

Chapter 4

THE KURDISH SPRING AND CHANGING GEOPOLITICS OF THE MIDDLE EAST

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The issue of Kurdish nationalism, autonomy or rights as a minority has affected primarily four Middle Eastern states—Turkey, Iran, Iraq and Syria—where the vast majority of Kurds reside. However, the Kurdish people have been affected by developments not only in the Middle East, but elsewhere in the world. With the breakup of the Ottoman Empire following the First World War, Kurdish territories were disputed between the Republic of Turkey and Great Britain, the mandatory power in Iraq, and following the Second World War, the Kurdish people and issues of concern to them became intertwined with the politics of the Cold War, the Arab-Israeli conflict and Turkish, Iranian and Arab nationalism. While this chapter will focus on the developments since the Second World War, there are obviously historical roots of political problems in the Middle Eastern countries that have directly affected the Kurds. Kurdish awakenings resembling the recent “springs” of the Arab world have occurred at different times in the various Middle Eastern countries. The reasons for this are best understood in examining the geopolitics of the region that also has an effect on internal developments in respective countries. Before doing so, it is necessary to compare the challenge of the Kurds to other groups in the region that have sought autonomy or independ-

ence: the Jews who created Israel, the Armenians and the Palestinians.

Are the Kurds a Special Case?

Zionism is a phenomenon of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries in reaction to anti-Semitism in Europe and a desire for an ethnic and religious group to express a form of European nationalism. The vast majority of Jews were in the Diaspora, but they claimed Palestine where they were a small minority and received the backing of first Great Britain and later the United States and the Soviet Union for their project. Certainly, the Holocaust provided one of the best arguments for the establishment of the state of Israel in the West, while the Socialist backgrounds of many of its founders was a factor to the Soviet bloc. Since then, Israel has developed a case that its continued existence is essential to Western interests in the Middle East, while Diaspora Jews have lobbied on its behalf.

As for the Armenians, many were in the Diaspora and the place that is today known as the Republic of Armenia was predominantly Muslim as late as the nineteenth century; also, they were a minority in every province they inhabited in the Ottoman Empire. The treatment of Christian Armenians in the latter area was of great interest to Western Europeans, but they were not willing to confront the Ottoman Empire, where large massacres of Armenians took place, or later Turkey to abide by the provisions of the Treaty of Sèvres or Communist Russia to respect the independence of a small state created in the midst of the First World War. Luckily, Soviet nationalist policies allowed for the creation of an Armenian republic that could legally secede years later with the breakup of the USSR and maintain its independence through the balancing of diplomatic relations and the political and economic assistance of Armenians in the Diaspora.

The Palestinian Arabs lost the first Arab-Israeli War in 1948-1949 to the Jewish *Yishuv* (community) in Palestine and large numbers either left voluntarily or were forced into exile; they refer to this event as the *Nakba* (catastrophe). While many Palestinians remain in refugee camps in neighboring countries, those same states and others in the Arab League as well as the Islamic world have supported their cause for statehood at least since the 1967 Arab-Israeli War. The Palestinians Liberation Organization engaged in both terrorism and later diplomacy to

establish political authority in the West Bank – its rival Hamas pushed them out of Gaza – as well as recognition as a state by a number of countries. While the United States does not, it agrees to the idea of a Palestinian state in principle.

As for the Kurds, far fewer live outside the core of the Middle East than is the case with Jews, Armenians and even Palestinians. In addition, while comprising a majority of the population in many of the regions in which they reside, they have been less successful in developing a unity of purpose. Furthermore, as minorities—albeit sizable—in four Middle Eastern states, they have historically for the most part sought autonomy rather independence in their respective countries, where they have been discriminated against or ignored; and, at times, in pursuit of assistance to seek the protection of or to fight for the political rights of their ethnic brethren and to promote regional economic development were exploited by neighboring states and the major powers. Indeed, a couple of well-known Middle East journalists described the Kurds in the early 1990s as having “no friends, but the mountains.”¹ However, especially since the Iraq War and the overthrow of Saddam Hussein in 2003, the United States has become an unconditional ally at least of the Kurds in Iraq; nevertheless, it seems doubtful at the moment that the Americans (or other Western countries) will ever recognize an independent Kurdish state in Iraq or actively encourage or help to promote autonomy for the Kurds in neighboring states. The United States’ alliance with Turkey and a lack of leverage with Iran precludes those developments.

