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Routledge Handbook on the Kurds

Edited by Michael M. Gunter

ROUTLEDGE HANDBOOK ON THE KURDS

With an estimated population of over 30 million, the Kurds are the largest stateless nation in the world. They are becoming increasingly important within regional and international geopolitics, particularly since the 2003 invasion of Iraq, the Arab Spring and the war in Syria.

This multidisciplinary Handbook provides a definitive overview of a range of themes within Kurdish studies. Topics covered include:

- Kurdish studies in the United States and Europe
- Early Kurdish history
- Kurdish culture, literature and cinema
- Economic dimensions
- Religion
- Geography and travel
- Kurdish women
- The Kurdish situation in Turkey, Iraq, Syria and Iran
- The Kurdish diaspora.

With a wide range of contributions from many leading academic experts, this Handbook will be a vital resource for students and scholars of Kurdish studies and Middle Eastern studies.

Michael M. Gunter is a Professor of Political Science at Tennessee Technological University and the Secretary-General of the EU Turkey Civic Commission (EUTCC), headquartered in Brussels. He is the author or editor of 15 scholarly books on the Kurdish and Armenian issues as well as over 100 peer-reviewed scholarly articles.



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ROUTLEDGE HANDBOOK ON THE KURDS

Edited by Michael M. Gunter

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To my wife Judy who has loved and supported
me for more than half a century



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INTRODUCTION

Michael M. Gunter

Given the increasing importance of the Kurds in regional and international relations writ large, there is a strong need for this multidisciplinary Handbook of more than 30 chapters that would seek to be a definitive overview of as much of Kurdish Studies as possible. The present purview includes emerging and cutting-edge areas, such as Kurdish cinema, literature, and travel, as well as more time-honored subjects, such as history; politics; religion; women; and country-specific analyses regarding Turkey, Iraq, Syria, and Iran, among others. Further chapters on corruption and nepotism in Iraqi Kurdistan, plus a contribution from an esteemed Russian scholar also largely novel to Kurdish Studies in the West, also appear. Two detailed bibliographic chapters on Kurdish Studies in the United States and Europe begin the collection and present the reader with an introduction to the wide panorama of the many authors and institutions now engaged in this burgeoning field.

Although these chapters are for the most part penned by academic scholars and contain reams of arcane details elaborating on important general themes, the Handbook is written for the intelligent lay public as well as scholars and governmental practitioners. Although each chapter covers a distinct subject, they still speak to each other and, taken as a whole, present the reader with a valuable overview.

The Handbook's compiler and editor opens this study with a bibliographic chapter on Kurdish Studies in the United States. Although the United States is about as far away from Kurdistan as is geographically possible, surprisingly, it has a well-established tradition of Kurdish Studies. Indeed, as long ago as April 1928, Sureya Bedirkhan—one of the three famous grandsons of the legendary mir of the emirate of Botan, Bedir Khan Beg (1800c.–1868)—journeyed to Detroit, Michigan, to mobilize the Kurdish community in that famous automobile capital in support of Khoybun's Ararat Revolt against Turkey. Surely, Bedir Khan only made this trip because there was a politically active Kurdish community there to receive him. Little known to even Kurdish scholars, William O. Douglas—the famous and longest-serving Associate Justice of the United States Supreme Court from 1939 until his retirement in 1975—visited Kurdistan in the summers of 1949 and 1950 as part of a much larger trip to the Middle East. He shared his impressions of the Kurds and concluded that “Independence Is Preferred,” the title of one of the chapters in a book that recorded his overall trip and a predilection that still prevails, despite continuing frustrations and setbacks. Dana Adams Schmidt, for many years a foreign correspondent for the *New York Times*,

spent 46 days with the Iraqi Kurds in 1962 (the climax of which was some 10 days with Mulla Mustafa Barzani), concluding that the Kurds were “the fightingest people in the Middle East.”

Vera Eccarius-Kelly follows with a wide-ranging survey of Kurdish Studies in Europe, where the field is older and possesses more practitioners. Her chapter reviews the emergence of clusters of scholarly communities that are focused on resisting political pressures from outside of Europe to silence their academic contributions or to frame their work as ideologically tarnished. Organizationally, her chapter offers several subsections to examine Kurdish Studies in the context of (a) historical developments, (b) fluctuating geographic and linguistic challenges, and (c) the rise of ethno-national politics. In all areas, scholars involved with Kurdish Studies have faced tremendous barriers yet managed to prevail by pursuing innovative scholarly projects and networks. Despite the reemergence of constraints related to emergency measures in various parts of Kurdistan, the larger field of Kurdish Studies in Europe looks promising. It is deeply rooted within numerous European institutions and increasingly recognized through newly formed centers of scholarly excellence.

Part II covers early Kurdish history. Michael Eppel examines the former Kurdish emirates or principalities of the premodern era, such as Hakkari, Soran, Baban, Ardalán, Bitlis, Cizire, and Bahdinan, among many others. His chapter puts the lie to the frequently made disparaging claim that the Kurds have never had any institutions mirroring independent states. Hamit Bozarslan presents an overview of 19th-century Kurdistan, which he terms the “long century” because of how it was marked by violent discontinuities, conflicts, and re-structuration. Ahmet Serdar Akturk then views the development of the Kurdish national movement in Turkey from Sultan Mahmud II (r. 1808–1839) to Atatürk (the founder of modern Turkey). Akturk argues that the modern history of the Kurds in the Ottoman Empire dates back to the 1830s, when the Ottoman central government began to abolish the autonomous Kurdish hereditary emirates that had been ruling Ottoman Kurdistan since the early 16th century.

Part III deals with various aspects of Kurdish culture. Michiel Leezenberg reflects on how more than any other work, Ehmedê Xani's *Mem û Zîn*, a mystical romance or *mathnawî* poem in 2,655 bayts, or distichs, written in Kurmançî or Northern Kurdish, symbolizes and reflects the Kurds' aspirations toward liberation and national independence. This story of two tragic lovers who are not allowed to marry in life and who—despite being buried together—remain separated by a thornbush, even in death, is usually seen as an allegory of the division of Kurdish society by outside forces and of the Kurds' inability to unite among themselves. Hashem Ahmadzadeh discusses classical and modern Kurdish literature. By comparing these periods, he shows how the modern period and the rise of nation-states have caused division in the content and mission of Kurdish literature. He concludes by illustrating that there is a clear relationship between the political situation and the flourishing of Kurdish literature. Michael L. Chyet writes that, although he is not a proponent of combining Kurmanji and Sorani into one hybrid language, there are ways that the two dialects can be brought closer together. This may be considered an important step in nation-building as well as a pedagogical tool in teaching Kurdish, both to native speakers and to foreigners. In situations where one dialect presents multiple forms to choose from, the forms that exist in the other dialect should be considered in order to calibrate the dialects, that is, to bring them closer together. Finally, in her chapter on Kurdish cinema, Bahar Simsek maintains that central to modern art forms, cinema has long been inseparable from discussions of

nationalism and popular culture. The definition of a national cinema has emerged as a discursive tool in the hands of both hegemonic (nation-state) politics and counter-hegemonic (anti-colonial) politics.

In Part IV, two enlightening chapters delve into the economic dimensions of the Kurdish experience. David Romano reminds us that just like the state of Iraq, the Kurdistan Regional Government (KRG) functions as a *rentier* economy—meaning that the large majority of government (including regional government) revenues come from an outside source (oil or budget transfers from Baghdad, the funds for which are also earned from oil) and flow directly to government coffers rather than coming from taxation or other forms of levies upon the population and its activities. Romano then goes on to examine the consequences of this curse of oil. Employing unpublished and published primary documents from British archival sources, published Turkish-/English-language primary sources, interviews, and a large number of secondary sources, Veli Yadirgi traces the political economic history of the Kurdish provinces of Eastern and Southeastern Anatolia (ESA) from Ottoman times to the present. In so doing, he deconstructs the generally accepted thesis that the autochthonous, feudalistic tribal structure and resulting primitive economic conditions basically caused the backward economic underdevelopment/de-development that continues to retard economic progress in ESA and plays such a huge role in Turkey's Kurdish question.

Part V deals with religion. Mehmet Gurses examines the role that Islam has played in the assimilation of Kurdish culture into the more dominant Turkish, Arab, or Persian identities of the controlling states. He contends that the armed conflict between the Kurds and the hegemonic states in which they reside has resulted in Islam's decline in Kurdish identity. Based on recent events, Christopher Houston concludes that there is a major split between Kurdish and Turkish Muslims in Turkey on the causes and solution to the Kurdish issue. Thus, as long as Islamist discourse, in the name of an overt Islamic and covert Turkish identity, continues to deny Kurdish Muslims the legitimacy and necessity of political mobilization based on a defense of Kurdish ethnicity, this tension will fester. Mordechai (Moti) Zaken reviews in fascinating detail the long history of Jewish communities within the tribal Kurdish society, from their reputed origin as exiles by the king of Assyria, as mentioned in the Bible, to their final mass immigration to Israel following the creation of the Jewish state in 1948. Based on their recent field work, Tyler Fisher and Nahro Zagros analyze the esoteric rituals of Yezidi baptism. Given the genocidal Islamic State of Iraq and Syria (ISIS) attack upon them in the summer of 2014, the Yezidis have transferred from being little more than an obscure footnote in regional history to the subject of important security and humanitarian initiatives.

