

Quietly Supporting Oppression: Britain and the Iraqi Kurds (1958-1964)

Dr. Hawraman Ali

International Relations & Diplomacy Department, Ishik University, Erbil, Iraq

Email: hawraman.ali@ishik.edu.iq

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Abstract

Since the establishment of the modern Middle East and the dismantlement of the Ottoman empire, one of the most enduring issues in the Middle East has been the Kurdish Question or the right of Kurds in the states which they have been attached to. In one of the countries in which the Kurds are attached to (Iraq) Britain, as a colonial power, continued to exercise a great influence until the 1970s. This paper seeks to demonstrate how Britain quietly and knowingly supported Iraq under Qasim and the first Ba'ath regime of 1963 in suppressing the Iraqi Kurds, and in conducting crimes which were largely recognised to amount to acts of genocide even at the time that they were taking place.

Keywords: Kurds, Iraqi Kurds, Britain, Middle East, UK, Turkey, Iran, Ba'ath Party, Iraq, Qasim, Genocide, Cold War, Kurdistan, stateless, United Arab Republic, KDP, Barzani, Revolution, Kurdish, UAR.

Introduction

Since the establishment of the modern Middle East and the dismantlement of the Ottoman empire, one of the most enduring issues in the Middle East has been the Kurdish Question or the right of Kurds in the states which they have been attached to. In one of the countries in which the Kurds are attached to (Iraq) Britain, as a colonial power, continued to exercise a great influence until the 1970s. This paper seeks to demonstrate how Britain quietly and knowingly supported Iraq under Qasim and the first Ba'ath regime of 1963 in suppressing the Iraqi Kurds, and in conducting crimes which were largely recognised to amount to acts of genocide even at the time that they were taking place.

The significance of stateless Kurdistan during the Cold War

The significance of the Kurdish territories or stateless Kurdistan during the Cold War was lying in its geographical position as the closest land route from the Soviet Union to the Middle East, and also in dividing Turkey and Iran, members of the CENTO—the purpose of which was to contain the Soviet Union. These were in addition to the possibility to exploit the Kurdish causes in each of the countries with Kurdish population by outside powers to their own advantage in weakening these countries.

Britain and the Iraqi Kurds: post-1958

After the Iraqi Revolution of 1958, when it came to Britain and the Iraqi Kurds, as a Foreign Office policy paper put it in December 1958, the idea was that the Iraqi ‘Kurds should form an integral and contented part of the Iraqi State’ and this was for a number of reasons. Firstly, hostilities in Iraqi Kurdistan, as the paper put it, ‘would endanger our oil investment in Iraq’.⁶ Secondly, Kurdish influence in Iraq would have meant that it wasn’t as easy for Iraq to join the United Arab Republic—as if the Kurds had broken away from Iraq.

Following these, the idea was that British diplomats ‘should discourage and decline to discuss overtures from potential trouble-makers [Kurds!] or leaders of potential independence Kurdish movements or opposition’.⁷ However, it was also stated that this policy could be reconsidered if Iraq found itself in the Soviet camp or merged with the UAR, that is, the Kurds could be exploited and used against Iraq should the latter join the UAR or the Soviet orbit.

Moreover, it was stated that if the USSR or the UAR were to ‘make trouble among the Kurds’ then ‘we should give unconditional diplomatic and moral support to Iran and Turkey, and should be ready to give similar support to Iraq in order to gain credit for doing so’.⁸ In other words, Britain’s policy towards the Iraqi Kurds immediately after the Revolution was to wait and see how the new Iraqi regime under Qasim would conduct itself, and the Iraqi Kurds were the expendables here.