The Kurdish Issue as a Part of the Cold War and Soviet-Western Relations

Throughout its history, the Soviet Union was sympathetic and at times supportive diplomatically, financially and/or logistically of the activities of insurgent nationalist groups that were directed against conservative pro-Western governments in the developing world. However, with the collapse of the briefly independent Mahabad Republic in Iran just after the end of the Second World War, the Kurdish movement was quiescent; when things became

¹ John Bulloch and Harvey Morris, *No Friends but the Mountains: The Tragic History of the Kurds* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1992).

very active once again first in 1960s in Iraq and in the 1980s in both Turkey and Iran, the Soviet Union had to balance its connections with the Kurds with the maintenance of productive political and economic ties with those Middle Eastern countries. Nevertheless, it could act through third countries such as Syria in the case of the Kurdistan Workers Party (PKK) of Turkey or as a conduit of information between the central government of Iraq and the Kurds in the northern part of that country.

The United States, on the other hand, preferred during the early part of the Cold War to maintain the status quo unless actions were directed against states in the Communist bloc or against governments elsewhere that challenged Western political and economic interests. When they did provide financial and military assistance to the Iraqi Kurds, such action was also taken largely through third countries such as Iran and Israel. During the Cold War, both superpowers were reluctant to assume direct accountability with regard to the Kurds though they provided noticeably direct assistance to their respective allies in the Middle East. With the 2003 Iraq War, the United States openly displayed its support for the Iraqi Kurds, but continued to insist on the territorial integrity of Iraq, a view shared by Russia and previously, during the Cold War, by its predecessor state.

Prior to the establishment of the Mahabad Republic in Iran, which existed for about a year before its demise in December 1946, in the same town bearing that state's name, a secret nationalist organization known as *Komala-i Khian-i Kurd* (the Committee of Kurdish Youth) was founded in August 1943. Komala subsequently set up chapters throughout Iran, Iraq and Turkey; however, in November 1945 it was dissolved and incorporated into the Kurdistan Democratic Party of Iran (KDPI) led by Qazi Muhammad, the preeminent political and religious leader in Mahabad, who shortly after became president of the breakaway republic.² However, the Soviets held most of the cards having occupied the northern half of Iran during the Second World War. They were more concerned primarily about acquiring oil inter-

² One of the best accounts on the Mahabad Republic remains Archie Roosevelt Jr., "The Kurdish Republic of Mahabad," *Middle East Journal*, Vol. 1, No. 3 (July 1947), pp. 247-269 which is reproduced in Gerard Chaliand, *A People without a Country: The Kurds and Kurdistan* (New York: Olive Branch Press, 1993), pp. 122-138.

ests in that country and secondarily the Azeris, who had established the Azerbaijan People's Government in Tabriz. When the U.S.S.R. agreed to withdraw its troops from Iran—which it completed by December 1946—in return for the establishment of a joint Soviet-Iranian oil company, a project later rejected by the Iranian parliament, the Mahabad Republic and its Azerbaijani counterpart were doomed and Qazi Muhammad was executed in March 1947.

Mulla Mustafa Barzani, on the other hand, who had sought refuge in Iran in October 1945 after an unsuccessful two-year revolt in Iraq and whose forces provided some of the Mahabad Republic's best troops, fled with his men—as did the Azerbaijani leadership—to the Soviet Union. It is interesting to note what the British Foreign Office thought about Barzani's (and his elder brother Sheikh Ahmad's) nationalist credentials; a confidential report written in 1946 states:

Their hostility of the 'Arab' government in Baghdad is fundamental and, in that sense, they may be regarded as champions of Kurdish nationalism; but it is a nationalism limited to achieving their personal ambitions rather than one inspired by wider patriotism. Their primary aim is to be left alone to exercise their feudal tyranny over as many of their countrymen as they can contrive to control.³

Barzani apparently transformed from a “pseudo-nationalist” to an ideologue in the eyes of West in a fairly short time. Shah Muhammad Reza Pahlavi had offered Barzani and the other tribal chiefs a general amnesty if they disarmed, but to the man who was described in a governmental report in 1951 as a Soviet “agent” by President Harry Truman's National Security Advisor and would be called the “Red Mullah” by the Western press during the early Cold War, such was not an option. Indeed, at that time, Barzani said “The Kurds have not been defeated by the Iranian army.... Rather it was the Soviet Union that was defeated by the United States and Great Britain.”⁴

³ Quoted in Bulloch and Morris, *No Friend but the Mountains*, p. 97.

