

The Historical Study on US Policy towards the Iraqi (1961-1975): A Perspective of Offshore Balance

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Abstract: From the early 1960s to the mid-1970s, the U.S policy towards Iraqi Kurds experienced two adjustment, which changed from ignoring the political appeal of the Kurds to aiding the armed forces of Kurdish Democratic Party, and finally abandoning the support towards the causes of Kurdish nationalism. From the perspective of policy change, the white house officials changed the action principle of diplomatic strategy again and again, which led to the policy incoherence. From the perspective of the law of decision-making, the U.S policy towards Iraqi Kurds was closely related to the offshore balance strategy of United State, which emphasize the center of the U.S. key benefits in the Middle East, and the limit of the bilateral relationship between the U.S and the sovereign state. This standpoint determines that U.S policy towards Iraqi Kurds always teeter between the political apathy and the surreptitious intervention. It is also the primary cause of U.S. refusing to support the Kurdish independence.

1. Introduction

In September 2017, the Kurdish region of Iraq launched a powerful “independence referendum”, but it ended in failure. The reasons for this are, on the one hand, the Iraqi government's opposition to any form of national separatism and its determination to safeguard national unity and territorial integrity, and, on the other hand, the international community's rejection of the legitimacy of the “independence referendum” at the level of international law and its clear support for Iraq's anti-separatist political stance. It is worth paying special attention to the fact that the Iraqi Kurds' prejudgement of the US political stance was the main driver of the referendum, while the Iraqi Kurds' misjudgement of the US' true thinking was an important reason for the failure of the referendum. Therefore, how to understand the basic US position on such foreign-related ethnic issues is not only an important perspective for studying the development of Kurdish nationalism, but also an important basis for predicting the trend of Kurdish nationalism. This article uses the interbank balancing strategy as a research lens to trace the origins of US policy towards the Kurds in Iraq and to analyse the inherent paradox between the interbank balancing strategy and Kurdish nationalism.

2. US Indifference to the Iraqi Kurds (1961-1972)

Following the outbreak of the Iraqi revolution in 1958, the new Iraqi government recognised the national rights of the Kurds in the constitution and granted the Kurdish Democratic Party (KDP) legal status as a political party in Iraq, with the aim of easing relations between the Kurds and the central government. However, as Kurdish leader Mustafa Barzani demanded that President Abd al-Karim Qasim end the dictatorship and recognise the Kurdish region's right to autonomy, the KDP's partnership with the Baghdad government ended and a major conflict between the Kurdish opposition and Iraqi government forces ensued. [1]For the next eleven years, the US has refused to support the Kurdish autonomy movement in any form and has advocated a peaceful resolution of the dispute between the Kurdish forces and the Baghdad government. Combining both international and regional considerations, as well as Strong's understanding of the Kurdish question, the US indifference to Kurdish political demands during that period can be attributed to three reasons.

Firstly, the complex relationship between the Soviet government and the Kurds weakened the US willingness to support Barzani. The genesis of US concern for Kurdish nationalism in Iraq was inevitably linked to the US-Soviet power struggle in the Middle East. The US government believed that the Soviet Union, aware of the sensitivity of the Arab world to the Kurdish question and convinced that any move to show solidarity with Kurdish autonomy would incur Arab resentment, continued to support the Kurdish nationalist movement in various forms for a long time, and at one point provided refuge for Iraqi Kurdish leader Barzani. [2]For this reason, even though Barzani repeatedly stressed his pro-Western political stance to the US, [3]the White House hierarchy could not ignore the important role played by the Soviet Union in the Iraqi Kurdish issue, and the US advocated a peaceful solution to the Kurdish problem essentially to undermine the Soviet Union's plans to exploit the Kurds.

Secondly, Washington, for its part, was reluctant to let the Kurdish issue stand in the way of warming relations with the Iraqi government. In the early years of the Iraqi republic, President Qasim's increased political cooperation with the Iraqi Communist Party, on the one hand, and his seeking of economic and military assistance from the Soviet government, on the other, led to instant tensions in US-Iraqi relations.[4] Since the Baath Party took power in Baghdad, Iraq has been interested in easing its increasingly tense diplomatic relations with the Western world and has bloodily purged the country of communists. The new Iraqi government's firm and clear anti-communist stance was fully endorsed by the White House hierarchy, which pushed the US and Iraq to reach a number of arms purchase agreements. In light of this, the US government will not support any armed action to destabilise the Baath regime at this stage, which means that the US will take a strict wait-and-see approach to the Kurdish issue.

