

# The Five Stages of American Foreign Policy towards the Kurds

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## ABSTRACT

*One might discern five stages of American foreign policy involvement with the Kurds. The first brief stage followed World War I and American president Woodrow Wilson's famous Fourteen Points, the twelfth of which held out the possibility of Kurdish independence. The second stage occurred during the time of American support for Mulla Mustafa Barzani's revolt in Iraq during the early 1970s, and ended when U.S. and Iranian aid for this revolt were terminated in 1975 after a deal with Saddam Hussein was reached. The third stage began with the Gulf War in 1991 and led to the creation of the Kurdistan Regional Government (KRG) for the "good" Kurds in northern Iraq. The fourth stage began with the second American war against Saddam Hussein in 2003, which led to what might be called the stage of a de facto U.S.-KRG alliance, and continues today. The fifth or PKK stage overlaps with the third and fourth stages and concerns U.S. support for its NATO ally Turkey against the "bad" Kurds of the PKK.*

The United States does not really have any grand foreign policy strategy towards the Kurds because they live in four separate states (Turkey, Iraq, Iran, and Syria), each one of which requires its own separate considerations. What is more, the states in which the Kurds live are more important for U.S. foreign policy than the Kurds themselves, and the Kurds cause problems for the United States when dealing with these more important states. Nevertheless, given its interest in Middle East stability as well as human rights, the United States has come to accept that it does owe the Kurds a certain amount of attention and even protection. This is true especially in Iraq, given that the Iraqi Kurds supported the United States in the 2003 war against Saddam Hussein when states such as Turkey did not.

Despite a certain degree of indebtedness, however, the United States opposes independence for the Iraqi Kurds because of concerns that this would lead to the partition and disso-

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The United States does tentatively support the Kurdistan Regional Government (KRG) as a way to maintain the political unity of Iraq and satisfy the Kurds

lution of Iraq and thus to greater instability in the Middle East. The United States' position on this point is all the more adamant given the attitudes of other states such as Turkey and the various Arab governments, all of which oppose Kurdish independence as a threat to their own territorial integrity. The United States does

tentatively support the Kurdistan Regional Government (KRG) as a way to maintain the political unity of Iraq and satisfy the Kurds. This position, of course, can be inherently contradictory and is a very fine policy line to implement successfully.

Many observers emphasize how much the Iraqi Kurds love the Americans. This needs to be qualified because the Kurds remember that they were twice betrayed by the United States, once in 1975 and again in 1991, and therefore might be again. Indeed, some Kurds began to fear the worst when the Baker-Hamilton *Iraq Study Group Report* of December 2006 suggested that the hard-won Kurdish federal state might have to be sacrificed to the perceived need for a reestablished centralized Iraqi state.<sup>1</sup> Fortunately, for the Kurds, the Report's recommendations were not adopted by the United States, but their mere consideration illustrated how tenuous future U.S. support might be.

On the other hand, U.S. secretary of defense Robert Gates acknowledged in a meeting on December 11, 2009 with KRG president Massoud Barzani that Kurdish cooperation is indispensable for the successful implementation of security and strategic framework agreements between the United States and Iraq, and essential for a unified and peaceful Iraq.<sup>2</sup> Even more importantly, the U.S. Obama administration a few days later publicly committed itself to broker disputes between the KRG and the Baghdad government, and also to help resolve the Kirkuk issue since the Kurds had agreed to accept the new Iraqi election law that slightly reduced the number of seats the KRG would have in the new Iraqi parliament to be elected in March 2010.<sup>3</sup>

While the United States sees the KRG as a friend and de facto ally, however, it does not consider the KRG as important an ally as Turkey. Therefore, the message is clear. The KRG must get along with Turkey or else, in a showdown between the two, the KRG will not be able to count on U.S. support. Fortunately for the Iraqi Kurds, Turkey's new zero-problems with neighbors' foreign policy means that Turkey is beginning to accept the KRG politically as a friend rather than a security threat as had been the earlier view. Clearly, however, the Kurdish question holds

only a minor position of importance in the national security of the United States and the democratization process it pursues in the Middle East.