September 1961: Start of hostilities in Kurdistan

Before the outbreak of hostilities in Kurdistan in September 1961, British diplomats and the Foreign Office were well aware of the discontent among the Iraqi Kurds regarding the Iraqi government and that, as one memorandum from the British embassy in Baghdad back to London put it, ‘[t]here seems to be a wide spread feeling among the Kurds that they are being treated as second class citizens’.⁹

British intelligence services were collecting extensive reports on the Kurds within the Cold War and the regional political framework—that is the Iraqi Kurds within Iraq, Iran, Turkish and Syrian politics, in relation to the Kurds, and in particular Nasser’s attitude towards the Kurds. One such intelligent report, on the request of the Joint Intelligence Committee reached the British Cabinet in November of 1958. British intelligence at this time (November 1958) believed that both the Soviets and Nasser wanted to keep their relations with the Kurds in order to exploit the Kurds for their advantage at short

⁶ FO953/1861: P10048/3, Propaganda in the Middle East: The Kurdish Problem. (1958). UK National Archive. Kew.

⁷ FO953/1861: P10048/3.

⁸ FO953/1861: P10048/3.

⁹ FO371/157404: E1821/5, Confidential. (November 25, 1958). UK National Archive. Kew.

notice. The worry was that the Soviets through exploiting Kurdistan could reach the Kirkuk oil fields from the north, or that both Nasser and the USSR could exploit and provoke the Kurds of Iran and Turkey to weaken these countries. British intelligence believed that an independent Kurdistan would require the support of an outside power, such as the two mentioned, but that these powers were intending to use the Kurds for their own advantage as opposed to sponsoring a Kurdish state.¹⁰ During these times, British foreign policy was also comparable to the USSR and Nasser's policy towards the Iraqi Kurds in wanting to keep friendly relations with the Iraqi Kurds but nothing more than that.¹¹

Implied Backing for Genocide

Once the Ba'athists took power in February 1963, from the onset they promised autonomy for Kurdistan. However, once they felt secure on power, they started a genocidal campaign in Kurdistan. An Associated Press reporter who had been to Kurdistan, in September 1963, reported that 'Government plans bomb villages to ruins, set fire to vast tracts of the green countryside and machine-gun anything that moves'. The Kurdish notable figure, Emir Badrkhan, forwarded this report to British diplomats, as evidence of the atrocities that the Iraqi government was committing in Kurdistan, together with a letter from himself as a representative of the Kurdish leadership. Badrkhan eloquently stated, among others, that:

The member states of the United Nations Organisation have on several occasions given proof of their determination to act on the international level as the defenders of the oppressed peoples, and I cannot think that there can be an exception in the case of the Kurdish people. For this reason, the Kurdish people [...] take the liberty of addressing your excellency again, with the view to enlisting your intervention with all international organizations, 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.

Badrkhan continued: 'We demand, at least, that a fact-finding mission be sent to Iraq, as have been sent to other areas of conflict.' Arguing that the Kurdish question is no longer an internal Iraqi problem but a national question, Badrkhan stated that '[y]our intervention at this international juncture will, at the same time, 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'.¹²

¹⁰ See CAB158/34, Cabinet: Joint Intelligence Committee. (No date). UK National Archive. Kew.

¹¹ See for instance FO371/170450: EQ1019/62, Meeting with a Number of Kurdish Democratic Party (K.D.P.). (October 17, 1963). UK National Archive. Kew.

¹² See FO371/170450: EQ1019/64, Your Excellency [enclosure 2]. (October 16, 1963). UK National Archive. Kew.

Britain not only did nothing but in fact British diplomats in Iran consistently tried to persuade the Shah that, as one put it to the Shah, 'it would be dangerous to side with the [Iraqi] Kurds' and this is while the Shah considered the Kurds "'as a weapon' to be used against Nasser and the Arab Federation in case of need".¹³ The Shah of Iran, it must be emphasised, also was not interesting in Kurdish freedom or any such thing but he simply wanted to exploit the Kurds' situation for his country's benefit.