Part VI deals with geography and travel. Michael Bishku reviews the difficult and changing geopolitics of the Kurds since World War I. He subtitles his thoughts as between Iraq and other hard places, which, given Baghdad's occupation of Kirkuk and other disputed territories in October 2017, seems particularly appropriate. In his chapter on roaming Iraqi Kurdistan, Stafford Clarry muses how traveling to and through any country is often about confronting expectations with the personal experience of meeting reality: flat, desert, hot, dry, or violent. Despite the Middle East's persistent image of pervasive violence, there are extensive areas that are safe and secure; easily accessible and warmly welcoming; unhesitatingly friendly and hospitable; and freezing cold in winter, with rugged snowy mountains, and lusciously green in spring, with wildflowers everywhere, with deep canyons and lakes, and with flowing waterfalls, rivers, and streams. Iraqi Kurdistan,

a major part of northern Iraq, is one such area. Touch wood, no American nor any other Westerner has been fatally harmed in Iraqi Kurdistan during the 2003 Iraq War and its aftermath to date.

In Part VII, Anna Grabolle-Çeliker cautions that such terms as Kurdish women are generalizations that, as will be obvious from other chapters in this Handbook, need to be tempered by considerations of a variety in terms of language, geography, and social class. Nevertheless, as women and members of a nation without a state, they have faced double discrimination, gender based and ethnicity based, in the countries they live in. Politically, the concept of gender equity and co-chairmanship has become established in Turkey's pro-Kurdish parties and in Northern Syria. This has attracted world attention and will, no doubt, inspire Kurdish women activists elsewhere to fight for similar rights. Whether or not the Kurdish movements in different countries move beyond token gestures in their gender politics depends also on the pressure these movements face from the state.

The next four parts deal with country specific chapters. Part VIII presents three chapters on the Kurdish situation in Turkey. Cengiz Gunes discusses the rise of the pro-Kurdish movement since 1990 and what factors have enabled its success in a number of local and national elections since 2014. He first provides an account of the organizational development and growth of the movement from its foundation in 1990 to the end of 2012, when the current pro-Kurdish political party, the HDP (Peoples Democratic Party), was established. This section also broadly discusses the political demands raised by the pro-Kurdish parties and their proposals to reform the existing political framework to recognize ethnic and cultural identities and difference in Turkey, and examines the attempts by the pro-Kurdish political parties to build a greater coalition of pro-democracy forces. The second section discusses the formation of the HDP and highlights the key political demands it articulates and its notions of democracy and pluralism. The final section discusses the factors behind the HDP's electoral breakthrough in the 2015 general elections.

Joost Jongerden and Ahmet Hamdi Akkaya consider the formation and disintegration of Kurdish national political parties in the period between two coups in Turkey: the March 12, 1971, coup and the September 12, 1980, coup. After the coup of 1971, a regrouping took place in which we can see a (first) separation between the Turkish left and Kurdish organizations, with the Kurdistan Workers Party (PKK) emerging from a grouping within the left Ankara Democratic Higher Education Association (ADYÖD) and other Kurdish organizations emerging from a Kurdish grouping outside the left Revolutionary Democratic Cultural Associations (DDKD). However, the Kurdish organizations were prone to mirroring the tensions and conflicts of orthodoxy and resulting sectarianism of the left in Turkey, with splits over the question of who represented the true path to socialism, the Soviet Union or China (or Albania), which were further deepened by various splits within these currents, notably the split over the Maoist Three Worlds Theory.

Finally, Bill Park analyzes Turkey's Kurdish complexes and its Syrian quagmire. Notwithstanding the relatively harmonious relationships Ankara has eventually been able to develop with at least part of the KRG leadership, Turkey has generally chosen to present itself as opposed to Kurdish demands for self-determination throughout the region, largely because of its own sense of vulnerability, deriving from the failure to constructively approach its own Kurdish problem. Given the generally harmonious relationships that existed between Turks and Kurds up to the very formation of the Republic, it did not have to be this way. Turkey could have evolved as the champion of Kurdish rights throughout the

region or at least as willing to accommodate them. Instead, it is now doomed to oppose federal arrangements in Syria, and perhaps in Iraq too, that surely represent the best way forward for these two troubled neighbors. The problem is at least as much a Turkish one as a Kurdish one.

Part IX examines the scenario in Iraq where 2017 began as the year when it seemed possible that the KRG might actually become independent but ended in the disastrous aftermath of the September 25 advisory referendum. Kirkuk was lost as well as other perquisites, such as usage of its two international airports and control of its border gates, among others. Kurdish disunity, the failure to build genuine institutions of government, and active foreign opposition cursed the hope for independence. Once again, the Iraqi Kurds were reminded of the ancient Peloponnesian War's Melian dialogue that "the powerful exact what they can and the weak grant what they must." Or, as Henry Kissinger more recently put it, "Covert activity should not be confused with missionary work."

Francis Owtram mainly analyzes the pattern of resistance to the situation the Kurds have found themselves in as a result of the Sykes-Picot Agreement during World War I, using the late Fred Halliday's framework of "the syndrome of post-colonial sequestration" or being legally possessed by another. Owtram synthesizes this with the relevant role of oil and considers the disaster following the advisory referendum on Iraqi Kurdish independence held on September 25, 2017. This stunning Kurdish failure "cruelly exposed" the "limitations of a polity organized around family-dominated politics and militias." Liam Anderson focuses on the disputed territories—a broad swathe of resource-rich land stretching across northern Iraq from Sinjar on the Syrian border down to Mandali on the Iranian border—where Iraq's Arab, Kurdish, and Turkmen populations coincide. At the heart of the territories, both geographically and symbolically, lies the contested, oil-rich governorate (and city) of Kirkuk. Though claimed as the heart of Kurdistan by Kurdish President Masoud Barzani, it is clear that Kirkuk's sizable Arab and Turkmen populations reject these claims and are opposed to being (as they see it) annexed to the Kurdistan Region. Twice since ISIS's attack against Iraq in June 2014, these disputed territories have changed hands between Baghdad and Irbil (June 2014 and October 2017), while the constitutionally prescribed road to resolving the issue through Article 140 has ground to a halt.

Michael Rubin boldly reviews the continuing controversial problems of KRG corruption and nepotism. Although this subject has won him few fans among the Kurds, the KRG's quick collapse in Kirkuk in October 2017 suggests that Rubin's litany of complaints should be thoroughly examined and dealt with for the KRG's own good. Continuing in the tradition of such famous, earlier Russian authorities on the Kurds as Vladimir Minorsky, Kirill V. Vertyaev offers a unique Russian perspective on his country's historical and political approach toward putative Iraqi Kurdish independence. He concludes that Russia's official position is "not only spicy but also ambiguous." On the one hand, this position, voiced by both the Russian Foreign Ministry and the President, boils down to a simple statement that the issue of an independent Iraqi Kurdistan is an internal affair of Iraq and must be resolved within the constitutional norms of this state. On the other hand, active participation in the exploration and extraction of oil and gas in the Kurdistan Region by such Russian giants as "Rosneft" and "Gazpromneft" indicates that these largely risky venture deals concluded with the Regional Government of Iraqi Kurdistan may well be a significant investment into the economy of a future independent Kurdish state. In other words, Moscow "sits between two chairs" by supporting Iraq's territorial integrity while recognizing the aspirations of the Kurds for a homeland.

Part X deals with war-devastated Syria and Rojava, its Kurdish region. Eva Savelsberg argues that the Democratic Union Party (PYD) is thus far one of the few winners in this Hobbesian war of all against all. Until the beginning of the protests in 2011, the PYD was not only the party with the most sympathizers in Syrian prisons: its members were also, as a rule, sentenced to longer prison terms than the members of other Kurdish parties and were systematically subjected to torture. Since then, however, the balance of power has shifted in favor of this party, which is currently ruling the predominantly Kurdish regions and beyond. The PYD or rather its military wing, the People's Defense Forces (YPG), is not only armed by the United States but has, at the same time, good relations with Russia. Staffan de Mistura, the special United Nations envoy tasked with seeking peace in Syria, would like to have the PYD at the negotiation table in Geneva, and the relationship with the Assad regime is that of a more or less "hidden" cooperation. Savelsberg analyzes why the PYD is so successful—and how sustainable this development will be.

Jordi Tejel adds that if cross-border cooperation between all Kurdish regions in the Middle East is a common feature, the pervasiveness of cross-border ties between Syrian Kurds, on the one hand, and Turkish and Iraqi Kurds, on the other, is particularly noteworthy. It responds to some singularities, such as a relatively small Kurdish population in Syria compared to those in Turkey and Iraq, geographical separation of the three Kurdish enclaves in Northern Syria, and a clear connection between the emergence of a Kurdish nationalist movement in Syria and the arrival of dozens of intellectuals and activists from Turkey to the Levant between the 1920s and 1930s.

Continuing with Syria, Michael Knapp looks at the roots of democratic autonomy in Rojava. The conflict in Syria might be portrayed in a simplistic, geopolitical manner as one between Russian and United States interests, along with those of their allies. Yet this became part of the picture dominated until recently almost entirely by the cruelty of the so-called Islamic State (ISIS). While the conflict had its geopolitical background, the war was fought along sectarian and ethnic divisions. With its Neo-Ottoman policy, Turkey tried to play out Sunnism in its gamble for power, while Iran, Syria, and Iraq used Shiite identity as a political leverage. Against this divisive policy, the multicultural and multireligious Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF)—composed of Arabs, Suryoye, Turkmens, Kurds, and numerous supporters from all over the world—formed a counterpoint of radical togetherness distinguished by female leaders like Cihan Şêx Ehmed, a commander of the Women's Defense Units (YPJ), which is intertwined with the presence of the Kurdistan Workers Party (PKK) and its ideological development in the region.

In the one chapter on Iran in Part XI, Nader Entessar surveys events from the days of the short-lived Mahabad Republic in 1946 to the current situation under President Hassan Rouhani, who was reelected to the office in May 2017. Although Rouhani's election initially disappointed the Kurds, there is now renewed hope that he will yet prove to be a reformer by highlighting Iran's multiethnic nature and viewing it as a point of strength, not a threat.