Finally, the US government is concerned that aid to the Kurds will destabilise the Turkish regime. In terms of the impact of the Kurdish issue on the regimes of the four countries in the Middle East, Iraq and Turkey are the most seriously affected countries. Situated at the crossroads of Europe and Asia, Turkey not only posed a direct threat to the southern defences of the Soviet Union, but also had a high degree of influence within the Arab world. During the 1950s and 1960s, the United States provided Turkey with significant military equipment and economic aid to ensure that the regime was protected from internal and external security threats, with the aim of establishing Turkey as a key player in the Western defence system. [5]The US government's refusal to intervene in the Iraqi Kurdish issue at this time is thus motivated by a combination of global strategic deployment and the security of its Western allies.

3. US Aid to the Kurds in Iraq (1972-1975)

The indifference of the US towards Iraqi Kurdish nationalism in the 1960s reflected, on the one hand, the White House's cautious view of the prospect of a Kurdish armed independence movement and, on the other, the continued dominance of sovereign states in the US Middle East strategy. Since the 1950s, when the US became fully involved in the Middle East, the US has been studying and implementing a cross-border balancing strategy, aiming to maintain political stability in the Middle East and the existing framework of sovereign states. As a typical cross-border ethnic issue, Iraqi Kurdish nationalism is ostensibly an internal affair of Iraq, but in essence it touches the nerves of tens of millions of Kurdish people and involves the national policies of several sovereign states, including Iran, Turkey and Syria, so Kurdish armed independence is an important potential factor that exacerbates instability in the Middle East. More importantly, the United States' overt support for Kurdish independence could bring the sovereign states of the Middle East closer to the Soviet Union, thus creating favourable conditions for the Soviet Union to expand its power. The Kurdish community, as a non-state actor, is unable to shake the relationship the US has established with the sovereign states of the Middle East, and will not receive the full support of the White House for their independence. At the same time, however, Kurdish forces, as an active force outside the sovereign state system, are often seen as an important tool for balancing forces both inside and outside the region. This was particularly true of the US military assistance to the Kurds during the Nixon years.

After regaining power in Baghdad in July 1968, the Baath government created divisions within the Kurdish population, which led to military clashes between Iraqi government forces and the Kurdish Democratic Party (KDP). [6] This time, the Nixon administration showed a different attitude than before. On 7 June 1972, Harold Saunders, the US government's adviser on Middle East affairs, systematically set out the arguments for and against assisting the Iraqi Kurds in a policy memorandum he had developed.[7] On 30 June 1972, Helms, head of the US CIA, promised two Iraqi Kurdish representatives that the US had begun to consider providing non-reimbursable military assistance to Kurdish forces through the channels of third-party countries. On 28 July 1972, Alexander Haig, the chief adviser to the White House, considering the highly sensitive nature of this aid programme, advised the CIA to avoid any written records in the official decision-making process and to inform only the interdepartmental committee heads. [8] This suggestion was soon endorsed by Secretary of State Kissinger and President Nixon, and the US government's secret assistance to the Iraqi Kurds began. So why did the US government change its indifferent attitude towards the Iraqi Kurdish independence movement?

Firstly, the US believed that Iraq would become a Soviet satellite state in the Gulf. After the return of the Baath Party to power, and because of the diplomatic isolation Iraq had faced, the Baath government decided to strengthen its cooperation with the Soviet Union in order to reshape Iraq's political and economic position in the Gulf region, and this received a positive response from Moscow. This inter-state agreement, which was in the nature of a military alliance, set the future course of Soviet-Iraqi relations. [9] In the view of the White House hierarchy, the political landscape in the Middle East was about to be reshuffled, with the Soviet Union's strategic focus in the Middle East shifting from Egypt to Iraq. Therefore, the US needed to use the Kurdish issue to curb the growth of Iraq's overall power and force the Baghdad government to change its pro-Soviet stance.

Secondly, the oil policy of the Baathist government is a serious threat to the energy supply of the Western world. In 1972, the Iraqi government decided to nationalise the Iraqi Oil Company and

joined with other oil-producing countries such as Algeria and Libya to exert pressure on foreign oil companies. The United States, as a global energy power, has long been among the world's leading producers of crude oil, but by the early 1970s had become increasingly dependent on imports, with the Middle East being an important source of US oil imports. Geographically, the Kurdish region was the most important oil-producing region in Iraq, and Iraqi Kurdish leaders saw access to oil fields as an important resource for external support.[10] The Nixon administration therefore used the Kurdish nationalist movement to undermine the Baath government's ability to launch an “oil offensive” as a means of solving the oil problem.

Finally, the escalating Kurdish nationalist conflict helped to ease the pressure on Israel in the Middle East war, and during the Fourth Middle East War in 1973, the White House hierarchy sought to reduce the threat to Israel from other Arab states, and the Iraqi Kurds became an important tool in this strategy. During the war, Iraq sent a total of 20,000 troops and four air squadrons to both Syria and Egypt. In this context, Kissinger became even more convinced of the importance of a Kurdish independence movement, as the presence of Kurdish forces would prevent Iraq from taking large numbers of troops out of the country and into Syria. The armed Kurdish campaign has proved effective in limiting the Iraqi government's ability to intervene in wars in the Middle East by forcing the Iraqi government to deploy two-thirds of its ground forces in the north.

