

Hakan Özoğlu

Molla Mustafa Barzani in the USA 1975-1979

The Copernicus Journal of Political Studies nr 2 (4), 203-210

2013

Artykuł został opracowany do udostępnienia w internecie przez Muzeum Historii Polski w ramach prac podejmowanych na rzecz zapewnienia otwartego, powszechnego i trwałego dostępu do polskiego dorobku naukowego i kulturalnego. Artykuł jest umieszczony w kolekcji cyfrowej bazhum.muzhp.pl, gromadzącej zawartość polskich czasopism humanistycznych i społecznych.

Tekst jest udostępniony do wykorzystania w ramach dozwolonego użytku.

Hakan Özoğlu

University of Central Florida, United States

MOLLA MUSTAFA BARZANI IN THE USA 1975–1979

ABSTRACT

The article presents the result of a research on the final years of Mulla Mustafa Barzani on the basis of US intelligence reports concluded in the late 1970s and declassified in 2006, as well as memoirs and articles by U.S. foreign officers. The author focuses on the documents prepared by the CIA in relation with the travel of Barzani to the U.S. for medical treatment. The selected material concerns issues such as: U.S. support for the last Kurdish uprising headed by Mustafa Barzani and its nature, Barzani's request from the U.S. after the Algiers Accord of 1975, behind-the-curtain negotiations regarding Barzani's travel to the U.S., and the restrictions imposed on him during his stay. The author also considers the possibilities connected with the phrase "requested asylum" used for Barzani's application to travel to the U.S.: from misinformation on the part of CIA officer, actually seeking refuge, to a political move aimed at enlisting U.S. support for the Kurdish cause. The author encourages the readers to form their own opinions on the presented matter. However, one indisputable fact remains – the U.S. has always been very much interested in Kurdish nationalism and the Kurds were a significant subject in the Cold War years.

Key words

Mulla Mustafa Barzani, Middle East, U.S. policy, intelligence, Kurdish uprising

Prior to the current relations between the Kurdish Regional Government (KRG) and the USA, Iraqi Kurds had established a level of contact with the United States, yet much of it was not well known in the Western public. Recently available documents have shed some light on the nature of this relationship. In this context, the present research will focus on the final years of Mulla Mustafa Barzani as they were represented in US intelligence reports (1975–1979). More specifically, I will present several documents prepared by the CIA about the travel of Barzani to

the U.S. for medical treatment. The presentation will be more descriptive than argumentative, aiming at providing the audience with information about the U.S. views on Barzani in the late 1970s.

The documents will answer some specific questions regarding international negotiations about the fate of Mustafa Barzani. The following are some of these questions: Did the U.S. support the last Kurdish uprising headed by Mustafa Barzani? What was the nature of this support? What did Barzani request from the U.S. after the Algiers Accord of 1975? What were the behind-the-curtain negotiations regarding Mustafa Barzani's travel to the U.S.? What were the restrictions posed on Barzani while in treatment in the U.S.?

My main source for this research is the documents that are available to all researchers through the Freedom of Information Act and several memoirs and articles by U.S. foreign officers. When produced in the 1970s, most of these reports were classified as "secret;" however, they were mostly declassified in 2006.

The paper is structured in a way that will allow its reader to make his/her own conclusions. Nevertheless, one conclusion will be inevitable for the reader that the U.S. has always been very much interested in Kurdish nationalism and the Kurds were a significant subject in the Cold War years.

We know that early in the 1970s, Mustafa Barzani was seeking assistance from outside powers for his rebellion against the Baath regime. The U.S. archives have plenty of documents detailing the Barzani request for financial and weapon assistance from the United States. There are even letters written by Barzani himself directly to U.S. presidents Kennedy in 1963¹ and to L.B. Johnson in 1967.²

We also know that the U.S. clandestinely helped Barzani by supplying him with Kalashnikovs, and other Soviet made submachine guns etc. A memorandum written by Henry Kissinger to President Nixon details the nature of the U.S. assistance³ Iranian and Israeli assistance to the Barzani movement has also been well documented.⁴

¹ Department of State, Central Files, POL 13-3 IRAQ.

² National Archives and Records Administration, RG 59, Central Files 1967-69, POL 23-9 IRAQ.

³ National Archives, Nixon Presidential Materials, NSC Files, Box 138, Kissinger Office Files, Kissinger Country Files, Middle East, Kurdish Problem Vol. I, June '72-October '73. Secret; Sensitive; Exclusively Eyes Only.