Part XII, the final section, deals with the burgeoning Kurdish diaspora. Osten Wahlbeck notes how large numbers of refugees have been forced to flee Kurdistan since the 1960s, with the largest communities found in Europe, especially in Germany. However, these communities continue to be characterized by the various political developments in Kurdistan, including wars, genocide, and forced migration, that have occurred in the Kurdish regions in Iran, Iraq, Turkey, and Syria. The successive waves of Kurdish political refugees that have arrived

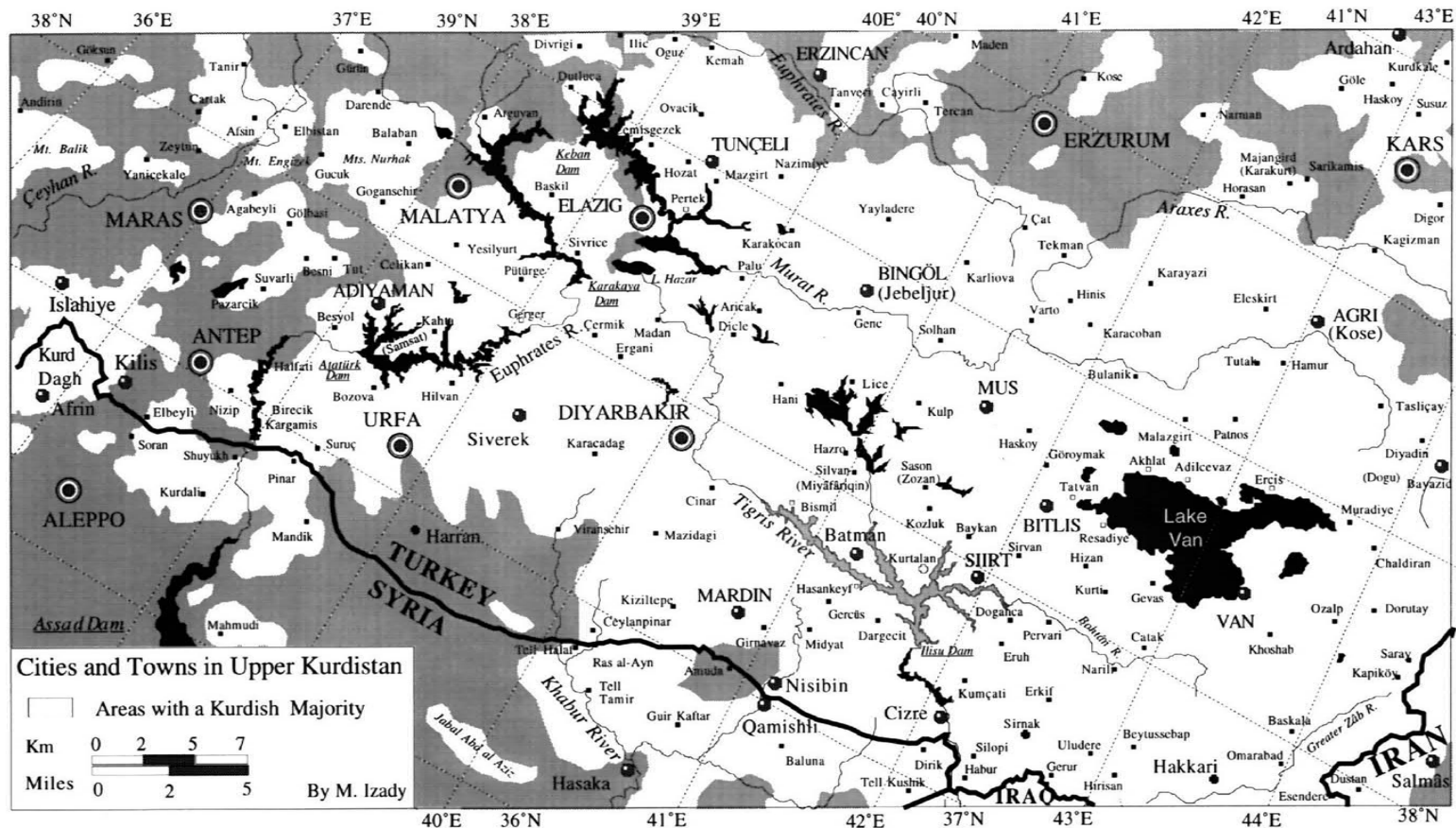
in the Kurdish diaspora have significantly influenced the processes of community formation and social integration throughout the diaspora.

Barzoo Eliassi explains that the concept of diaspora offers an important perspective on how different migrant groups experience dislocation and relate to the country of settlement and origin. The questions of movement, connectivity, and return are accordingly central to diasporic identity formation. Diasporas are not homogenous, and their members often hold different or conflicting views on the political order of their country of origin due to their social locations, based on gender, ethnic, and religious identity; political party affiliation; ideological orientations; class; and generation.

Vera Eccarius-Kelly describes how Kurdish communities in Germany are heterogeneous in terms of their geographic and regional origins, their tribal heritage, their educational attainment over time, and their religious affiliations. The vast majority of Kurds in Germany came from impoverished southeastern provinces of Turkey during the 1960s and 1970s, but many also departed urban environments in Istanbul, Izmir, and Ankara following the military coup in 1980. About 85 percent of the Kurds in Germany continue to have family connections in Turkey. The majority of Kurds in Germany are Sunni, but significant communities identify as Alevi, Zaza/Dimili, or Yezidi, or belong to other groups.

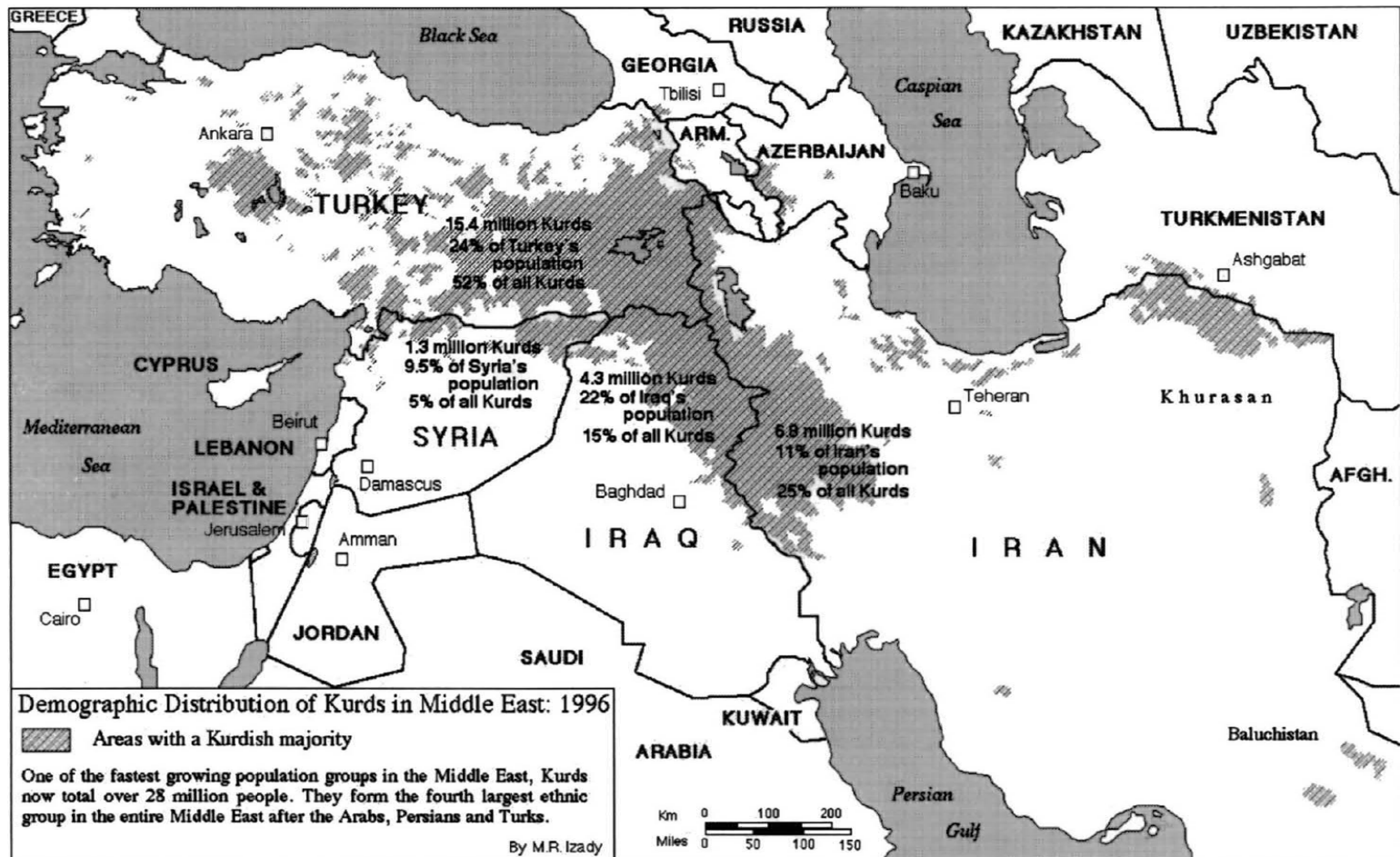
Desmond Fernandes analyzes the Kurdish diaspora in the United Kingdom. He notes how several scholars have debated the diaspora definitions and concepts as they relate to Kurds in the United Kingdom, and in the past 8 years, in particular, there has been a proliferation of academic articles focusing upon various aspects of the Kurdish diaspora in the United Kingdom. It is clear that as the diaspora establishes itself in the United Kingdom, many Kurds will continue to harbor a sense of “transnational belonging” and will continue to socially and politically organize through “transnational social spaces” and organizations. Unless there is a marked change in British politics, Kurdish communities will continue to be subjected to various forms of “othering” and criminalization.