⁴ Quoted in Jonathan C. Randal, *After Such Knowledge, What Forgiveness? My Encounters with Kurdistan* (New York: Farrar, Straus and

Barzani remained in exile in the Soviet Union—living in Baku, Tashkent and finally Moscow—from June 1947 until October 1958 (a few months after the Iraqi Revolution), when he returned to Iraqi Kurdistan. Journalist Quil Lawrence remarks that Barzani’s time in the Soviet Union “seemed to disabuse him of any socialist leanings he had.”⁵ And afterwards, he insistently told Western visitors “I am not a Communist. When I sought asylum in Russia I had no choice.”⁶ Indeed, Barzani refused to establish a Kurdish government-in-exile in 1950 and according to Jalal Talabani, who would split from Barzani’s Kurdistan Democratic Party (KDP) in 1975 to establish the rival Patriotic Union of Kurdistan (PUK) in Damascus, had visited Barzani for the first time in Moscow in 1957 and found him to have no interest in Marxism.⁷ Yevgeny Primakov, a former Soviet journalist and academic who worked for the KGB and latter became foreign minister of Russia under Boris Yeltsin notes that Barzani, who lived in Soviet Union under the surname Mamedov, “took care not to advertise his presence” and that the “widespread rumor that Barzani was a general in the Soviet army is nothing but a lie.”⁸

As a journalist for *Pravda*, Primakov visited Barzani in Iraqi Kurdistan in 1966, 1968 and finally in early 1970, in the midst of an ongoing civil war between the Kurds and the government in Baghdad that began in 1961 and also involved Kurdish infighting. During the first trip, Barzani embraced him saying “The Soviet Union is like a father to me,” admitted dealing with Iran as it “was his only link with the outside world,” and during the course of discussions asserted “We do not want to secede from

Giroux, 1997), p. 132. “Red Mullah” and Soviet “agent” references are from p. 135.

⁵ Quil Lawrence, *Invisible Nation: How the Kurds’ Quest for Statehood is Shaping Iraq and the Middle East* (New York: Walker & Company, 2009), p. 18.

⁶ Quoted in Randal, *After Such Knowledge*, p. 135.

⁷ *Ibid.*

⁸ Yevgeny Primakov, *Russia and the Arabs: Behind the Scenes in the Middle East from the Cold War to the Present*, translated by Paul Gould (New York: Basic Books, 2009), p. 326. Barzani told him about a photograph of the Kurdish leader in a Soviet general’s uniform that fell into the hands of British intelligence, but that the uniform was purchased innocently at *Voentorg*, a military department store.

Iraq. This is our country. But in that country, Kurds should enjoy all the same rights as the Arabs. That is what we are fighting for.”⁹

On March 11, 1970, a deal was struck between the Kurds and Iraqi government led by President Ahmad Hassan al-Bakr that would allow for Kurdish autonomy, but real power was slowly shifting to his vice president, Saddam Hussein, who had personally negotiated the agreement with the Kurds. Neither side trusted one another nor were they acting in good faith to implement their promises: The Iraqi government took measures to insure Arab control of Kirkuk and the Kurds refused to close the border with Iran.¹⁰ In terms of foreign relations, the Soviet Union and Iraq signed a treaty of friendship providing for cooperation in political, economic and military matters in April 1972, while Barzani moved closer to the United States, Iran and Israel. Such developments greatly concerned the Kremlin, and Primakov visited Barzani once more in January 1973 at the request of Saddam Hussein. When asked by the Soviet emissary about “the nature of his relations with the shah,” Barzani replied: “I knocked on one door, asking for bread, and was turned away [a reference to Baghdad]. What am I supposed to do, starve to death? So I knocked on another door. Who’s to blame? Me or the one that turned me away?”¹¹

However, Barzani had no faith in Iran. He stated to Edmund Ghareeb in an interview in 1976: “We wanted American guarantees. We never trusted the Shah. Without American promises we wouldn’t have acted the way we did.”¹² In fact, *New York Times* reporter Dana Adams Schmidt asserts that fourteen years earlier, Barzani told him: “Let the Americans give us military aid, openly or secretly, so that we can become truly autonomous, and we will become your loyal partners in the Middle East.”¹³

⁹ Quoted in *Ibid.* pp. 329-330.