Given its relatively weak hand compared to Turkey and the Baghdad government, the KRG lobby in the United States has worked hard to make a good impression and has achieved some successes. Qubad Talabani, the KRG representative in the United States, makes an excellent impression and has been able to gain much goodwill for the Kurds. On the other hand, rightly or wrongly, the Turkish Kurds are often perceived in the United States as too closely tied to the PKK, which the U.S. considers to be a terrorist organization. As a result, the cause of the Turkish Kurds in the United States has not prospered as well as that of their brothers and sisters to the south. This is all the more so given the longstanding U.S. alliance with Turkey. With this brief overview and its caveats in mind, the purpose of this article is to analyze what might be called the five stages of American foreign policy towards the Kurds.<sup>4</sup>

### First Stage

American foreign policy involvement with the Kurds dates back to World War I and President Woodrow Wilson's famous Fourteen Points, the twelfth of which concerned a forlorn promise of "autonomy" for "the other nationalities [of the Ottoman Empire] which are now under Turkish rule."<sup>5</sup> Resurgent Kemalist Turkey's successful struggle to regain its territorial integrity,<sup>6</sup> and British Iraq's decision to maintain control over the oil-rich Kurdish region of northern Iraq known as the Mosul *vilayet*, however, ended nascent Kurdish hopes for independence or even some type of autonomy.<sup>7</sup> The first brief Wilsonian stage or prelude to American foreign policy toward the Kurds had ended.

### Second Stage

A half century passed before American foreign policy again became involved with the Kurds. Because of the North Atlantic Treaty Alliance (NATO), the United States supported the position of the Turkish government on the Kurdish issue in that state. This was to deny Kurdish demands for minority rights as they might escalate into further demands that would threaten Turkish territorial integrity.<sup>8</sup> Thus, the Kurds who supported the Kurdistan Workers Party (PKK) in Turkey became "bad Kurds" from the point of view of American foreign policy.<sup>9</sup>

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In Iraq, however, in what might be called the second or “Barzani” stage in American foreign policy toward the Kurds, the United States encouraged and to a certain extent even supported Mulla Mustafa Barzani’s revolt against Iraq during the early 1970s.<sup>10</sup> Thus, the Iraqi Kurds became the “good Kurds” from the point of view of American foreign policy. The United States pursued this policy for several reasons: (1) As a favor to its then-ally, Shah-ruled Iran; (2) As a ploy during the Cold War as Iraq was seen as an ally of the Soviet Union; (3) As a means to relieve pressure on Israel so Iraq would not join some future Arab attack on the Jewish state; and (4) as a means to possibly satisfy its own need for Middle East oil since Barzani had promised that the United States could look to a friend in OPEC once oil-rich Kurdistan had achieved independence.

Accordingly, U.S. president Richard Nixon and his national security advisor and later secretary of state Henry Kissinger first encouraged the Iraqi Kurds to revolt against Baghdad, but then with their ally Iran double-crossed the Kurds when the Shah decided to make a deal with Saddam Hussein. To rationalize U.S. actions, Kissinger argued that the “benefit of Nixon’s Kurdish decision was apparent in just over a year: Only one Iraqi division was available to participate in the October 1973 Middle East War.”<sup>11</sup> Cynically, he also declaimed that “covert action should not be confused with missionary work.”<sup>12</sup>

Barzani himself died a broken man four years later in U.S. exile as an unwanted ward of the CIA.<sup>13</sup> Years later Jonathan Randal argued that Barzani’s son and eventual successor Massoud Barzani had “never forgotten Kissinger’s treachery in 1975, had never totally recovered from the humiliation of his years of enforced exile, which he blamed on the United States . . . [and] never stopped worrying about American constancy.”<sup>14</sup> Massoud Barzani himself explained that “we have had bitter experience with the U.S. government. . . . In 1975 . . . it changed its alliances purely in its own interest at the expense of our people’s suffering and plight.”<sup>15</sup>

More than a quarter of a century later, Kissinger revisited what the United States had done under his stewardship and explained that “saving the [Iraqi] Kurds [in 1975] would have required the opening of a new front in inhospitable mountains close to the Soviet border.”<sup>16</sup> Thus, “we did not have the option of overt support in a war so logistically difficult, so remote, and so incomprehensible to the American public.” Moreover, “the Shah had made the decision, and we had neither the plausible arguments nor strategies to dissuade him.” Kissinger then concluded: “As a case study, the Kurdish tragedy provides material for a variety of conclusions: the need to clarify objectives at the outset; the importance of relating goals to available means; the need to review an operation periodically; and the

importance of coherence among allies.” In other words the Iraqi Kurds had played the role of dispensable pawns for American foreign policy.