In editing all these contributions, I have endeavored to let these accomplished scholars speak for themselves rather than trying to hold them to one strict, confining order. Of course, given the wide-ranging scholarly traditions these authors represent, one editorial style for all the succeeding chapters would have been virtually impossible to implement. In addition, standardization of Middle Eastern spellings would have been tiresomely pedantic, given so many scholarly variations and opinions. Thus, there are a variety of editorial schemes and spellings in the succeeding chapters. This heterogeneity speaks to the richness of Kurdish Studies and the international attention it now enjoys, and which is being represented in this Handbook. Of course, each individual chapter does adhere internally to one consistent stylistic standard. Finally, of course, any resulting errors in all this are my fault alone.



Map I.1 Cities and towns in Upper Kurdistan.

Source: Rowman and Littlefield, reproduced with permission.



Map 1.2 Demographic distribution of Kurds in Middle East: 1996.

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Map 1.3 Cities and towns in Lower Kurdistan.

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PART I

Kurdish studies



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1

KURDISH STUDIES IN THE UNITED STATES

Michael M. Gunter

Although the United States is about as far away from Kurdistan as is geographically possible, it has a well established tradition of Kurdish Studies. Indeed, as long ago as April 1928, Sureya Bedir Khan—one of the three famous grandsons of the legendary mir of the emirate of Botan, Bedir Khan Beg (1800c.–1868)—journeyed to Detroit, Michigan, to mobilize the Kurdish community in that famous automobile capital in support of Khoybun’s Ararat revolt against Turkey. Surely, Bedir Khan only made this trip because there was a politically active Kurdish community there to receive him.¹

Little known to even Kurdish scholars, William O. Douglas—the famous and longest-serving Associate Justice of the U.S. Supreme Court from 1939 until his retirement in 1975—visited Kurdistan in the summers of 1949 and 1950 as part of a much larger trip to the Middle East. He shared his impressions of the Kurds and concluded that “Independence Is Preferred,” the title of one of the chapters in a book that recorded his overall trip.² Dana Adams Schmidt, for many years a foreign correspondent for the *New York Times*, spent 46 days with the Iraqi Kurds in 1962 (the climax of which was some 10 days with Mulla Mustafa Barzani), concluding that the Kurds were “the fightingest people in the Middle East.”³ Margaret Kahn, whose PhD dissertation in 1976 at the University of Michigan dealt with Kurdish linguistics, wrote an entire book about her trip to Kurdistan in 1974.⁴ All three of these American descriptions of the Kurds were early preludes to a veritable sea of later studies.

One of the most celebrated early American devotees of Kurdish Studies was Dr. Vera Beaudin Saeedpour (1930–2010). In middle age, she married Hodayoun Saeedpour, a young Kurd from Sanandaj, Iran, and developed a keen interest in the plight of the Kurdish people. After her husband’s premature death from leukemia, Saeedpour founded the Kurdish Heritage Foundation of America with a Kurdish library in her Prospect Heights, Brooklyn, brownstone. Her Kurdish library came to contain more than 2,000 texts in Kurdish and other languages, while her museum, opened in 1988, possessed Kurdish artifacts, art, costumes, and maps. For more than a decade, these institutions and related publications served as a source of Kurdish scholarship in the United States and in effect made Saeedpour the dean of Kurdish Studies in that country.

In 1986, she also established and served as the editor of *Kurdish Times*, a scholarly journal, which published semiannual issues in 1986, 1988, 1990, and 1991. Richard T. Reiter,

Benoni, Jane A. Daniels, and Wheeler Thackston served, respectively, as editors. Beginning with Volume 5, Nos. 1 & 2, in 1992, the journal was renamed *Kurdish Studies, An International Journal* “to better reflect its content and scope.” Wheeler Thackston continued as its first editor. The following year, in 1993, the semiannual publication became known as *The International Journal of Kurdish Studies*, and for several years, with Merhdad Izady as its Editor in Chief, it published numerous refereed articles of high quality. Izady, an Iranian Kurd with a PhD from Columbia University, also contributed several articles and computer-generated maps to the publication.⁵ Ismet Cheriff Vanly, the dean of international Kurdish Studies, served as one of the journal’s advisers.⁶ However, after Izady left the journal in 1998, its quality declined, and it eventually ceased publication.

In 1991, Saeedpour also began publishing *Kurdish Life*, a “quarterly featuring research and analysis of contemporary issues and events in the Middle East in the context of U.S. foreign policy.”⁷ The last issue of this newsletter was published as Number 68 in the fall of 2008. After her death, Saeedpour’s Kurdish library and museum were donated to the Binghamton University Library in Binghamton, New York. The collection contains more than 3,000 books, journals, and newspapers in Kurdish and other languages. It also holds artifacts, costumes, maps, photographs, artwork, and other unique materials, including Saeedpour’s correspondence with politicians, universities, Kurdish friends, writers, and others.⁸

Not to be confused with Vera Saeedpour’s *The International Journal of Kurdish Studies* was *The Journal of Kurdish Studies*, an entirely separate scholarly journal edited by Professor Keith Hitchens (1931–) of the University of Illinois at Urbana. Dr. Joyce Blau, the renowned French scholar of Kurdish literature, served as one of this journal’s associate editors. *The Journal of Kurdish Studies* published volumes in 1995, 1997, 2001, 2002, and 2005, with probably the final volume publishing in 2008.

Mustafa Al-Karadaghi was a former peshmerga fighter and minister in the Iraqi diplomatic service who resigned in protest against Iraq’s genocidal policies against the Kurds before finally settling in the United States, where his daughter, Dr. Pary Karadaghi, established the Kurdish Human Rights Watch to aid Kurdish refugees. From its first issue in the winter of 1990 to possibly its final one in June 2001, Mustafa Al-Karadaghi edited and published *Kurdistan Times: A Biannual Political Journal*. While not a scholarly journal, this publication contained short, interesting pieces on the Kurds and their heritage, along with historical photos. Omar Sheikmous, Margareta Hanson, Walter Landry, Yona Sabar, and Desmond Fernandes, among others, were sometime associate editors.

Practically legendary in Kurdish Studies and considerably predating Saeedpour’s work was the famous PhD dissertation that Wadie Jwaideh submitted to Syracuse University in the United States in 1960. *The Kurdish National Movement: Its Origins and Development* was finally published, with a foreword by the renowned Kurdish scholar Martin van Bruinessen, by Syracuse University Press in 2005. Although Wadie Jwaideh’s study only goes up to 1959, it remains seminal in Kurdish Studies as a detailed analysis of the early phases of Kurdish nationalism and offers a framework within which to understand the movement’s late development. It also contains a number of fascinating, unique photos.

For many years, Professor Jwaideh taught in the Department of Near Eastern Languages and Literatures at Indiana University, where one of the leading modern Kurdish scholars in the United States, Robert Olson, studied under him. Professor Olson went on to author 10 books, edit or co-edit another 4, and write 114 referred scholarly articles in books and journals, many dealing with the Kurdish issue.⁹ For many years, he taught at the University of Kentucky, where he was selected as the Kirwan Memorial Prize Professor in 1999–2000 and the Distinguished Professor of the College of Arts and Sciences in 2000–2001. Olson also

served for more than a decade as the general editor of Mazda Publication's Kurdish Studies Series, which, as of 2013, had published 13 books.¹⁰ In 2013, he finally retired.

In Olson's honor, Michael Gunter compiled and edited the only Festschrift honoring a U.S. scholar of Kurdish Studies.¹¹ The Olson Festschrift contains 13 chapters on various subjects by such distinguished scholars of Kurdish Studies (listed in alphabetical order) as Hamit Bozarslan, Vera Eccarius-Kelly, Nader Entessar, Cengiz Gunes, Joost Jongerden, David Romano, Michael Rubin, Eva Savelsberg, Kamal Soleimani, Jordi Tejel, and Abbas Vali, among others.

Edmund Ghareeb published another well-known study in the formative period of modern Kurdish Studies in the United States in 1981.¹² He also introduced the first regular courses to be taught in the United States on Kurdish history, politics, and culture. In addition, he became the first Mustafa Barzani Distinguished Scholar in Global Kurdish Studies at the American University in Washington, D.C. Three core topical areas were to guide the research, course development, and program activities of the Barzani scholar: Kurdish history and culture in a local, regional, and global context; reconciliation among Kurdish groups and factions; and coexistence between the Kurds and the peoples and states of the Middle East. Among numerous other accomplishments, Ghareeb was the principal author of the first edition of the *Historical Dictionary of Iraq*.¹³

Michael Gunter followed Ghareeb's first book on the Iraqi Kurds, with two more books on the Kurds in Iraq in 1992 and 1999.¹⁴ His first scholarly publication on the Kurds, however, had already had been published in 1988 but only after Paul Henze, the former U.S. Central Intelligence Agency (CIA) station chief in Ankara, who was then working for the Rand Corporation, asked Gunter to document how the Kurdistan Workers Party (PKK) in Turkey was controlled by the Soviet Union and international communism.¹⁵ When Gunter instead concluded that the PKK was mostly motivated by Kurdish nationalism, Henze rejected his findings. However, Gunter felt vindicated when the prestigious *Middle East Journal* published his article.¹⁶ In the succeeding years, other U.S. scholars began to publish a veritable flood of scholarly books and articles on the Kurdish problem in Turkey, Henri J. Barkey in 1993 being one of the first.¹⁷ Over the years, Gunter also published three more well-reviewed monographs on the Kurds¹⁸ as well as numerous scholarly articles.¹⁹

Gunter also was possibly the first and only Western scholar to meet Abdullah Ocalan, the PKK leader, in his Syrian safe house before he was expelled from Syria in October 1998 under heavy Turkish pressure and then captured by Turkey in February 1999.²⁰ At the time, a few said that somehow Gunter was involved in some type of plot to capture Ocalan, a wild conspiracy theory in complete opposition to the facts.²¹ Indeed, for several years, Gunter has served as the Secretary-General of the EU Turkey Civic Commission (EUTCC), a non-governmental organization that lobbies the EU parliament in Brussels for Turkish admission into the EU as a way to help solve the Kurdish problem in Turkey. Since its establishment in 2004, the EUTCC has held 14 annual conferences on the Kurdish problem in Turkey at the EU parliament. Gunter also taught courses on Kurdish and Middle Eastern politics, among others, for the U.S. Government Areas Studies Program and U.S. Department of State Foreign Service Institute in Washington, D.C. In a keynote speech at the international conference on "The Kurds and Kurdistan: Identity, Politics, History" at the Centre for Kurdish Studies, University of Exeter, UK, April 2, 2009, the renowned French-Kurdish scholar Hamit Bozarslan referred to Robert Olson and Michael Gunter as the two leading scholars of Kurdish Studies in the United States.