¹⁰ David McDowall, *A Modern History of the Kurds* (London: I.B. Tauris, 2004), pp. 327-330.

¹¹ Quoted in *Ibid.* p. 336.

¹² Quoted in Edmund Ghareeb, *The Kurdish Question in Iraq* (Syracuse, N.Y.: Syracuse University Press, 1981), p. 140.

¹³ Quoted in Dana Adams Schmidt, “The Kurdish Insurgency,” *Strategic Review*, Vol. 2, No. 3 (Summer 1974), p. 54; as cited in Michael M.

Yet the United States was unreceptive until May 1972 as according to the *Pike Report*—named for the head of the special committee on intelligence, U.S. congressman Otis G. Pike of New York—on clandestine activities of the U.S. Central Intelligence Agency (CIA), extracts of which were published in the *Village Voice* in February 1976, it “might ... provide the Soviet Union with an opportunity to make trouble [for our allies],” meaning Turkey and Iran.¹⁴

Given the changing situation in the Middle East, in the words of the Pike Report, National Security Advisor and later Secretary of State, Henry Kissinger saw the operation to assist the Kurds as “merely an instrument to dissuade Iraq from any international adventurism,” while the Shah viewed it “as a card to be played in the contest with his neighbors.”¹⁵ President Richard Nixon approved a plan that secretly provided \$16 million in arms and cash to Barzani, a small but symbolic sum compared to the Iranian investment.¹⁶ Arms supplied to the Kurds included Russian and Chinese “rifles, automatic weapons, some out-of-date anti-aircraft guns and low-power artillery” captured by the Israelis from the Arabs during the 1967 War.¹⁷ Interestingly, according to Trita Parsi, the CIA and the State Department originally had misgivings about U.S. participation as “the Kurds would inevitably be betrayed by Tehran.”¹⁸

And such became the case when Iran signed the Algiers Accord in March 1975 with Iraq abruptly ending its support of the Kurds in return for an equitable settlement of the two countries’ common Shatt al-Arab waterway border. With oil prices on the rise following the 1973 Arab-Israeli War, both countries wanted to avoid a direct conflict that might cause damage to their fields

Gunter, *The Kurds of Iraq: Tragedy and Hope* (New York: St. Martin’s Press, 1992), p. 26.

¹⁴ Quoted in Ismet Sheriff Vanly, “Kurdistan in Iraq” in Chaliand, *People without a Country*, p. 169.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*

¹⁶ Nader Entessar, *Kurdish Politics in the Middle East* (Lanham, MD: Lexington Books, 2010), p. 163.

¹⁷ Vanly, “Kurdistan in Iraq,” p. 170; and Ghareeb, *Kurdish Question in Iraq*, p. 140.

¹⁸ Trita Parsi, *Treacherous Alliance: The Secret Dealings of Israel, Iran, and the U.S.* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2007), pp. 53-54.

and to improve their respective relations with countries in the Arab world.¹⁹ Shortly after, Barzani sent a frantic message to Kissinger reminding the secretary of state of the U.S. promises of support despite Iran's action, for which he never received a reply. When CIA Director William Colby followed up on Barzani's appeal, he was informed by Kissinger that "secret service operations are not missionary work."²⁰ Barzani and many of his *Peshmerga* fighters fled to Iran, but Barzani died of cancer in the United States in 1979. For decades, his son Massoud refused to meet with Kissinger, who because of his "betrayal ... made him one of the greatest villains in Kurdish history."²¹

When the United States became involved with Kurds once again, the Cold War was coming to an end; in April 1991, following the Gulf War—together with Britain and France—the United States created a safe haven for the Kurds in northern Iraq. Together with Saddam Hussein's subsequent decision to pull out of the region in October 1991, the United States "unwittingly became the midwife to a de facto Kurdish state, something it certainly never desired." For the next twelve years "American jets overhead [to enforce a no-fly zone] protected the Kurds from their exterior enemies—Iraq, Turkey and Iran. But who would protect the Kurds from one another?"²²