### Third Stage

The third stage of American foreign policy toward the Kurds began with the Gulf War in 1991 and lasted until the U.S. attack on Iraq in March 2003. This third stage led to the creation of the Kurdistan Regional Government (KRG), the closest approximation of an independent Kurdish state in modern times. As the Iraqi military was being ousted from Kuwait, U.S. president George H.W. Bush encouraged “the Iraqi people to take matters into their own hands—to force Saddam Hussein, the dictator, to step aside”.<sup>17</sup> Despite initial successes, however, neither the Iraqi Shiites nor the Kurds proved able to cope with Saddam Hussein’s stronger military. As Saddam Hussein began to put the Kurdish rebellion down, the two Iraqi Kurdish leaders—Massoud Barzani of the Kurdistan Democratic Party (KDP) and Jalal Talabani of the Patriotic Union of Kurdistan (PUK)—appealed to Bush for help by reminding him: “You personally called upon the Iraqi people to rise up against Saddam Hussein’s brutal dictatorship.”<sup>18</sup>

For a variety of reasons, however, the United States decided not to intervene in the internal Iraqi strife. Doing so could lead, it was feared, to an unwanted, protracted U.S. occupation that would be politically unpopular in the United States, to an unstable government in Iraq, or even “Lebanonization” of the country and destabilization of the Middle East. Furthermore, the United States also concluded that Saddam Hussein could win. To support the Kurds against him might require an unwanted, permanent American commitment. Possibly too, the memory of over-stepping itself in the Korean War by trying to totally replace the North Korean regime after initially liberating South Korea, also influenced American thinking. In addition, Kurdish success in Iraq might provoke Kurdish uprisings in Turkey, Syria, or Iran, states whose cooperation the United States felt it needed. (All of these problems, of course, came back to haunt the United States after its second war against Saddam Hussein in 2003 under the second President Bush.) A U.S. Senate Foreign Relations staff report written by Peter Galbraith and issued a month after Saddam Hussein had put down the rebellion confirmed that the United States “continued to see the opposition in caricature” and feared that the Kurds would seek a separate state and that the Shiites wanted an Iranian-style republic.<sup>19</sup>

Once it became clear the United States was not going to intervene in 1991, the uneven struggle turned into a rout and some 1.5 million Kurdish refugees fled to the Iranian and Turkish frontiers where they faced death from the hostile

climate and lack of provisions. This refugee dilemma quickly created a disastrous political problem for everyone involved, including the United States, Turkey, and Iran. Thus, after much soul searching, the United States reversed itself and took several steps to protect the Kurds. United Nations Security Council Resolution 688 of April 5, 1991 condemned “the repression of the Iraqi civilian population . . . in Kurdish populated areas” and demanded “that Iraq . . . immediately end this repression.” Under the aegis of Operation Provide Comfort (OPC) and a no-fly zone imposed against Baghdad, the Kurds were able to return to their homes in northern Iraq where they began to build a fledgling de facto state and government, which soon became today’s KRG.

The continuance of OPC became a major political issue in Turkey, however, because many Turks believed it was facilitating the vacuum of authority in northern Iraq that enabled the PKK to enjoy sanctuaries there. Some even argued that OPC was the opening salvo of a new Treaty of Sevres (1920) that would lead to the creation of a Kurdish state in northern Iraq as almost occurred following World War I. Thus, went the argument, Turkey was facilitating its own demise by housing OPC. This argument, of course, became even more relevant when the next stage of American foreign policy toward the Kurds began in 2003.