4. The End of US Aid to the Kurds in Iraq (1975)

From the perspective of strategic interpretation, the concept of counterbalance should be understood at two levels, namely, the US refuses to join any form of regional military alliance and chooses to avoid direct intervention in the Middle East by “proxy”, which is “counterbalance”; the US uses the pro-Western forces available in the Middle East to inhibit the socialist camp from expanding its regional influence, which is “counterbalance”. The US used the pro-Western forces available in the Middle East to restrain the socialist camp from expanding its influence in the region, in order to 'balance' it. The Nixon administration's assistance to the Kurds proved that the independence of Kurdish forces within sovereign states could, at certain times, be compatible with the US strategy of balancing across the border, mainly in terms of containing Soviet expansion, ensuring energy supplies and safeguarding the security of allies. However, in the midst of competing regional and international powers, the Kurdish nationalist movement may appear to be in line with the US strategic vision of balancing across the border in the short term, but it is still fundamentally contrary to the core interests and policy bottom line of the US in the Middle East. Therefore, when assistance to the Kurdish nationalist cause was no longer closely linked to the Soviet threat, or even to the implementation of a 'proxy' strategy in the Middle East, the US government was bound to abandon its military assistance to Kurdish forces.

In March 1975, at the OPEC summit, Iran and Iraq issued the Algiers Declaration. Under the agreement, the Iraqi government accepted the Shah's proposal to divide the Shatt al-Arab, while the Iranian government ceased all aid operations to the Kurdish Democratic Party and closed the Iranian border with the Kurdish region of Iraq.[11] On 23 March 1975, Barzani decided to officially cease armed operations and thousands of Kurdish families sought refuge in Iran or surrendered to Iraqi government forces.[12] On 19 May 1975, Kissinger informed then US President Ford that the CIA would no longer support the Iraqi Kurdish cause of armed autonomy, which announced the official end of the three-year Kurdish aid operation in Washington. [13]The end of the three-year Kurdish aid operation in Washington. Even though Barzani wrote to Kissinger several times, hoping that the US would help the Kurdish people who had assisted the US in its Middle East

policy, the US government chose to abandon its assistance when the Kurds were in desperate straits.[14]

Firstly, continued assistance to the Iraqi Kurds is contrary to the dominant ideology of the US “two-pillar” policy. In the late 1960s and early 1970s, Washington saw Iran and Saudi Arabia as the two regional pillars in the defence of Western interests in order to minimise direct US involvement in the Middle East and thus reduce the possibility of Soviet forceful intervention in the affairs of Middle Eastern states. It was thanks to the unprecedented strategic cooperation between the US and Iran that the US largely achieved its stated policy objectives in the Gulf for most of the 1970s. [15] It could be argued that the initial US decision to support the Kurdish aid programme was in large part an important move to preserve Iran's regional hegemony. Therefore, even though Kissinger believed that the signing of the Algiers Agreement by Iran at this time could have many negative consequences, the US administration would never compromise the fruitful US-Iranian (Iranian) alliance strategy because of the Iraqi Kurdish issue.

Secondly, the gradual improvement in US-Iranian (Iraqi) relations has accelerated Washington's abandonment of the Kurds. At the same time that Kissinger and others were secretly running Kurdish aid operations, the US State Department was actively seeking to improve US-Iraqi bilateral relations. The difference in perceptions between the White House and the State Department led to a dual-track approach to Iraqi policy, and the outbreak of Watergate signalled that the covert operations led by the White House were unsustainable. On the other hand, as Iraqi government forces were unable to use military means to resolve the Kurdish problem, Baghdad gradually lost interest in Soviet arms aid and instead sought a rapprochement with the US and Iran. Thus, when the two countries reached a consensus on the Kurdish issue, the Ford administration seized the opportunity to improve US-Iraqi (Iraqi) relations and to lay the groundwork for the next strategic plan for the Middle East.

5. Conclusion

Both Wilson's Fourteen-Point Plan and Roosevelt's Atlantic Charter reflected a strong desire to export American nationalist values abroad. The fact that the Kurdish idea of national independence coincided with the liberal ideas promoted by the US was not a key factor in the cooperation between the two. In contrast, the policies of the sovereign states of the Middle East in defence of their national interests, which in some cases are not in line with US nationalist values, have not prevented the implementation of the US policy of counterbalancing across the border. It is clear that US nationalist values remain more at the level of official pronouncements and are by no means an important criterion for judging the merits of US foreign policy. Tracing its roots, the US policy towards the Iraqi Kurds during the Cold War was always closely related to the US strategy of balancing across the Middle East, emphasising the core interests of the US in the region as the central axis and the limits of the US bilateral relations with sovereign states.

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