The Kurdish Issue and the Arab-Israeli Conflict

Since its establishment in 1948, Israel has subscribed to the old proverb "The enemy of my enemy is my friend." However, beyond that practical policy, many Israelis are sympathetic with the Kurdish people and their cause even if the government of Israel will not publicly support an independent Kurdish state, although such a development would obviously strengthen Israel's position vis à vis its Arab neighbors. However, it would irreparably damage relations with Turkey and would be out of synch with the policies of the United States and its Western allies. Indeed, in its historical dealings with the Kurds Israel was careful to take

¹⁹ Michael B. Bishku, "Egyptian-Iranian Relations and the Politics of the Middle East during the Cold War," *Maghreb Review*, Vol. 36, No. 1 (2011), p. 13.

²⁰ From the *Pike Report* quoted in Vanly, "Kurdistan in Iraq," p. 174.

²¹ Lawrence, *Invisible Nation*, pp. 27 and 209-210.

²² *Ibid.* p. 62.

into consideration the interests of Shah Muhammad Reza Pahlavi's Iran and has avoided being overly critical of Turkey's treatment of its Kurdish population, even though Turkey, especially in recent years, has been outspoken in chastising the Jewish state over its policies towards the Palestinians.

While the Arab world has been generally unsympathetic to the plight of the Kurds, Israeli involvement with the latter until to the 2003 Iraq War was largely directed towards weakening Iraq's ability to militarily challenge Israel either directly or indirectly. Since the Iranian revolution Israeli involvement with the Iraqi Kurds has provided a way to keep an eye on developments in Iran, which has been more antagonistic toward the Jewish state than any Arab country since the 1993 Oslo Peace Accords between Israel and the Palestinians.

In July 1958, just days after the overthrow of the pro-Western Hashemite monarchy in Iraq, Israel's Prime Minister David Ben-Gurion wrote a letter to President Dwight Eisenhower in which he outlined what became known as the "Periphery Alliance":

Our object is the creation of a group of countries, not necessarily in formal and public alliance, which by mutual assistance and joint efforts, in political, economic and other fields, will be able to stand up steadfastly against Soviet expansion through [Egyptian President Gamal Abdel] Nasser.... [We] have begun to strengthen our links with four neighboring countries on the outer ring of the Middle East—Iran, Sudan, Ethiopia and Turkey.

Ben-Gurion continued:

I do not speak of a far-off vision.... But two things are necessary United States support—political, financial and moral; and the inculcation of a feeling in Iran, Turkey, Sudan and Ethiopia that our efforts in this direction enjoy the support of the United States.²³

While Sudan never joined, the other countries did and it was through the Shah's Iran that Israel would provide aid to the

²³ Ben-Gurion to Eisenhower, July 24, 1958, Eisenhower Papers, International Series, Box 35, Mid-East, July 1958, Eisenhower Library, Abilene, Kansas.

Kurds beginning perhaps as early as 1963,²⁴ but more likely 1965. (It is interesting to note that Edmund Ghareeb writing in the early 1980s, even after Prime Minister Menachim Begin revealed publicly that Israel had provided “money, arms and instructors,” stated that “Israeli support for the Kurds prior to 1972 is as difficult to document as U.S. aid.”)²⁵ Ben-Gurion’s official biographer Michael Bar-Zohar cites the memoirs of Meir Amit (the director of Mossad, 1963-1968): “At the end of 1965, our dream started to become a reality.”²⁶ The unbelievable happened. An official Israeli delegation settled in the camp of Mullah Mustafa Barzani.” In August 1965, the Israelis provided a training course for *Peshmerga* officers that lasted three months and was code-named *Marvad* (carpet). Besides providing military assistance, the Israelis set up a field hospital for the Kurds during the summer of 1966.²⁷ The Kurds also assisted 3,000 Iraqi Jews to escape, who eventually flew from Tehran to Tel Aviv.²⁸ While such operations had wide support in the intelligence community, at least one prominent Israeli Foreign Ministry official (Ezra Danin) reflected on his reservations years later:

It was clear to me that the assistance we gave the Kurdish fighters in Iraq could not but be interpreted as exploiting

²⁴ Benjamin Beit-Hallahmi, *The Israeli Connection: Who Israel Arms and Why* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1987), p. 19; citing Samuel Segev, *The Iranian Triangle* (Tel Aviv: Maariv, 1981) [Hebrew] claims that arms, ammunition and military advisors were channeled through Iran to the Kurds that year, but the English version of that book translated by Haim Watzman (New York: The Free Press, 1988) makes no such mention. Randal, *After Such Knowledge*, p. 190 remarks “A visiting foreign journalist reported mysterious airdrops of weapons as early as 1963.”

²⁵ Ghareeb, *Kurdish Question in Iraq*, p. 142.

²⁶ Quoted in Michael Bar-Zohar and Nissim Mishal, *Mossad: The Greatest Missions of the Israeli Secret Service* (New York: Harper-Collins Publishers, 2012), p. 160.

²⁷ Ian Black and Benny Morris, *Israel’s Secret Wars: A History of Israel’s Intelligence Services* (New York: Grove Weidenfeld, 1991), p. 184.

²⁸ Dan Raviv and Yossi Melman, *Every Spy a Prince: The Complete History of Israel’s Intelligence Community* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Company, 1990), p. 82.

the Kurdish tragedy for our own ends, even though the assistance itself was a noble contribution and despite the fact that Israel gained military advantages by tying the hands of a considerable part of the Iraqi army by forcing it to deal with the Kurdish problem.²⁹

Indeed, both sides received benefits from this alliance. The Israelis advised the Kurds on an important military victory at Mount Handrin in May 1966 routing an entire Iraqi brigade and helped to plan a Kurdish attack in March 1969 on Kirkuk's oil fields, which provided about 65 per cent of Iraq's production.³⁰ In return, the Kurds assisted in the defection of an Iraqi pilot and his MiG 21 in August 1966 by helping his family escape to Iran and kept the Iraqis busy militarily and unable to provide any significant help to the Arab effort in the 1967 War.³¹

As mentioned above, during the 1970s, Israel continued to support the Kurds in cooperation with the Shah's Iran, who abruptly ended assistance in March 1975 with the signing of the Algiers Accord. While the Shah reportedly told Uri Lubriani, the head of Israel's diplomatic mission in Tehran that that agreement was "not worth the paper it was written on," Israeli officials were stunned by the decision and felt betrayed; Eliezer Tsafir, the head of Mossad operations in Iraqi Kurdistan, wrote: "[The Shah] did what [British Prime Minister Neville] Chamberlain did with Hitler in abandoning Czechoslovakia."³²

While the Israelis had an affinity with the Kurds, they were sometimes perplexed with Barzani's behavior. According to Shimon Peres' official biographer, Matti Golan, during one of his visits to Israel, the Kurdish leader reportedly suggested to Peres, who was minister of defense during the mid-1970s, that the Israelis participate in a joint campaign in which they would overthrow the government in Syria, while his forces would do

²⁹ Quoted in Black and Morris, *Israel's Secret Wars*, p. 185.

³⁰ Randal, *After Such Knowledge*, pp. 192 and 194; and Edgar O'Ballance, *The Kurdish Revolt, 1961-1970* (Hamden, CT: Archon Books, 1973), p. 137.

³¹ Black and Morris, *Israel's Secret Wars*, pp. 207-209; and Lawrence, *Invisible Nation*, p. 20.

³² Quoted in Parsi, *Treacherous Alliance*, pp. 57-58.

the same against Iraq.³³ This appeal may have been in reaction to the fact that Syria supported his then-rival Jalal Talabani's PUK, which was engaged in fighting Mustafa Barzani's KDP along with the Iraqi central government. Disagreements between the two can be traced back as early as 1964 when the younger Talabani made a high profile visit to Cairo, which Barzani viewed as undermining his political stature,³⁴ and may have contributed to his pursuit of relations with Israel at that time.³⁵ Given the secretiveness surrounding Israel's involvement with the Kurds it is quite possible that Mossad maintained its communications with Kurdish leaders throughout the following decades, but Israeli operations in Iraqi Kurdistan probably resumed by late 2003 or mid-2004.³⁶