Dr. Najmaldin O. Karim was a young Iraqi Kurdish doctor who treated Mulla Mustafa Barzani in his final years and became an American citizen. Then for almost 35 years,

Dr. Karim was a very prominent and successful neurosurgeon in Washington, D.C. In addition, he served as a most knowledgeable lobbyist for the Kurdish cause on Capitol Hill and frequently shepherded Kurdish visitors about the city. For several years, he also served as the president of the Kurdish National Congress of North America (KNC), a nonprofit, member-driven organization founded by Asad Khailany that represents Kurds from all parts of Kurdistan living in the United States and Canada. In April 2013, the KNC held its annual conference in Nashville, Tennessee, where maybe 12,000 Kurds are the largest such concentration in the United States, where maybe 50,000 Kurds presently live. In 1996, Dr. Karim also established the Washington Kurdish Institute (WKI) as a nonprofit research and educational organization. Finally, in 2010, he returned to this homeland and served as the prominent governor of Kirkuk province until Baghdad removed him in October 2017. His colleague, Dr. Kirmanj Gundi, a professor of education at Tennessee State University, also served recently as the president of the KNC.

Born in Kirkuk, Dr. Mohammed M.A. Ahmed earned a PhD in Agricultural Economics from Oklahoma State University in 1964 and worked for many years in the United Nations. Upon his retirement, he established the Ahmed Foundation for Kurdish Studies, a nonprofit and nonpartisan organization based in the United States, which undertakes scholarly conferences and studies pertaining to Kurdish history, culture, and politics pertaining to the Kurds. Under the Ahmed Foundation's purview, Dr. Ahmed also has co-edited five academic studies with Professor Michael Gunter,²² while in addition writing two more academic studies of Iraqi Kurdistan.²³ In recent years, the Ahmed Foundation has also sponsored a panel on Kurdish affairs at the large annual Middle East Studies Association of North America (MESA) conference. These panels have spotlighted leading scholars from both the United States and Europe, while drawing large audiences.

At the same time, Kurdish scholars in the United States have also created the Kurdish Studies Association (KSA) as an affiliated organization of MESA. The KSA is a nonprofit organization composed of scholars and other individuals interested in Kurdish Studies. It was founded in 2000 by a small group of faculty members to (1) encourage scholarly research and writing on Kurdistan and Kurdish politics, culture, and society; (2) facilitate the exchange of information and ideas among scholars and others sharing interest in these issues; and (3) foster a wider and better informed understanding of this important region and people of the Middle East. Currently, it has approximately 125 members, mostly faculty members, librarians, and doctoral students from more than 20 different countries. The KSA is run by a committee of four officers (President, Vice President, Executive Secretary, and Treasurer) and an executive board. It organizes annual meetings (in conjunction with the larger MESA), attracting scholars and researchers from all over the world to present research papers on the Kurds and Kurdistan. Charles MacDonald, a now retired professor of political science from Florida International University, served as the KSA's first president, followed by Shayee Khanaka, a Kurdish librarian at the University of California at Berkeley, and recently Christian Sinclair, the Director of International Studies at Moravian College in Bethlehem, Pennsylvania.

Michael Rubin, presently a resident scholar at the American Enterprise Institute (AEI) and an instructor to senior military officers deploying to the Middle East, has been in the past a visiting lecturer at the Universities of Sulaymaniya, Salahuddin, and Duhok in Iraqi Kurdistan, and an official at the Pentagon. He also has written a number of commentaries criticizing nepotism and corruption among Kurdish officials that have aroused their ire, but time has shown him to be often accurate in his assessments. Rubin's recent book *Kurdistan Rising? Consideration for Kurds, Their Neighbors, and the Region* (Washington, D.C.: AEI, July 2016) is a valuable contribution that breaks new, important ground by identifying many significant

questions that would arise **after** Kurdish independence is achieved. In other words, “statehood would be not the fruition of a process but rather its beginning” (p. 121). For example, the Kurds “will face disputed borders, disunity, major gaps in defense and infrastructure, and major economic challenges” (p. 123).²⁴

Nader Entessar, a now retired professor and chairman of the Department of Political Science and Criminal Justice at the University of South Alabama, was one of the first modern scholars of Kurdish Studies in the United States. Over the years, he became one of the leading American scholars of this increasingly important sub-discipline. His main concentration was on the Kurdish situation in Iran.²⁵ Entessar retired in 2017, but surely will continue to monitor and comment on Kurdish developments.

Among his many other scholarly books, Brendan O’Leary, the Lauder Professor of Political Science and Director of the Penn Program in Ethnic Conflict at the University of Pennsylvania, co-edited a much-read book dealing with Iraqi Kurdistan.²⁶ Professor O’Leary’s main contribution to Kurdish Studies possibly has been applying his deep understanding of federalism to the situation in the Kurdistan Regional Government (KRG).

David Romano, the Thomas G. Strong Chair in Middle East Politics at Missouri State University,²⁷ is arguably the leading member of the new generation of Kurdish scholars. He spent several years living in and conducting research in Turkey, Iraq, Iran, and Syria. Romano also rode his bicycle through large parts of northern Iraq and Turkey as part of his onsite learning process. His recent publications include insightful and well-written articles in leading academic journals.²⁸ For several years Romano has also been writing regular, thought-provoking, weekly pieces for *Rudaw*, one of the principal Iraqi Kurdish newspapers. Along with Mehmet Gurses, he additionally compiled an important collection of articles on the prospects for democracy and peace for the Kurds and the states in which they principally reside.²⁹

After more than two decades of researching and working in the Kurdish regions of Iraq, Turkey, Iran, and Syria, Denise Natali became a Distinguished Research Fellow and Minerva Chair at the Institute for National Strategic Studies (INSS) in Washington, D.C. There she has carved out an important niche for herself as a well-respected, often exacting critic of the Kurds,³⁰ as well as providing Middle East security analyses and strategic support to senior leaders at the Defense and State Departments, unified combatant commands, intelligence communities, and the broader national security community. Natali assumed her present position after engaging in research, teaching, and university start-ups in Iraqi Kurdistan, including positions as director of research institutes and the Dean of Students at the American University of Iraq-Sulaymaniyah. Earlier, she was a specialist for the American Red Cross Gulf Relief Crisis Project in Washington and information officer for the Disaster Assistance Relief Team, U.S. Agency for International Development’s Office of Foreign Disaster Assistance in Northern Iraq in support of Operation Provide Comfort II (1993–1994).

Gunes Murat Tezcur, the Jalal Talabani Chair of Kurdish Studies at the University of Central Florida (UCF) and associate professor of political science, is also the chair of the Kurdish Political Studies Program at UCF, the first and only academic unit in North America dedicated to the study of Kurdish issues. His research centers on studying political violence³¹ and Islamic politics in Iran and Turkey.³² Possibly, his best-known work is on the Kurdish insurgency in Turkey in which he explains why ordinary individuals take risks and join the insurgency. This study is based on an original dataset involving biographies of thousands of militants in which he argues that the ethnic cleavages do not matter by themselves, but they become politically salient when individuals from a certain ethnic minority face state repression and see their ethnicity and identity under threat.³³ Tezcur’s research has been supported by grants from the National Science Foundation, the U.S. Institute of Peace, and the Harry Frank

Guggenheim Foundation. Along with David Romano, Gunes Murat Tezcur is clearly among the leading members of the new generation of Kurdish scholars in the United States.

Nicole F. Watts, a professor of political science at San Francisco State University;³⁴ Vera Eccarius-Kelly, a professor of comparative politics at Siena College in New York;³⁵ Diane E. King, an associate professor of anthropology at the University of Kentucky;³⁶ Janet Klein, an associate professor of history at the University of Akron;³⁷ Mehmet Gurses, an associate professor of political science at Florida Atlantic University;³⁸ Michael L. Chyet, a linguist and cataloger of Middle Eastern languages at the U.S. Library of Congress;³⁹ and Peter Galbraith, a former U.S. ambassador and Congressional staffer⁴⁰ are also noteworthy U.S. scholars of Kurdish Studies. Surely, there are others which this author has missed and for the oversight of which he apologizes.

Among a number of prominent journalists in the United States, a partial list and possibly their most important contribution includes Jonathan C. Randal, a distinguished retired correspondent who has worked with the *New York Times* and *Washington Post*, among others;⁴¹ Kevin McKiernan, a war correspondent;⁴² Aliza Marcus, a commentator who has worked for the *Boston Globe* and Reuters News Agency, among others;⁴³ and Quil Lawrence, a well-known reporter for the National Public Radio.⁴⁴ Susan Meiselas,⁴⁵ a documentary photographer, has compiled a huge, magnificent photographic history of the Kurds with useful commentaries by Martin van Bruinessen.