To abandon OPC, however, would alienate Washington and strip Ankara of important influence over the course of events. OPC, for example, enabled Turkey to launch military strikes into Iraqi Kurdistan against the PKK at almost any time. If the United States refused to allow such Turkish incursions, Turkey could threaten to withdraw its permission for OPC. Although it might have seemed ironic that an operation that was supposed to protect the Iraqi Kurds was allowing Turkey to attack the Turkish Kurds as well as inflict collateral damage on the hosting Iraqi Kurds, such was the logic of the Kurdish imbroglio and part of the dilemma for America foreign policy.

Moreover, in May 1994, the two main Iraqi Kurdish parties—Barzani’s KDP and Talabani’s PUK—fell into a civil war that immensely complicated American foreign policy toward them. How could the United States help and protect the Iraqi Kurds when they were busy killing themselves? In late January 1995, U.S. president Bill Clinton sent a message to both Barzani and Talabani in which he warned: “We will no longer cooperate with the other countries to maintain security in the region if the clashes continue.”<sup>20</sup>

The situation was then allowed to drift with the United States declining to try harder to effect a cease-fire between the Iraqi Kurds or to contribute a mere \$2

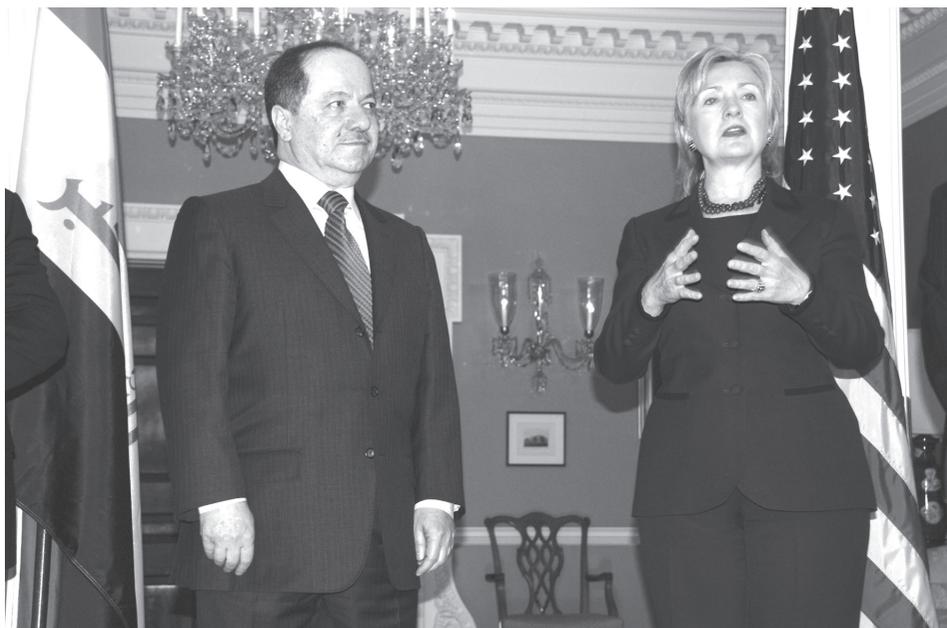


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million to an international mediation force that might have forestalled the next round of fighting.<sup>21</sup> In August 1996, a sudden renewal of the intra-Kurdish struggle seemed likely to result in a PUK victory, given arms it had received from Iran. Desperate, Barzani did the unthinkable and invited Saddam Hussein in to help him against Talabani.

How could the United States enforce the no-fly zone against Saddam Hussein when the very people it was supposed to be protecting had invited Saddam Hussein in? Halfheartedly, the United States responded by bombing a few meaningless targets south of Baghdad. Saddam Hussein used the few hours he had to capture and execute some 96 Iraqis who had defected to the U.S.-financed Iraqi opposition, the Iraqi National Congress (INC). A senior INC official claimed: “in two hours, the Iraqi opposition [had] lost its entire infrastructure,”<sup>22</sup> while a U.S. official concluded, “our entire covert program has gone to hell.”<sup>23</sup>

New peace initiatives early the next year, however, finally led to significant developments and renewed attempts by the United States to bring the Iraqi Kurds together. Following a successful high-level meeting at the end of August 1998 between KDP officials and Talabani, in early September 1998 first Barzani and

then Talabani journeyed to Washington. After separate individual meetings with U.S. state department officials, the two Iraqi Kurdish leaders finally met personally for the first time since the summer of 1994, when their civil war had begun. After two days of lengthy sessions, they reached a tentative agreement to permanently end their fighting and establish peace.