Journalist Seymour Hersh in *Chain of Command* asserts that, besides training Kurdish commando units in Iraq, Israel was also engaged covertly in intelligence gathering in Kurdish areas of Iran and Syria. While such actions were regarded favorably by George W. Bush's administration, they had become an irritant to Turkey. One Turkish official reportedly told Hersh: "This is very dangerous for us, and for them, too. We do not want to see Iraq divided and we will not ignore it."³⁷ However, this did nothing to disturb Turkish-Israeli military ties—rather it was Israel's raid in May 2010 on the *Mavi Marmara* which sought to break the blockade of Gaza—as the Jewish state sold drones to the Turks that were used in intelligence gathering against the PKK. As for the Iraqi Kurds, Falah Mustafa Bakir, the head of the Kurdistan Regional Government's (KRG) department of foreign relations, said during an interview in October 2010: "We have no problems with Israel. They have not harmed us. We can't be hating them because the Arabs hate them." He continued, "We have been called 'the second Israel.' We cite Israel as

³³ Matti Golan, *The Road to Peace: A Biography of Shimon Peres*, Translated by Akiva Ron (New York: Warner Books, 1989), p. 118.

³⁴ McDowall, *A Modern History of the Kurds*, p. 315.

³⁵ Randal, *After Such Knowledge*, pp. 195-196.

³⁶ Seymour Hersh, *Chain of Command: The Road from 9/11 to Abu Ghraib* (New York: HarperCollins Publishers, 2004), pp. 353 and 357.

³⁷ Quoted in Ibid. p. 359.

a democracy in the Middle East.”³⁸ In another interview three years earlier, Massoud Barzani declared that “If an Israeli embassy were opened in Baghdad, we would no doubt open an Israeli consulate in Erbil.”³⁹

The Kurdish Issue in Relations between Turkey, Iran, Iraq and Syria

Historically, these four Middle Eastern countries have regarded Kurdish internal autonomy as posing a threat to their own nationalist ideals and territorial integrity. However, at the same time, they have supported to varying degrees Kurdish activities detrimental to their neighbors’ interests if it suited their respective political aims and/or economic interests. All of these countries oppose the idea of an independent Kurdish state in any territorial form as do members of the Arab League and the Organization of the Islamic Conference (OIC); however, respect for political and cultural rights is another matter and probably would be acceptable to countries in both those political organizations.

Throughout much of the Cold War, Iran was a member of the pro-Western Central Treaty Organization (Cento) as was Turkey, which continues to be a member of the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO). Therefore, both countries had a common interest in cooperating on the Kurdish issue. Turkey and the Islamic Republic have a mutual need to deal with each other economically and therefore avoid tensions on their common border. Iran under the rule of the Shah had major disagreements with Iraq over boundaries and foreign policy, while under the Islamic Republic, until the 2003 Iraq War and the overthrow of Saddam Hussein’s Baathist regime, the issues of contention had been Iraq’s treatment of its majority Shi’a Muslims and its foreign policy. Both have employed Kurdish groups in military actions against each other.

While Turkey and Iraq have disagreed at times on foreign policy matters, since the overthrow of the Iraqi monarchy in

³⁸ Quoted in James Kirchick, “Another Israel: Kurds and Jews Share a Similar History and a Common Enemy,” *Tablet*, October 18, 2010. Available at:

<http://www.tabletmag.com/jewish-news-and-politics/47651/another-israel>, accessed November 16, 2012.

³⁹ Quoted in *Ibid.*

1958, they have had common interests in maintaining economic ties and in cooperating on the Kurdish issue, at least until the 2003 Iraq War. As for Syria, ruled by the Alawite Assad family since 1970, it has had many political problems with both Turkey—and its periodic close cooperation with Israel—and fellow Baathist Iraq, while becoming an ally of the Islamic Republic of Iran. Until recently, its Kurdish population has been the most quiescent of the four Middle Eastern neighbors, and for many years Syria provided assistance to the PKK in its conflict with Turkey.