⁴ National Archives, Nixon Presidential Materials, NSC Files, Box 601, Country Files, Middle East, Iran and Iraq, TDCS DC-315/01044-70. This document is an Intelligence Information cable with the subject line "Israeli Aid to Kurdish Rebels."

Such an aid was also confirmed in *Unexpurgated Pike Report: Report of the House Select Committee on Intelligence, 1976*.⁵ This report was leaked to the press in 1976 and created much controversy. In the introduction to the report, Phillip Agee summarized the section related to the Kurds as the following:

Paramilitary support by the CIA to the Kurdish rebellion against the Iraqi government from 1972 to 1975, which cost some \$16 million, was initiated at the request of the Shah of Iran, then engaged in a border dispute with Iraq. Once the Iraqis agreed to a settlement favorable to Iran, the Shah had the support to the Kurds cut off. The rebellion collapsed, over 200,000 Kurds became refugees, and neither Iran nor the US set up adequate refugee assistance. As one high-ranking but unidentified witness told the Select Committee, ‘covert action should not be confused with missionary work.’⁶

In any case, according to David A. Korn, the Director for Lebanon, Jordan, Syria and Iraq Affairs at the Department of State’s Near East Affairs division between 1972–75 and later an ambassador, “the Americans gave money directly to Barzani’s group, though much less than the Iranians; and they financed some of the arms that were delivered by the Iranians. But for Barzani, the symbolism of the American contribution was more important than its size.”⁷

The trouble began with the signing of the Algiers Accord of 1975 between Iran and Iraq. This agreement stipulated that the Shah of Iran would cease all material and other assistance to Barzani and the Iraqi Kurds immediately. In return, Iraq agreed to accept several border modifications, especially in the Shatt al-Arab region. David A. Korn describes the Shah’s move to stop Iran’s support to Barzani as follows.

The agreement “was a surprise even to the shah’s own ministers, and also to Richard Helms, the U.S. ambassador to Iran and a former director of the CIA. Helms was at Tehran airport on March 6 when top Iranian officials gathered to welcome the shah back from Algiers. He found the shah’s aides as uninformed, and as puzzled, as he was. Helms watched wryly as the monarch amazed them all by issuing instructions the moment he stepped off the aircraft, right there on the tarmac, not even waiting to get to his palace to convene a meeting. He directed that all Iranian military support to the Kurds should cease immediately,

⁵ Prepared for publication by Gregory Andrade Diamond, New York 1992.

⁶ It is believed that this high-ranking officer was Henry Kissinger, Ibidem, p. xiii.

⁷ D.A. Korn, *The Last Years of Mustafa Barzani*, “Middle East Quarterly” 1994, June, as published on www.meforum.org/220/the-last-years-of-mustafa-barzani.

along with all financial and other assistance, and that the border between Iran and Iraq should be sealed after a brief delay.⁸

Such a move would mean the collapse of the Barzani rebellion against Baghdad as the Shah also told Richard Helms that “the cutoff of Iranian assistance to Barzani’s Kurdish insurrection would also entail terminating all American assistance.”⁹ Mustafa Barzani was aware of the dire consequences of the Algiers Accord; after long soul searching, he decided to end the rebellion, to the dismay of many Iraqi Kurds. Barzani correctly judged that moving forward without international help would be futile, if not suicidal.

With the conclusion of the Kurdish rebellion in 1975, Molla Mustafa Barzani became the “guest” of Shah Muhammad Reza Pahlavi, the very same man who betrayed him. Along with his family, Barzani was moved to a house in Tehran controlled by the Iranian secret police, SAVAK. It is during this time that Barzani’s health problems flared up as he felt pain in his upper right chest. His son, Idris, invited Dr. Hajmaddin Karim, a young Kurdish physician from Kirkuk, to examine his father. Dr. Karim suspected that Barzani had lung cancer. Upon receiving this news, Barzani showed his desire to go to the United States for further examination and treatment. According to Korn, “illness served as a means to break free of his Iranian prison and get to America.”¹⁰ If one reason for his desire to go to the US was medical treatment, the other was certainly to have an audience with Henry Kissinger to plead the Kurdish case in person.