Britain was actually in favour of a settlement between the Iraqi government and the Iraqi Kurds.¹⁴ However, Britain's Kurdish policy here was contradicting itself, so much so that, on the one hand, Britain apparently preferred a settlement between the GOI and the Iraqi Kurds, while on the other, it was as if it wanted this to happen by magic. The fact that, for instance, its ambassador to Tehran (Denis Wright) wanted Iran to deny Talabani a visa, while the later wanted to return to Kurdistan, from Europe, is evident of this. David Wright wanted the Iranians to do this because 'any [Iranian] contact with him here would arouse Iraqi suspicion'. The UK also did not want essentially the Iraqi Kurds' autonomy demands to be met because this was said to cause trouble for Turkey and also Iran itself. The Shah of Iran was fearful that the Kurds may turn to the USSR for help and the later obliging to help in order to exploit the Kurdish Issue in the region; the Shah, thus, wanted to circumvent this by alluring the Kurds to turn to Iran than the USSR.¹⁵

The Soviet Union took the issue of the Ba'ath government bombing and destroying Kurdistan to the Security Council in July 9, 1963. In a letter to the President of the Security Council, the USSR essentially accused Iraq, backed by CENTO, of genocide in Kurdistan.¹⁶ However, CENTO, spearheaded by the UK, and the UK Mission to the UN, decided that if the issue is discussed by replying to the USSR at the UN, it will thus internationalise the Kurdish Issue at the UN stage. Therefore, the aim was to drag it out of the UN by having CENTO responding to it, and this is exactly what happened. In fact, CENTO's reply portrayed the organisation to have been victimised by the USSR.¹⁷ Further, it was not only CENTO members, that not only turned a blind eye to the Ba'ath government's brutal military campaigns in Kurdistan and curtailed any internationalisation of it, but other Arab states such as Syria and Algeria also took an aggressive stance against the USSR's efforts and considered it as an "attack" on Iraq by the USSR.¹⁸ Elsewhere, on July 8th, the USSR delegation

¹³ See for instance: FO371/170456: EQ102134/6, Confidential: From Tehran to Foreign Office. (May 29, 1963). UK National Archive. Kew.

¹⁴ FO371/170456: EQ103134/7, Your Telegram 470; Kurds. (June 13, 1963). UK National Archive. Kew.

¹⁵ FO371/170456: EQ103134/8, Confidential: From Tehran to Foreign Office. (June 19, 1963). UK National Archive. Kew. Also see FO371/170456: EQ103134/5, Confidential: From Tehran to Foreign Office. (May 20, 1963). UK National Archive. Kew.

¹⁶ FO371/170515: EQ2281/a(C), From New York to Foreign Office. (July 19, 1963). UK National Archive. Kew.

¹⁷ FO371/170515: EQ2281/7(B), CENTO. (July 22, 1963). UK National Archive. Kew.

¹⁸ See for instance: FO371/170515: EQ2281/7(B), CENTO. (July 12, 1963). UK National Archive. Kew.

to the Economic and Social Council wanted ‘the policy of genocide which is being pursued by the Government of the Republic of Iraq against the Kurdish people’ to be put on the agenda of the thirty-six session of the Council. According to the memorandum submitted by the Soviet delegation ‘[t]he Government of Iraq is carrying out a criminal policy of genocide—a policy which involves the physical extermination of the whole Kurdish people’. It continued that:

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.¹⁹

And that ‘the blood thirsty acts of the Government of Iraq against the Kurdish population are nothing but genocide’. The Delegation, however, made it clear, that self-determination here implies self-rule for the Kurds within Iraq. The Soviet Union in fact also submitted a draft resolution condemning Iraq ‘for military operations [in Kurdistan] which by their nature constitute an act of genocide’. The resolution also called upon Iraq to immediately end its military operations against the Kurds.²⁰

The USSR’s attitude here was not driven merely by sympathy for the Kurds but, as put by a Foreign Office memo, it was largely due to the Ba’ath government’s repression of the Iraqi communists and Baghdad’s desire for better relations with the West—including in the military sector. The West could not have complained. More importantly, with regards to the charge of genocide raised by the Soviet, the secret Foreign Office memo recognised that ‘[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 evident to support a charge of genocide*’.²¹ The memo goes on to suggest that Turkey may have cooperated with the Iraqis in suppressing the Iraqi Kurds, and so have the Syrians. In addition to this, while confirming that both the UK and the US had repeatedly urged the Ba’ath government for a negotiated settlement, according to the same memo ‘[w]e have, however, been anxious to seize the opportunities offered since the February revolution for better relations in particular the need to wean the Iraqis away from dependence on Russian arms’. Despite the UK recognising that the Iraqi government was possibly committing genocide in Kurdistan, the UK had already agreed ‘in principle’ in May 1963 to sell Iraq arms, ammunition and rockets, including Saracens and Hawker Hunter fighters.²² The latter would later prove to be devastating in Kurdistan.