In announcing this pact, U.S. secretary of state Madeleine Albright also made general promises of American support for the Iraqi Kurds—contingent upon their continuing unity—by declaring, “the United States will decide how and when to respond to Baghdad’s actions based on the threat they pose to Iraq’s neighbors, to regional security, to vital U.S. interests and to the Iraqi people, including those in the north.”<sup>24</sup> President Clinton repeated Albright’s lukewarm assurances in letters to Congress on November 6, 1998, and again on May 19, 1999.<sup>25</sup> Although these pronouncements did not constitute an ironclad agreement of protection, they were—in contrast to Nixon’s and Kissinger’s covert and unkept promises of a quarter of a century earlier—public declarations. Thus, they could not be so cavalierly ignored.

#### **Fourth Stage**

The fourth stage of American foreign policy toward the Kurds began with the U.S. war to remove Saddam Hussein from power in March 2003 and continues to the present (2011). This most recent period might also be called the *de facto* U.S.-KRG alliance stage. Until this fourth stage, Turkey’s opposition to the Kurdish identity and Turkey’s strong strategic alliance with the United States since the days of the Truman Doctrine first promulgated in 1947, had arguably been two of the main reasons for the inability of the Kurds to create any type of independent state in the modern Middle East. Although the United States had always paid lip service to the idea of Kurdish rights, whenever it was necessary to make a choice, the United States always backed its strategic NATO ally Turkey on the Kurdish issue.

Only when the United States perceived the Iraqi Kurds to be a useful foil against Saddam Hussein did Washington begin to take a partially pro-Kurdish position, at least towards the Iraqi Kurds. However, this U.S. support for the Iraqi Kurds did not prohibit Turkey from unilaterally intervening into northern Iraq in pursuit of the PKK during the 1980s and 1990s. However, U.S. support for the developing KRG, the disagreements over sanctions against Saddam Hussein’s Iraq, and the future of Iraq itself gradually helped begin to fray the longstanding U.S.-Turkish alliance.

The U.S. war to remove Saddam Hussein from power in 2003 furthered this process and even partially reversed alliance partners. For the first time since the

creation of Iraq, the Iraqi Kurds now—at least for the present—have a powerful ally in the United States. This ironic situation was brought about by Turkey refusing to allow the United States to use its territory as a base for a northern front to attack Saddam Hussein's Iraq in March 2003 during the second Gulf War. Courtesy of Turkey, the Iraqi Kurds suddenly were thrust into the role of U.S. ally, a novel position they eagerly and successfully assumed. Quickly, the Iraqi Kurds occupied the oil-rich Kirkuk and Mosul areas which would have been unthinkable encroachments upon Turkish “red lines” had Turkey anchored the northern front. What is more, Turkey had no choice but to acquiesce in the Iraqi Kurdish moves.

The new situation was further illustrated in July 2003 when the United States apprehended eleven Turkish commandos in the Iraqi Kurdish city of Sulaymaniya who were apparently seeking to carry out acts intended to destabilize the de facto Kurdish government in northern Iraq. Previously, as the strategic ally of the United States, Turkey had had *carte blanche* to do practically anything it wanted to in northern Iraq. No longer was this true. The “Sulaymaniya incident” caused what one high-ranking Turkish general called the “worst crisis of confidence”<sup>26</sup> in US-Turkish relations since the creation of the NATO alliance. It also illustrated the extent to which the United States was willing to protect the Iraqi Kurds from unwanted Turkish interference. What is more, Washington now began to reject Turkish proposals that either the United States eliminate the PKK guerrillas holed up in northern Iraq or permit the Turkish army to do so. Previously, the Turkish army had entered northern Iraq any time it desired in pursuit of the PKK.