In this context, I would like to introduce two original documents dealing with Barzani’s appeal for a visa, and with local CIA agents’ view of this request.¹¹

24 March 1975

Subj: Barzani Appeal

1. I strongly recommend against granting Barzani and associates refuge in USA. GOI leaders finally may be convinced that USG did not aid Kurds to whom Iraqis giving us credit, however unjustified, for persuading shah to end war. Major obstacle to resumption of relations now removed. If we grant asylum we will

⁸ Ibidem.

⁹ Ibidem. Korn’s description of events throughout his article is quite vivid and detail oriented. Clearly, he writes with authority as the Iraq Affairs Director of the United States.

¹⁰ Ibidem.

¹¹ I found these documents on the www.foia.cia.gov in 2006. Last time I checked I could not find them there. Regardless, I already made the copies of the digital copies and added to this paper as appendixes.

lose these gains and presence of Kurdish leaders in USA likely to be constant future irritant in bilateral relations. Barzani, with encouragement of shah, took his people into hopeless war and I see no reason for USG to now get involved with him, however romantic US journalists consider his struggle.

2. I do not believe GOI intends to punish Kurdish people. Policy of past year has been to win them over with financial inducements. Army has, however, paid high price for this victory and there are bound to be incidents of retribution against known peshmerga and some innocent Kurds. Recommend dept. encourage maximum number correspondents visit Kurdistan via Baghdad. Any other observers almost certainly unacceptable there.

3. Extension of truce to protect innocent lives necessary if Kurds continue fighting. USG could urge shah to seek extension but I recommend against direct USG approach to GOI as presumptuous and futile.

4. No doubt humanitarian aid needed. GOI has in past rejected aid offers and protested to those who gave aid to refugees via Iran, even blankets. GOI has, to best of my knowledge, not approached international organizations. Funds not problem for GOI but logistics and distribution will be. I consider it most unlikely that GOI would accept any foreign humanitarian aid, particularly personnel. Dept. may nevertheless wish to inform ICRC [International Committee of the Red Cross] and other international organizations that we prepared to contribute to any program they work out with GOI.

GRAHAM

Clearly, the report by agent Graham was not very sympathetic to Barzani. Yet, what captured my attention was the language he used in the report. Even a cursory textual analysis cannot fail to notice that agent used the words “refuge” and “asylum.” “I strongly recommend against granting Barzani and associates *refuge* in USA. (...) If we grant *asylum* we will lose these gains (...)” Until now we were not aware that Barzani asked for “asylum” in the United States. We do know that he was granted visa for medical treatment. Did Mustafa Barzani ask for political asylum? Or, did the agent used the word “asylum” mistakenly? We do not know for sure and the only conclusive evidence would be the actual application of Barzani, if it ever existed. David Korn does not help us much in this context either. We do know that agent Graham believed it to be an asylum application.

The other document is significant in that it indicates the conditions under which Barzani was allowed to travel to the US. Here there was no mention of “asylum” but “travel” to the US.

18 July 1975

Confidential, Tehran 6943

Subject: GOI places limits on Barzani's activities during perspective trip to US

1. Embassy received unsigned letter July 16 addressed to Consul Nuemann in Tabriz (believed to be from Kurdish Democratic Party office here on Barzani contact in Rezaieh) stating GOI had decided to permit Barzani to travel to US but had told his son Idris it was setting three conditions.

These were (1) SAVAK officer would accompany him at all times, (2) he must promise not to make contact with Kurds in US, and (3) he must not "forward" any comments to press corps there, letter complained about these conditions but did not specifically ask for us intervention to try and change them. It added Barzani had been moved to Karaj (25 miles west of Tehran) and had asked that Neumann meet with Idris to keep contact with Kurds, "otherwise some tragedy may happen".

2. Letter noted that KDP office in Tehran had been closed by GOI last week, which has been confirmed by Fereidun Ahmadi (aka Shafiq Qazzaz), formerly of that office.

3. Embassy will take no further action to support Barzani travel document application per state 121656, as GOI will apparently issue one soon. We will also take no official note go GOI's conditions on his travel unless they are subsequently sent by official channels.

4. Although Neumann has occasional contact with Barzani's family, he will now wait until travel document is presented for visa. In any case, he is now in Tehran for medical treatment and will not return to post for a few days.