Finally, although they are politicians and diplomats rather than scholars, mention might also be made of three Iraqi Kurds who lived for several years in the United States where they furthered Kurdish Studies, among many other duties. Barham Salih, who earned a PhD in Statistics and Computer Applications in Engineering from the University of Liverpool in the United Kingdom, also spent the 1990s in the United States as the representative of Jalal Talabani's leftist-leaning Patriotic Union of Kurdistan (PUK). He returned to Iraqi Kurdistan in 2001 and subsequently served as the Prime Minister of the PUK-controlled portion of the KRG from 2001 to 2004, the Deputy Prime Minister of Iraq (2006–2009), and Prime Minister of the KRG from 2009 to 2012. Since Jalal Talabani suffered his debilitating stroke in December 2012, Barham Salih has served as one of the *de facto* PUK heads but with disappointing results. Qubad Talabani, the son of Jalal Talabani, served for several years as a successful KRG representative in the United States until moving to the KRG in 2012 and becoming the Deputy Prime Minister of the KRG. Bayan Sami Abdul Rahman, the daughter of the famous Kurdish leader Sami Abdul Rahman, succeeded Qubad Talabani as the KRG representative in the United States in 2015. The American connection these three prominent KRG leaders have undoubtedly influences their views.

Notes

- 1 Sureya Bedirkhan (1883–1938), who spent several years in prison for his nationalist activities, resumed publishing the newspaper *Kurdistan* in Constantinople after the Young Turk coup in 1908 and was an early member of the transnational Kurdish party, Khoybun. His brother, Jaladet, was elected the first president of Khoybun. Subsequently, he devoted himself to literary work and helped to develop a Kurdish alphabet in Latin characters. The third brother, Kamuran, became a noted Kurdish author, spokesman, editor, and professor teaching Kurdish at the Ecole des Langues Orientales in Paris, where Joyce Blau, the famous French authority on Kurdish literature, was one of his students. I published an earlier, much smaller version of this chapter as “Kurdish Studies in the United States,” in *Wiener Jahrbuch für Kurdische Studien*, eds. by Ferdinand Hennerbichler, et al. *Vienna Yearbook of Kurdish Studies* (Bremen: Wiener Verlag, 2014), pp. 178–192.
- 2 William O. Douglas, *Strange Lands and Friendly People* (New York: Harper & Brothers, Publishers, 1951), p. 87.

- 3 Dana Adams Schmidt, *Journey among Brave Men* (Boston, MA and Toronto: Little, Brown and Company, 1964).
- 4 Margaret Kahn, *Children of the Jinn: In Search of the Kurds and Their Country* (New York: Seaview Books, 1980).
- 5 Izady is perhaps best known for his *The Kurds: A Concise Handbook* (Washington, DC: Crane Russak, 1992). Among numerous other scholarly items, he also published an English translation and commentaries of Prince Sharaf al-Din Bitlisi, *The Sharafnama or the History of the Kurdish Nation – 1597 – Book One* (Costa Mesa, CA: Mazda Publishers, 2005), but unfortunately did not continue with the project.
- 6 Lokman I. Meho, a Kurdish scholar from Lebanon, who earned his doctorate in library sciences from the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill and has been the Director of Libraries at The American University in Beirut, Lebanon since 2009, compiled a cumulative index of *The International Journal of Kurdish Studies* in its issue of 17:1 & 2 (2003), pp. 121–154. Meho is also the compiler of *The Kurds and Kurdistan: A Selective and Annotated Bibliography* (Westport, CT: Greenwood Press, 1997); and with Kelly L. Maglaughlin, *Kurdish Culture and Society: An Annotated Bibliography* (Westport, CT: Greenwood Press, 2001).
- 7 She published a cumulative index of *Kurdish Life* (Fall 1991–Fall 2002) in *The International Journal of Kurdish Studies* 17:1 & 2 (2003), pp. 155–167.
- 8 See www.binghamton.edu/libraries/specialcollections/researchandcollections/saeedpour.html, accessed December 23, 2013.
- 9 Perhaps his most famous publication was *The Emergence of Kurdish Nationalism and the Sheikh Said Rebellion, 1880–1925* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1989). Two other noteworthy books were *The Goat and the Butcher: Nationalism and State Formation in Kurdistan-Iraq since the Iraqi War* (Costa Mesa, CA: Mazda Publishers, 2005) and *The Kurdish Nationalist Movements in Turkey: 1980–2011* (Costa Mesa, CA: Mazda Publishers, 2011). However, Professor Olson himself argues that his best book was *The Siege of Mosul and Ottoman-Persian Relations 1718–1743: A Study of Rebellion in the Capital and War in the Provinces of the Ottoman Empire* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1975), reissued in 2017 by Mazda Publications with a new introduction by Olson.
- 10 Abbas Vali, ed., *Essays on the Origins of Kurdish Nationalism* (Costa Mesa, CA: Mazda Press, 2003) is probably one of the more important ones.
- 11 Michael M. Gunter (com. and ed.), *Kurdish Issues: Essays in Honor of Robert W. Olson* (Costa Mesa, CA: Mazda Publishers, 2016).
- 12 Edmund Ghareeb, *The Kurdish Question in Iraq* (Syracuse NY: Syracuse University Press, 1981).
- 13 Edmund Ghareeb and Beth Dougherty, *Historical Dictionary of Iraq* (Lanham, MD: Scarecrow Press, 2004). With Dougherty now the principal author, the two published an 858-page second edition of this volume in 2013.
- 14 *The Kurds of Iraq: Tragedy and Hope* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1992); and *The Kurdish Predicament in Iraq: A Political Analysis* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1999).
- 15 Earlier, Henze, a most knowledgeable student of Turkey, also had argued vehemently that the Soviet Union had been behind the attempt to assassinate the Pope in May 1981. See Paul Henze, *The Plot to Kill the Pope* (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1985). However, probably the attempt on the Pope's life was more complicated, and Henze's real purpose—consciously or not—was to frame and smear the Soviet Union as part of what was then the covert counterintelligence struggle between the two Cold War adversaries. For a cogent critique of the supposed Soviet role, see Jeffrey M. Bale, "The Ultranationalist Right in Turkey and the Attempted Assassination of Pope John Paul II," *Turkish Studies Association Bulletin* 15 (March 1991), pp. 1–63.
- 16 "The Kurdish Problem in Turkey," *Middle East Journal* 42 (Summer 1988), pp. 389–406. Gunter followed up this article with his first book on the subject in 1990, *The Kurds in Turkey: A Political Dilemma* (Boulder, CO: Westview Press, 1990). Perhaps Gunter's most important contribution to Kurdish studies is his *Historical Dictionary of the Kurds*, 3rd ed. (Lanham, MD: Scarecrow Press, 2018).
- 17 Henri J. Barkey, "Turkey's Kurdish Dilemma," *Survival* 35 (Winter 1993), pp. 51–70. In 1998, Barkey and Graham E. Fuller published *Turkey's Kurdish Question* (Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield, 1998).
- 18 Michael Gunter, *The Kurds Ascending: The Evolving Solution to the Kurdish Problem in Iraq and Turkey*, 2nd ed. (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2011); *Out of Nowhere: The Kurds of Syria in Peace and War* (London: Hurst and Company, 2014); and *The Kurds: A Modern History*, 2nd ed. (Princeton, NJ: Markus Wiener Publishers, 2016), among others.