Until the PKK began its armed struggle in Turkey in 1984, most Kurdish military action during the Cold War was confined to Iraq. In 1963, the Syrian government sent airplanes and troops to assist Iraq, also under Baathist rule, against the Kurds;⁴⁰ when the Baathists returned to power in Iraq in 1968, following an ideological split two years earlier between the Syrian and Iraqi branches, things were different, especially when Hafiz al-Assad rose to power in 1970. His personal rivalry with Saddam Hussein turned antagonistic when Syria developed an alliance with the Islamic Republic of Iran.⁴¹ In 1980, after Iraq initiated its eight-year war with Iran, both countries attempted to use the Kurds to their own advantage.

Meanwhile, Turkey remained neutral, but given the fact that Syria shut down their oil pipeline and closed their border with Iraq, the latter became dependent upon the Turkish pipeline as its sole outlet for oil exports and on land routes through Turkey for a large share of its imports. Turkey and Iraq commenced to operate closely against their respective Kurdish adversaries, with Turkish forces launching a large number of military operations beginning in 1983 in northern Iraq against the PKK; that organization had been established in 1978 and its leader, Abdullah Öcalan fled to Syria the following year.

The Syrians allowed the PKK to establish training camps in Lebanon's Beqaa Valley and other territory in that country under their control, while their intelligence service provided money, arms, logistical assistance and false identification papers to PKK

⁴⁰ Bulloch and Morris, *No Friends but the Mountains*, p. 213.

⁴¹ Saïd K. Aburish, *Saddam Hussein: The Politics of Revenge* (New York: Bloomsbury Publishing, 2000), p. 167.

operatives.⁴² (Iran also assisted the PKK, but its involvement was less noticeable.) Part of Syria's motivation was connected to disputes over water usage on the Tigris and Euphrates River system, which originates in Turkey in a heavily Kurdish-populated area that extends over the border into northern parts of Syria (and Iraq). There was also resentment over Turkey's annexation of Hatay (Alexandretta) prior to the Second World War.

In October 1998, Syria in the face of what was described as a "strategic partnership" between Turkey and Israel signed the Adana Agreement recognizing the PKK as a terrorist organization and ending all assistance; Öcalan, who had already been expelled from Syrian territory, unsuccessfully sought asylum, but was captured in Kenya the following year and has been in prison in Turkey since then.⁴³ A few months later, the PKK established a unilateral ceasefire that was rescinded in 2004. Syria abided by its agreement, but is now engaged in civil war jeopardizing Turkey's security. Turkish-Iraqi relations are strained as Iraq's prime minister Nuri al-Maliki is sympathetic to Bashir al-Assad staying in power in Damascus while Turkey supports the opposition. Meanwhile, Turkey has developed political and economic ties with the KRG even establishing a consulate in Erbil in 2010. Iran is severely weakened by economic sanctions. The political climate is such that none of the Middle Eastern countries with sizable Kurdish populations neither can nor want to use the Kurds as an instrument of foreign policy.

Conclusion

Over the last few decades, the Kurdish nationalist organizations of Iraq, Iran and Turkey have operated in the same fashion as the Israelis—"The enemy of my enemy is my friend." Mulla Mustafa Barzani alone, according to Quil Lawrence, "may hold the dubious record for the number of countries he took aid from ... the Soviets, the government in Baghdad, the shah of Iran, the Israelis, the Jordanians, the British and finally the Americans."⁴⁴ At times afterwards, both Massoud Barzani and Jalal Talabani

⁴² Michael M. Gunter, *The Kurds and the Future of Turkey* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1997), pp. 93-94.

⁴³ Michael B. Bishku, "Turkish-Syrian Relations: A Checkered History," *Middle East Policy*, Vol. 19, No. 3 (Fall 2012), pp. 43-46.

⁴⁴ Lawrence, *Invisible Nation*, p. 15.

cooperated with the Islamic Republic, while the latter received assistance from Syria before Mustafa Barzani's death. Following the Gulf War in 1992, both the KDP and the PUK helped Turkey against the Syrian-supported PKK and the following year the Turks provided the KRG in Erbil with financial assistance.⁴⁵ Such maneuverings and a longstanding dream of autonomy have sustained the Kurdish nationalist movements for many years throughout the changing geopolitics of the Middle East. However, the possibility of a de jure independent state of Kurdistan, whether in Iraq alone or including territory in neighboring countries may be an evolving development, especially with the ongoing civil war in Syria.

⁴⁵ McDowall, *A Modern History of the Kurds*, p. 384.