Accordingly, many observers now stress how the Iraqi Kurds love the Americans. Yes, but. Although the United States is currently widely popular in the KRG, it is with a background caveat reminding all that they were betrayed twice before by the United States in 1975 and again in 1991. Indeed, as already mentioned, some Kurds began to fear the worst when the Iraq Study Group Report—co-authored by former U.S. secretary of state James A. Baker III and former U.S. representative Lee H. Hamilton and released in December 2006—suggested that the hard-won KRG federal state might have to be sacrificed to the perceived need for a reestablished centralized Iraqi state.<sup>27</sup> Fortunately, for the KRG, U.S. president George W. Bush did not adopt these recommendations, but their mere broaching showed how tenuous future U.S. support might be.

Nevertheless, the KRG leadership maintains that it received renewed U.S. guarantees of protection in December 2009. At a meeting in Irbil between KRG president Massoud Barzani and U.S. secretary of defense Robert Gates, the latter assured the Iraqi Kurds by declaring: “We recognize the concerns that you have

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about the future of your people and we will help you to ensure a prosperous and peaceful Iraq. We will not abandon you.”<sup>28</sup> In addition, Gates made the following three commitments on behalf of the U.S.: (1) To use our influence to ensure that the outstanding disputes

between the KRG and the Iraqi Government, including the Kirkuk dispute and other disputed areas and the sharing of oil revenues, are resolved based on the Iraqi Constitution and Article 140. (2) To continue with our military efforts with the Peshmerga (KRG defense forces) as well as with the Iraqi Army and security forces within the framework of our joint security architecture. (3) To offer our support and assistance for a census to be conducted in Iraq next year.<sup>29</sup>

A few days later, the Obama administration gave the Iraqi Kurds what they maintained was an “historic”<sup>30</sup> commitment when it promised to broker disputes between them and the Baghdad government, and to give support to the Kurds in resolving the vexing issue of oil-rich Kirkuk.<sup>31</sup> This U.S. support came in return for the Iraqi Kurds agreeing to accept a new election law that would give them fewer seats in the new Iraqi parliament that was elected on March 7, 2010. Nevertheless, if the United States withdraws from Iraq as scheduled by the end of 2011, the KRG leadership must become particularly astute for the KRG to survive.

### The Fifth (PKK) Stage

Commencing a decade earlier and then overlapping the third and fourth stages analyzed above is what might be called the fifth or “PKK stage” of American foreign policy toward the Kurds. In contrast to its support for the “good” Iraqi Kurds and despite Turkish conspiracy theories to the contrary,<sup>32</sup> the United States has very strongly opposed the “bad” Kurds of the PKK. Turkey’s longtime and continuing geostrategically important position as a U.S. NATO ally is clearly the main reason for this situation. Other explanations include the U.S. fear of Islamic extremism and Turkey’s continuing alliance with Israel. As a constitutionally secular state, Turkey is seen as a bastion against Islamic extremism, while support for Israel remains a given for American foreign policy.

Although it continues to criticize Turkey in its annual human rights country reports,<sup>33</sup> the United States has also maintained that the PKK are “terrorists” who “frequently kill noncombatants, and target village officials, village guards, teachers and other perceived representatives of the state.”<sup>34</sup> “The PKK are terrorists. Turkey is going after terrorists. The PKK are indiscriminately killing their own people.

They are not supported by the majority of Kurds.”<sup>35</sup> Other U.S. officials claim that they have compiled a thick dossier on the PKK that includes murder, drug trafficking, extortion, robbery, and trafficking in illegal immigrants.<sup>36</sup> The U.S. State Department has also long had the PKK on its list of terrorist organizations, but never the KDP or PUK of the Iraqi Kurds.

U.S. support for Turkey on the Kurdish issue was amply illustrated by the help it gave Turkey to capture Abdullah Ocalan, the leader of the PKK. When Turkey forced Syria to finally expel Ocalan from his longtime sanctuary in that country in October 1998, the United States backed Turkey by sending a strongly worded letter to Syria regarding the situation.<sup>37</sup> After a short, surreptitious stay in Russia, Ocalan arrived in Italy where for a brief period it looked like he might be able to turn his military defeat into a political victory by having the European Union try him and thus also try Turkey.