- 19 Michael M. Gunter, "Trump, Turkey and the Kurds," *Middle East Policy* 24 (Summer 2017), pp. 78–86; and "US Middle East Policy and the Kurds," *Orient* 58:2 (2017), pp. 43–51, are two of his most recent ones.
- 20 See Michael M. Gunter, "Interview: Abdullah Ocalan, Head of the PKK," *Middle East Quarterly* 5 (June 1998), pp. 79–85; and Michael M. Gunter, "An Interview with the PKK's Ocalan," *Journal of Conflict Studies* 18 (Fall 1998), pp. 104–109.
- 21 On Ocalan's capture in February 1999, see Michael M. Gunter, "The Continuing Kurdish Problem in Turkey after Ocalan's Capture," *Third World Quarterly* 21 (October 2000), pp. 849–869.
- 22 Based on papers presented at conferences it sponsored, The Ahmed Foundation for Kurdish Studies published privately *The Kurdish Question and International Law*, 2000; and *Kurdish Exodus: From Internal Displacement to Diaspora*, 2002. Subsequently, the Ahmed Foundation went on to publish three more academic studies co-edited by Mohammed M. A. Ahmed and Michael M. Gunter, *The Kurdish Question and the 2003 Iraqi War* (Costa Mesa, CA: Mazda Publishers, 2005); *The Evolution of Kurdish Nationalism* (Costa Mesa, CA: Mazda Publishers, 2007); and *The Kurdish Spring* (Costa Mesa, CA: Mazda Publishers, 2013).
- 23 Mohammed M. A. Ahmed, *America Unravels Iraq: Kurds, Shiites and Sunni Arabs Compete for Supremacy* (Costa Mesa, CA: Mazda Publishers, 2010); and Mohammed M. A. *Iraqi Kurds and Nation-Building* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2012).
- 24 Also see Alireza Nader, et al., *Regional Implications of an Independent Kurdistan* (Santa Monica, CA: Rand Corporation, 2016).
- 25 Among his many publications, possibly Nader Entessar is best known for his *Kurdish Ethnonationalism* (Boulder, CO: Lynne Rienner, 1992); and *Kurdish Politics in the Middle East* (Lanham, MD: Lexington Books, 2009).
- 26 Brendan O'Leary, John McGarry, and Khaled Salih, eds., *The Future of Kurdistan in Iraq* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2005).
- 27 David Romano, *The Kurdish Nationalist Movement: Opportunity, Mobilization and Identity* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006) is possibly his best-known contribution.
- 28 See, for example, his "Iraq's Descent into Civil War: A Constitutional Explanation," *Middle East Journal* 68:4 (Autumn 2014), pp. 547–566; "Iraqi Kurdistan and Turkey: Temporary Marriage?" *Middle East Policy*, 22:1 (2015), pp. 89–101; and "Iraqi Kurdistan: Challenges of Autonomy in the Wake of US Withdrawal," *International Affairs* (London) 86 (2010), pp. 1345–1359, among numerous others.
- 29 David Romano and Mehmet Gurses, eds., *Conflict, Democratization, and the Kurds in the Middle East: Turkey, Iran, Iraq, and Syria* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2014).
- 30 Denise Natali, *The Kurds and the State: Evolving National Identity in Iraq, Turkey, and Iran* (Syracuse, NY: Syracuse University Press, 2005), is probably her best-known work. It was the recipient of the Choice Award for Outstanding Academic Titles. Other noteworthy publications include *The Kurdish Quasi-State: Development and Dependency in Post-Gulf War Iraq* (Syracuse, NY: Syracuse University Press, 2010); "The Kirkuk Conundrum," *Ethnopolitics* 7:4 (November 2008), pp. 433–443; and "Kurdish Concessions in Baghdad," *Foreign Policy Magazine* (December 2010), among others.
- 31 Gunes Murat Tezcur, "Violence and Nationalist Mobilization: The Onset of the Kurdish Insurgency in Turkey," *Nationalities Papers* 43:2 (2015), pp. 248–266.
- 32 Gunes Murat Tezcur, *Muslim Reformers in Iran and Turkey: The Paradox of Moderation* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 2016); and "Democracy Promotion, Authoritarian Resiliency, and Political Unrest in Iran," *Democratization* 19:1 (2102), pp. 120–140.
- 33 Gunes Murat Tezcur, "Ordinary People, Extraordinary Risks: Participation in an Ethnic Rebellion," *American Political Science Review* 110:2 (2016), pp. 247–264.
- 34 Nicole F. Watts, *Activists in Office: Kurdish Politics and Protest in Turkey* (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 2010) is probably her best-known publication. Others include "The Role of Symbolic Capital in Protest: State-Society Relations and the Destruction of the Halabja Martyrs Monument in the Kurdistan Region of Iraq," *Comparative Studies of South Asia, Africa and the Middle East* 32:1 (2012), pp. 70–85; and "Towards Kurdish Distinctiveness in Electoral Politics: The 1977 Elections in Diyarbakir," (with Giles Dorronsoro), *International Journal of Middle East Studies* 41:3 (August 2009), pp. 457–487.
- 35 Vera Eccarius-Kelly, *The Militant Kurds: A Dual Strategy for Freedom* (Santa Barbara, CA: Praeger, 2011) is perhaps her most prominent work. Other notable publications include "The Imaginary Kurdish Museum: Ordinary Kurds, Narrative Nationalisms and Collective Memory," *Kurdish*

- Studies* 3:2 (October 2015), pp. 172–191; and “Surreptitious Lifelines: A Structural Analysis of the FARC and the PKK,” *Terrorism and Political Violence* 24:2 (2012), pp. 235–258.
- 36 Diane E. King, *Kurdistan on the Global Stage: Kinship, Land, and Community in Iraq* (New Brunswick, NJ and London: Rutgers University Press, 2014).
 - 37 Janet Klein, *The Margins of Empire: Kurdish Militias in the Ottoman Tribal Zone* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2011).
 - 38 Mehmet Gurses, “Ethnic Exclusion and Mobilization: The Kurdish Conflict in Turkey” (with Gunes Murat Tezcur) *Comparative Politics* 49:2 (January 2017), pp. 213–230; and “Environmental Consequences of Civil War: Evidence from the Kurdish Conflict in Turkey,” *Civil Wars* 14:2 (2012), pp. 254–271 are two of his important publications as well as the joint collection of chapters he co-edited with David Romano, *Conflict, Democratization, and the Kurds in the Middle East: Turkey, Iran, Iraq, and Syria* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2014).
 - 39 Michael L. Chyet, *Kurdish-English Dictionary/Ferhenga Kurmanci-Ingilizi* (New Haven, CT and London: Yale University Press, 2003) is arguably the best Kurdish-English dictionary available.
 - 40 Peter Galbraith, *The End of Iraq: How American Incompetence Created a War without End* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 2006) analyzes very well how Iraq has become a broken, failed state that makes Iraqi Kurdish independence likely in the future.
 - 41 Jonathan C. Randal, *After Such Knowledge, What Forgiveness: My Encounters with Kurdistan* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1997).
 - 42 Kevin McKiernan, *The Kurds: A People in Search of Their Homeland* (New York: St. Martin’s Press, 2006).
 - 43 Aliza Marcus, *Blood and Belief: The PKK and the Kurdish Fight for Independence* (New York and London: New York University Press, 2007).
 - 44 Quil Lawrence, *Invisible Nation: How the Kurds’ Quest for Statehood Is Shaping Iraq and the Middle East* (New York: Walker Publishing Company, 2008).
 - 45 Susan Meiselas, *Kurdistan: In the Shadow of History*, 2nd ed. (Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 2008). This volume contains 301 often rare color plates and 219 halftones. The first edition was published by Random House in 1997.

2

KURDISH STUDIES IN EUROPE

Vera Eccarius-Kelly

Introduction

As a subspecialization of Middle East Studies, contemporary Kurdish Studies integrates a wide range of methodological and geographic foci. The field includes the study of languages, literatures, and linguistics; research related to peace and conflict studies, ethno-nationalism, migration, and diasporas; and intersectional projects on gender, race, and human rights. Kurdish Studies also overlaps with anthropology, history, international relations, and political science. Over the last decade, Kurdish Studies has demonstrated an increasing openness to younger scholars with an interest in interdisciplinary and boundary-spanning work.¹

In 2016, the University of Leicester, UK, offered its first specialized Kurdish Studies Summer School, which was organized and directed by sociologist Ipek Demir.² Best known in the field of Kurdish Studies for grappling with notions of identity in “Battling with *Memleket* in London: The Kurdish Diaspora’s Engagement with Turkey,” Demir’s summer program affirmed the emergence of new directions in Kurdish Studies.³ The far-reaching themes that were integrated into the summer school program reinforced the field’s increasingly multifaceted and interdisciplinary approaches. Recent publications in Kurdish Studies (and in the *Kurdish Studies* journal) demonstrate a pattern of bridging disciplinary boundaries by proposing an engagement with varied methodologies, diverse schools of thought, and broader epistemological concepts.⁴

The aim of this chapter is to identify how the field of contemporary Kurdish Studies has evolved over time, why certain academic institutions or research centers in Western Europe dominate the field of Kurdish Studies, and in which ways European-based scholars shape both the existing knowledge and new narratives about Kurdistan and Kurds. This chapter also reviews the emergence of clusters of scholarly communities that are focused on resisting political pressures from outside of Europe to silence their academic contributions or to frame their work as ideologically tarnished. Organizationally, this chapter offers several subsections to examine Kurdish Studies in the context of (a) historical developments, (b) fluctuating geographic and linguistic challenges, and (c) the rise of ethno-national politics. In all areas, scholars involved with Kurdish Studies have faced tremendous barriers yet managed to prevail by pursuing innovative scholarly projects and networks. Despite the reemergence of constraints related to emergency measures in various parts of Kurdistan, the larger field of Kurdish Studies

in Europe looks promising. It is deeply rooted within numerous European institutions and increasingly recognized through newly formed centers of scholarly excellence.

In sum, doctoral- and master's-level students should continue to seek out specialized Kurdish Studies programs in Europe today. As a dynamic and interdisciplinary area of study, the field has moved away from the once dominant state-centric emphasis on intelligence, government, and military affairs. In fact, more refereed journals now invite and welcome contributions from Kurdish Studies scholars, which affirms a general commitment to the multiplicity of communities in the Middle East. Instead of the once overwhelming scholarly emphasis on Arab-, Persian-, and Turkish-centric articles, a noticeable shift has taken place, creating space for more diverse contributions. Edited volumes and special journal issues now focus on the study of Kurdish, Yezidi, Shabak, Jewish, Turkmen, Assyrian, and other regional, syncretic, and ethnic communities. Therefore, prospects for students interested in pursuing Kurdish Studies seem propitious, notwithstanding the return of familiar barriers that have limited archival work as well as fieldwork in parts of Kurdistan.

The origins of Kurdish Studies at Western European Institutions⁵

Numerous European academic institutions in the UK, France, and Germany assert historically grounded connections to various regions of Kurdistan. The field of Kurdish Studies in Europe never experienced a period of uninterrupted growth, which tended to weaken or undermine opportunities for academic institutionalization. Kurdish Studies in Europe have been characterized as highly decentralized and often dispersed across numerous academic disciplines until very recently. Frequently, the field has been institutionally subordinated to more traditional areas of study, such as Middle East or Iranian Studies. In addition, as a result of both political and economic realities, Kurdish Studies in Europe repeatedly faced pressures related to disciplinary program mergers, the reduction of funding opportunities for younger scholars, and the increasingly common practice of failing to replace senior scholars after their retirement.

Several positive trends must also be identified. A growing body of work has been published by younger scholars who emphasize linkages across conventional academic and national boundaries. In particular, it is noteworthy that considerable opportunities have been created for Kurdish Studies scholars through interdisciplinary and transnational approaches, and the pursuit of comparative methodologies. This development, in spite of troubling restrictions involving research in Kurdistan, has led to a growing sense of academic autonomy for Kurdish Studies.