MIKLOS

CONFIDENTIAL

This document indicates that in the 1970s, Iran was the determining factor in US policy towards the Iraqi Kurds. Shah was able to set conditions for the Barzani visit to America. He was not allowed to be involved in any political activities. The legendary Kurdish leader's travel to the US was indeed not a welcoming request for Iran and the US; however, internal political pressures current by some powerful American lobbyists made it necessary to accept Barzani's request. On the question of US willingness to host Barzani, David Korn, in his article, explained:

Neither the shah nor Kissinger wanted Barzani parading about the United States exposing the embarrassing and still secret story of America's aid to the Kurds of Iraq and its abrupt abandonment of them. But Mullah Mustafa did

in fact have powerful friends in [Senator Henry] Jackson and [the AFL-CIO chief George] Meany, friends who could bring out his story if they thought he was unjustly denied medical treatment in the United States. Reluctantly, the shah and Kissinger decided the safest course would be to let Barzani come to the United States for diagnosis and treatment but to keep his movements and contacts carefully circumscribed. The CIA would make all arrangements – and pay all bills – while CIA and SAVAK officers would at all times escort Barzani and the members of his party. And so it was that Barzani was finally allowed to travel to the United States, arriving on that steamy afternoon in August 1975.

We know that Mustafa Barzani stayed in the US from August to October 1975, during which he was very closely monitored. According to Korn, Barzani was forced by the CIA to return back to Iran without seeing Kissinger who, in reference to his flip flopping Kurdish policy, said “covert action should not be confused with missionary work.”¹² However, for many Kurds and some Americans this was the ultimate betrayal of the US for the Kurdish cause.¹³

Back in Iran, Barzani once again became a “guest” of the shah. During the next eight months, the Kurdish leader tried hard to go back to the United States. According to David Korn, neither the United States nor Iran was willing to allow Barzani travel back to the US; therefore, Muhammad Dosky, a Kurd from Iraq who resided in Washington and was an aide to Barzani, was “put to work.”¹⁴ Dosky’s lobbying activities bore fruit in June 1976 and Mustafa Barzani landed at the John F. Kennedy airport for one last time. During his medical treatment, Barzani was pressured again by the CIA and SAVAK to return to Iran but this time he refused. In response to this refusal, the CIA cut off his funding.¹⁵ Needless to say Barzani was forbidden to make political statements while in the US; however, his lobbying efforts through some influential political figures in Washington was nominally successful. For example, some one thousand Iraqi Kurds were admitted to the United States as refugees. Nothing more than that. Barzani was surely justified feeling that he was deeply betrayed by not only Iran

¹² D.A. Korn, op.cit. Also *The Unexpurgated Pike Report*, p. xiii.

¹³ Surely the second betrayal came after the First Gulf War in 1991.

¹⁴ D.A. Korn, op.cit.

¹⁵ *Ibidem*. David Korn describes this period very vividly as he probably was privy to the information, as a high level State Department employee and the Director of Iraq Affairs, on Barzani’s stay in the US. Therefore, I confidently rely on this information. Unless otherwise indicated, my source for this period is David Korn’s above mentioned article.

but also the US. He probably resented, for the rest of his life, the trust he placed on this superpower. He died on March 1, 1979 at Georgetown University Medical Center.¹⁶ His body was transferred to Iran and in 1994 his remains were moved to his birthplace, Barzan in Iraq, in 1994.

What is ironic is that Shah Muhammad Reza Pahlavi, who determined Barzani's fate in the US, lost his throne just a short time before the Kurdish leader's death. And he failed to find refuge in the United States, other than for short medical treatment. In the final analysis Pahlavi's fate was not too different than that of Molla Mustafa Barzani.

In conclusion, we can safely state that Molla Mustafa Barzani, who returned to Iraq thanks to the Soviet pressure on the Baath government, spent his later years trusting the aid of the United States of America. Yet after the Algiers Accord of 1975, the US followed the Shah's request to abandon Barzani's rebellion. The two documents by the CIA officers I presented above clearly summarize the general attitude of the US government towards Barzani. Among others that I underlined above, what captured my attention is the word "requested asylum" used for Barzani's application to travel to the US. It is possible that the CIA officer was misinformed about the nature of this visa application; yet the possibility does exist that Mustafa Barzani considered applying for political asylum in the United States. This possibility, of course, does not necessarily mean that the legendary Kurdish general abandoned his people; very likely this was a political move towards enlisting US support once again. Nevertheless, if correct, this information enhances our knowledge on Barzani's relations with the United States.

¹⁶ Korn claims the date for Barzani's death to be March 3, 1979.