Although the Italians and other Europeans such as the Germans initially appeared sympathetic, at this point the United States weighed in heavily by denouncing Ocalan in the strongest of terms as a terrorist. The United States also pressured Italy—and any other state tempted to offer the PKK leader asylum and a platform from which to negotiate—to instead extradite him to Turkey for trial. An editorial from the U.S. State Department broadcast by the Voice of America (VOA) declared: “It is neither U.S. practice nor policy to provide an international platform from which terrorists can expound their views or try to justify their criminal actions. No one should doubt our views on Ocalan; the United States considers him a terrorist who should be brought to justice for his crimes.”<sup>38</sup>

As he flew from country to country, James Foley, the U.S. State Department representative, seemingly mocked Ocalan by joking: “I’d hate to be the pilot of that small plane.”<sup>39</sup> Desperate, Ocalan finally allowed the Greeks to take him to their embassy in Nairobi, Kenya, where U.S. intelligence agents had inundated the country following the U.S. embassy bombing there the previous summer. At this point American animus toward the PKK leader entered its final stage by providing Turkey with the technical intelligence to pinpoint his whereabouts and capture him. Mark Parris, the U.S. ambassador to Turkey, approvingly spoke of “Ocalan’s rendition,”<sup>40</sup> an archaic term referring to the surrender of a fugitive slave.

Although the U.S. war to overthrow Saddam Hussein in 2003 brought new tensions between the United States and Turkey over the Kurdish issue, more recently the United States has continued to support its longtime Turkish ally against the PKK now ensconced in the Kandil Mountains of the KRG. Late in 2007, for example, the United States began giving Turkey “actionable intelligence”<sup>41</sup> on the PKK’s

location. Then in February 2008, Turkey, armed with this intelligence, launched its first military incursion into northern Iraq against the PKK since the 1990s. As in earlier times, the United States did not object despite its de facto alliance with the KRG. In February 2010, U.S. secretary of defense Robert Gates indicated that the United States was seeking to determine whether it could offer Turkey even more help with equipment and intelligence to combat the PKK.<sup>42</sup> Turkey's much greater gravitas and value as a U.S. ally had inevitably begun to reassert itself.

## Conclusion

Given their division into four separate states (Turkey, Iraq, Iran, and Syria), the United States does not have any grand strategy toward the Kurds as each state requires its own unique considerations. Furthermore, the states in which the Kurds live are each more important to American foreign policy than the Kurds themselves. However, given its interest in Middle East stability and human rights, the United States has come to feel that it has a certain degree of responsibility toward the Kurds. Nevertheless, the United States opposes independence for them, because this would likely lead to the partition of the states in which they live and result in unwanted instability in the Middle East.

For the purposes of academic analysis, one might discern five stages of American foreign policy involvement with the Kurds. The first brief stage followed World War I and American president Woodrow Wilson's famous Fourteen Points, the twelfth of which held out the possibility of Kurdish independence from the Ottoman Empire. This first brief stage ended with the resurgence of Turkey under Atatürk. The second stage occurred during the time of American support for Mulla Mustafa Barzani's revolt in Iraq during the early 1970s, and ended when U.S. and Iranian aid for this revolt were terminated in 1975 after a deal with Saddam Hussein was reached. As Henry Kissinger infamously explained, "covert action should not be confused with missionary activity."

The third stage began with the Gulf War in 1991 and led to the creation of the Kurdistan Regional Government (KRG) for the "good" Kurds in northern Iraq. The fourth stage began with the second American war against Saddam Hussein in 2003, which led to what might be called the stage of a de facto U.S.-KRG alliance, and continues today. The fifth or PKK stage overlaps with the third and fourth stages and concerns U.S. support for its NATO ally Turkey against the "bad" Kurds of the PKK. During these last three stages, U.S.-Turkish relations have suffered given the U.S. support for the Iraqi Kurds, but Turkey's much greater importance as a U.S. ally has recently begun to reassert itself.

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