

The history extends back to 1920, when the Kurds, the largest ethnic group in the world not to have a state of their own, were promised autonomy in the Treaty of Sèvres. But the two great powers of the day, Britain and France, reneged in 1923 and carved up the Kurdish territories into modern-day Turkey, Iran, Iraq, and Syria. The Kurds rebelled against this betrayal and were crushed by their new British, French, Iranian, and Turkish colonizers. After decades of relative quiet, the Kurds tried again to achieve autonomy in the aftermath of Iraq's 1958 revolution, which saw the overthrow of the Hashemite monarchy.

After the outbreak of war in Iraqi Kurdistan in September 1961, the U.S. government adopted a policy of noninterference. The primary objective of U.S. policy at the time was to maintain good relations with Baghdad, and there was always the nagging suspicion that the Kurdish rebel leader, Mustafa Barzani, was a communist agent, given his 11-year exile in the Soviet Union from 1947 to 1958.

However, two close American allies in the region—Israel and Iran—quickly concluded that the Iraqi Kurds were ideological and strategic allies who could be exploited to keep the radical Arab nationalist regime in Baghdad—and its large military—tied down. Starting in mid-1962, the Shah of Iran ordered his intelligence agency, SAVAK, to help finance the Kurdish insurgency in northern Iraq to undermine the stability of the regime in Baghdad. The Israelis joined the Iranian-led intervention in 1964, after Prime Minister David Ben-Gurion recognized the Kurds as a strategic ally against the radical Arab regime in Baghdad. For the next decade, the Iranian and Israeli strategy was simple: As long as the Kurds presented a clear and present danger to Baghdad, the Iraqi military could not be deployed in force against Israel in the event of a war or threaten Iranian ambitions in the Persian Gulf. This paid off in 1967, when Iraq was unable to deploy its forces in the pan-Arab war against Israel, and in the successor war in 1973, when it could only

muster a single armored division because 80 percent of its military was tied down in northern Iraq.

The Americans were slower to come around. Since the mid-1960s, both the Iranians and Israelis had been seeking to convince the White House to reconsider its nonintervention policy; so had Iraqi Kurds, who regularly met with U.S. foreign service officers. They were always greeted with a polite but firm refusal.

This changed in July 1968 when the Baath Party—whose leadership included a young Saddam Hussein—seized power and firmly established itself as the dominant political force inside Iraq for the next 35 years. In March 1970, Saddam concluded that the war against his country's Kurds was a wasted effort and personally traveled north and met with Barzani. Saddam agreed to every demand, which centered on Kurdish autonomy within a unified Iraq, but indicated that the program would not be implemented until 1974. Essentially, the March accord bought time for both sides. Saddam was able to consolidate power, and Barzani was able to secure a powerful new ally—the United States.

Following the March Accord, Saddam pulled Iraq firmly into the arms of the Soviets. In December 1971, Iraq signed an arms deal with Moscow, and in April 1972, it signed a Treaty of Friendship and Cooperation. The following month, Nixon visited Tehran on his return from a successful Moscow summit, where he managed to secure detente with the Soviets. During his visit, the shah pressed Nixon to assist the Kurds in destabilizing Iraq.

After a careful review of the risks, the Nixon administration concluded that the Soviet-Iraqi threat to Western interests was significant enough to justify helping the Kurds. Following Nixon's green light, the Kurdish operation was run out of Kissinger's White House office. Between August 1972 and late 1974, when fighting in the Iraqi-Kurdish war resumed, the Nixon administration frequently consulted with the Iranians, Israelis, and the Kurds on how to prepare them for an inevitable confrontation with Baghdad. This meant stockpiling weaponry and training Kurdish fighters on modern warfare techniques—all while relations between the Kurds and Baghdad deteriorated rapidly.

In early 1974, Saddam violated the terms of the March accord and unilaterally imposed a watered-down version of autonomy for the Kurds. Barzani responded by traveling to Iran, where he met with the shah and the CIA's station chief to request U.S. backing for a plan to set up an Iraqi Arab-Kurdish government that would claim to be the sole legitimate government of Iraq. As Kissinger wrote in his 1999 memoir, *Years of Renewal*, Barzani's request "triggered a flood of communications" among U.S. officials focused on two questions: whether the United States would support a unilateral declaration of autonomy and what level of support the United States was willing to give the Kurds. The CIA, in particular, warned against increasing U.S. assistance.