¹⁹ FO371/170515: EQ2281/8, Request for an Additional Item [...]. (July 12, 1963). UK National Archive. Kew.

²⁰ FO371/170515: EQ2281/8.

²¹ FO371/170515: EQ2281/9, Kurdish Problem in Iraq: Soviet Approach to the Security Council. (July 29, 1963). UK National Archive. Kew. Emphasis added.

²² FO371/170515: EQ2281/9.

Here as much as the UK government was concerned, it had to balance its backing for the government of Iraq, to win it over to the West's side against that government's repression of the Kurds within the Cold War context. The UK wanted to exploit the rift between the USSR and Iraq for itself, even if this meant that providing limited arms to the Iraqis which at some point, sooner or later would be used against the Kurds. The UK government's other excuse, of course, was that it considered the Kurdish Issue within Iraq as an Iraqi internal matter—thus apparently the UK had no role to play in it and no connection. Nonetheless, the UK was backing an army which it knew that maybe carrying out an act of genocide. The UK government also wanted to blame Russia for the troubles and also for providing Iraq under Qasim with weapons which were still being used against the Kurds. Britain did not want the Kurds or the crimes of the Iraqi government to stand in the way of good relations with the government of Iraq, thus for this reason it adopted the policy of the issue as being an internal Iraqi matter, and blaming the USSR for apparently provoking the Kurds and providing arms to Qasim. In this way, it did not show itself as backing the Iraqi regime but quietly it was well aware of what the Iraqi army was doing in Kurdistan and chose to turn a blind eye on it—distance itself from it while continuing to appease the Iraqis. This is despite the fact that on a different occasion the Foreign Office in a telegram to the UK Mission at the UN (New York) recognised that '[t]here is disquieting evident 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'.²³ Nonetheless, despite this, it also stated: '[o]ur 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'.²⁴

In an interview with the British ambassador to Baghdad, the Iraqi Foreign Minister told the ambassador that it would be better to settle the Kurdish problem "once and for all"²⁵. Indeed, the systematic destruction of both life and property in Kurdistan and resettling the areas with Iraqi Arabs was well known to British diplomats in Baghdad. In the words of the ambassador, it was reported that the intention was to 'drastically reduce the Kurdish population in the North and to resettle the areas with Arabs'.²⁶ The methods were such that at least one Arab officer complained of his disgust of the 'inhuman and ill-advised [acts] in the long term'.²⁷ The army was bombing villages with no prior

²³ FO371/170515: NO. 2119, Confidential: From Foreign Office to New York UK. (July 12, 1963). UK National Archive. Kew.

²⁴ FO371/170515: NO. 2119. Also see FO371/170515: EQ2281/9.

²⁵ Quoted in FO317/170488: EQ1019/21, Confidential. (August 6, 1963). UK National Archive. Kew.

²⁶ FO317/170488: EQ1019/21.

²⁷ FO317/170488: EQ1019/21.

warning to its inhabitants. Also, the Iraqi government simultaneously pursued a vigorous propaganda campaign to portray the Kurds as a barbarous people. For instance, on one occasion it had the British believing that the anti-government Kurds had cut out the noses of about 40-70 loyalist Kurds and that they were being treated in Baghdad. The British memo went as far as declaring that ‘this barbarous custom is an old one in Kurdistan and indeed among other Aryan tribes [...]’²⁸. However, such custom is not known to exist in Kurdistan. The government thus wanted to somewhat whitewash its genocidal campaign in Kurdistan and to portray that they were fighting a savage people. By August 1963, even the French embassy in Baghdad was reporting ‘massacre of Kurds’ back to France. The degree of these reports was affecting French diplomatic staff to sympathise with the Kurds but who were allegedly powerless to do anything due to France’s apparently “non-intervention” policy in the affairs of others.²⁹

Pleas and rejections

When Emir Badrkhan, wanted to visit the Foreign Office in September 1963, to lobby for the Kurdish cause, it was decided that he should be seen by someone below Head of Department Level and not at the Office, but in a hotel where Badrkhan stayed.³⁰ In a similar manner, when in June 1963, Jalal Talabani was in France and wanted to visit the UK, the Foreign Office wanted Talabani to first agree that he will not engage in any public campaign on behalf of the Kurdish movement, because, as was put by a memo from the Foreign Office, this ‘could be embarrassing to us both in our relations with the Iraqi Government and vis a vis public opinion here [in the UK] in the context of our decision to supply arms to Iraq’.³¹ The same thing applied to Emir Badrkhan’s attempt to visit the UK because as the Foreign Office put it, again, engagement in advocacy by him ‘will embarrass us in our relations with the government of Iraq’.³²

On another occasion, a different Kurdish emissary (Shawkat Akrawi) met a Foreign Office representative in London in August 1963 and on behalf of the Kurdish leadership, he asked if Britain could not help the Kurds then at least can she remain neutral by not helping the government with arms and ammunition? The reply was that Britain does not pass moral judgement on other governments nor could they interfere in others’ internal affairs. As for the arms, it was stated that Britain had agreed to supply Iraq before the current fighting (which is not entirely correct); in any case, the arms provision could not be stopped regardless of the reason.³³ On another occasion, a Kurdish representative,

²⁸ FO317/170488: EQ1019/21.

²⁹ See for instance FO317/170488: EQ1019/32, Confidential. (August 16, 1963). UK National Archive. Kew.

³⁰ FO317/170488: EQ1019/32, Emir Badir Khan. (August 3, 1963). UK National Archive. Kew.

³¹ FO317/170488: SD.36588. (June, 1963). UK National Archive. Kew.

³² FO317/170488: EQ1019/32. (August 21, 1963). UK National Archive. Kew.

³³ FO317/170488: EQ1019/35/G, Secret. (August 27, 1963). UK National Archive. Kew.

delivering a message from Mustafa Barzani, told British diplomats in Tehran that the Kurds were capable of holding out permanently against small arms but ‘they were suffering heavily from tanks and aircraft [provided to the Iraqis]. *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’.³⁴ However, again, nothing came out of this. The UK government was not even prepared to urge resumption of talks or to act as a guarantor for any potential settlement to last. The UK and also the US were not only not supporting the Kurds in any way but in fact they were too afraid to even pass a peace message from the Kurdish leadership to the Iraqi government lest that offends the Iraqis, this was as if the UK and the US were owned by the Iraqi government.³⁵

The Ba’ath government also wanted to have the bulk of the army in Kurdistan and keeping it busy there than free in Baghdad. The Ba’ath ground campaign in Kurdistan was a failure overall, like that of Qasim, despite government leaders in Baghdad consistently claiming that it was only a matter of days before they would crush the Kurdish movement or that they were only “mopping up” the remnants.³⁶

In conclusion, for Britain, in the time examined, Cold War considerations and the regional political dynamics, or political advantage, were taking precedence over even merely objecting to a possible act of genocide in which the British government was complicit by ways of providing both arms and political backing for the perpetrating side. The question of the charge of genocide was well recognised even by the British diplomats themselves as has been shown in this paper.

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See for instance: FO317/170488: EQ1019/39 (A), British Embassy Baghdad. (August 31, 1963). UK National Archive. Kew

³⁴ FO317/170488: EQ1019/40, From Tehran to Foreign Office. (September 1, 1963). UK National Archive. Kew. Emphasis added.

³⁵ FO317/170488: WQ1019/33(A), Confidential. (August 24, 1963). UK National Archive. Kew.

³⁶ See for instance: FO317/170488: EQ1019/39 (A), British Embassy Baghdad. (August 31, 1963). UK National Archive. Kew.