A historical examination of Kurdish Studies in European countries has been carried out by several well-recognized scholars. In particular, Martin van Bruinessen's extensive work in *Wiener Jahrbuch für Kurdische Studien* (2014), Joyce Blau's contributions in *Encyclopedia Iranica* (2009), and Clémence Scalbert-Yücel and Marie Le Ray's inquiry into the production of knowledge about Kurds in the *European Journal of Turkish Studies* (2006) shaped historical understandings about the field.⁶ Both van Bruinessen and Blau traced the origins of Kurdish Studies as an academic field to orientalist scholars involved in colonial and missionary activities in the late 18th century.⁷ Initial studies on Kurds published by Catholic and, later, Protestant missionaries focused on language and grammar, and sporadically provided regional histories and ethnographies.⁸ During this period, Kurdish Studies relied on descriptive approaches, which privileged disciplines such as archeology, ethnology, linguistics, and history. Nearly all aspects of Kurdish life were studied by orientalist scholars, who focused on

cultural and linguistic practices or provided insights into the lives of distinguished Kurdish leaders. Military officers, diplomats, and colonial administrator-scholars in the service of the British, French, Russian, and later German imperial authorities pursued specific cultural and language projects with the intent to advance strategic regional interests.⁹

The British school of Kurdish Studies exerted a noticeable influence on the larger academic field in Europe and can be traced to two influential orientalist scholars: Major Ely Banister Soane (1881–1923) and diplomat Cecil J. Edmonds (1889–1979). Major Soane arrived in Persia in 1902 and spent years traveling in Mesopotamia and Kurdistan. He published a number of influential books on Kurdish grammar and culture, and a well-known travel account, fittingly entitled *To Mesopotamia and Kurdistan in Disguise*, which recounted his journey from Constantinople to Baghdad while impersonating a Persian traveler.¹⁰ Edmonds, who served as a political officer with HM Expeditionary Forces in Mesopotamia and spent years in the region, first visited Kurdistan in 1922 and then rose to the position of advisor to the Ministry of the Interior of Iraq from 1935 to 1945.¹¹ After Edmonds left Iraq, he became the UK's permanent delegate to the International Refugee Organization and served in the British Foreign Service until 1950. His career then continued in academia for a short period of time. He was appointed to the School of Oriental and African Studies (SOAS) at the University of London and became its first chair of Kurdish Studies. He lectured in Kurdish languages until 1957, when the position was filled by Neil Mackenzie. Initially, Mackenzie served in the role of lecturer in Kurdish and was later named lecturer in Iranian languages (1955–1975) before accepting a professorship in Germany. Today, both *Kurmanji* and *Sorani* Kurdish continue to be offered at SOAS on a regular basis within the Department of Languages and Cultures of the Near East and Middle East.¹²

The formation of financially independent Kurdish Studies centers and programs characterizes a very recent phenomenon at European universities. The rise of major Kurdish political players in the Kurdistan Regional Government (KRG) in Iraq encouraged this parallel development in academia. In 2006, the University of Exeter in the UK established a Centre for Kurdish Studies after receiving funding from the Ibrahim Ahmed Foundation as well as Nechirvan Barzani, Prime Minister of the KRG. While housed in the same building as the Institute for Arab and Islamic Studies, it and its successor program have produced some 26 PhDs in Kurdish Studies as of June 2016. Gareth Stansfield, a leading scholar on Iraqi Kurdish history and politics, has played the crucial role in this program. Stansfield is also the Al-Qasimi Professor of Arab Gulf Studies and is a Senior Associate Fellow of the Royal United Services Institute (RUSI), London, among others. Christine Allison, a prolific scholar on Yezidi oral traditions, holds the Ibrahim Ahmed Chair at Exeter.¹³ She studied Kurdish at SOAS, was a tenured lecturer (*maître de conférences*) in Kurdish at the *Institut National des Langues et Civilisations Orientales* (INALCO) in Paris, and then accepted the chair position at the Centre for Kurdish Studies at Exeter in 2007. Her colleague in Kurdish Studies is Clémence Scalbert-Yücel, a senior lecturer in ethno-politics.¹⁴

Along with the premier program at the University of Exeter, several smaller Kurdish Studies options are beginning to emerge in the UK, as evidenced by the University of Leicester's recent addition of Marianna Charountaki as Lecturer of Kurdish Politics and International Relations. Charountaki earned her doctoral degree from Exeter, and after publishing her work on Kurdistan-US relations, she brought funding from the KRG to the University of Leicester. She now directs the Kurdistan International Studies Unit (KISU) at the university.¹⁵ Ömer Tekdemir, a PhD Research Associate at Leicester, further enhances the University of Leicester's ability to organize occasional seminars and special conferences

related to Kurdish Studies. According to the University of Leicester, the 2017 Kurdistan Studies Unit was established “to bridge the gap” that exists between institutionalized research in the field of Kurdish Studies and International Relations in the UK.¹⁶ In March 2016, the KISU held its first major symposium under the title “The Role of the Kurds in the Middle East and Beyond: Regional and International Interactions,” and among the most significant political participants were the KRG’s Government Spokesperson and the KRG’s High Representative to the UK.

The French school of Kurdish Studies similarly emerged out of a military and intelligence tradition within the French Mandate Administration in Syria and Lebanon (1923–1946). Both Roger Lescot (1914–1975) and Pierre Rondot (1904–2000) were among the best-known orientalist Kurdish scholars in continental Europe.¹⁷ Lescot spent some 25 years in Kurdistan and studied *dengbêj* storyteller musicians in Syria during the mid-1930s. While they carried out scholarly work in the region, Lescot and Rondot also engaged in extensive intelligence gathering within Kurdish communities throughout the war years, which was a common practice in the region.¹⁸ According to Jordi Tejel,

Rondot and Lescot were more than solely French orientalists dealing with Kurdish affairs. Today, we know that Rondot and Lescot went beyond the parameters of their scientific mission giving precious assistance to Kurdish intellectuals, especially Jaladat and Kamuran Badirkhan, who had sought refuge in the Levant after the Turkish republic was founded in 1923.¹⁹

In an experience that is certainly reminiscent of British orientalist scholar Edmonds at SOAS, Lescot became the first chair of Kurdish Studies at the *École Nationale des Langues Orientales Vivantes (Langues O’)* in 1945. However, he only remained at *Langues O’* until 1947, when Kamuran Badirkhan was named chair of Kurdish Language and Civilization. He was followed by Ismet Chérif Vanly, a Syrian-born Kurd. Vanly was later joined by Thomas Bois and Joyce Blau.²⁰ By 1970, the institution of *Langues O’* faced a significant restructuring effort and became integrated into *Paris III-Sorbonne Nouvelle*, now known as the INALCO. Sorbonne’s INALCO inherited numerous arts, language, and humanities faculties from the former University of Paris, and its students can continue their studies of Kurdish by taking courses in both *Kurmanji* and *Sorani*. The predominantly publicly funded *Fondation Institut Kurde de Paris* also plays a significant part in advancing access to Kurdish language studies in France while simultaneously offering courses in French to Kurdish immigrants and refugees.²¹

The German school of Kurdish Studies emerged as a consequence of increasing economic, political, and cultural relations between the Ottoman Empire and Germany. The first well-known orientalist German scholars were Emil Rödinger (1801–1874), a professor of oriental languages in Berlin, and August-Friedrich Pott (1802–1887), a scholar of linguistics in Göttingen. Both shared an interest in theology and frequently collaborated. Another influential German orientalist was Oskar Mann (1867–1917), who traveled through Persia from 1901 to 1903, taking photographs and documenting archeological monuments.²² Van Buinessen mentioned that Oskar Mann was not just a librarian at the Royal Prussian Library in Berlin but also “the first Western scholar to carry out extensive linguistic fieldwork among the Kurds and neighboring Iranian groups.”²³ In 2014, Mann’s travel accounts were republished by Mojtaba Kolivand under the title *Persische und kurdische Reiseberichte*.²⁴ All three German orientalist researchers, Rödinger, Pott, and Mann, pursued scholarly work related to Persian and Kurdish languages, regional cultural practices, and archeological studies, which shaped

the still common practice of housing Kurdish language studies within Iranian programs at German academic institutions.²⁵

Berlin's Humboldt University supported Kurdish Studies (*Kurdologie*) for years, but discontinued the program in the mid-1990s when mergers became an increasingly common practice. The Free University of Berlin (FU) has offered *Kurmanji* language courses as part of its Institute for Iranian Studies and maintains a lecturer position in Kurdish, which is currently held by Feryad Fazil Omar.²⁶ The Kurdish Studies working group at FU attempted to develop an independent Kurdish Institute in the 1990s and succeeded temporarily when a guest professorship for Kurdish Studies in the Institute of Anthropology became a reality in 1996/1997. That position was filled by van Bruinessen; yet, despite vigorous outreach efforts, sustained public funding for a Kurdish Studies Institute at the Free University failed to materialize. However, a privately funded European Center for Kurdish Studies was formed in 1999, which continues to collaborate with the *Österreichische Gesellschaft für Kurdologie* (Austrian Society for Kurdish Studies), led by Thomas Schmidinger. A network of affiliated scholars with the European Center for Kurdish Studies produces high-quality papers and reports on a range of Kurdish issues. The Center, nevertheless, remains heavily reliant on private support and occasionally receives specialized public funding.

The University of Göttingen holds one of four distinguished chairs of Iranian Studies in Germany (Berlin, as mentioned is another, along with Bamberg and Hamburg). Göttingen has offered a concentration in Kurdish Studies, and represents one of the most prestigious centers of Iranian Studies in Europe.²⁷ Neil Mackenzie, formerly a leading academic at SOAS, arrived in Göttingen in 1975 and retired nearly 20 years later in 1994; he was followed by Philip Kreyenbroek, who led the program from 1996 to 2014. Kreyenbroek specialized in Iranian religions (Zoroastrianism and Yezidism), but has now retired. Currently, Khanna Usoyan Omarkhali, who holds a PhD from St. Petersburg State University, serves as Assistant Professor in the Institute of Iranian Studies in Göttingen.²⁸ Like Kreyenbroek, she is a prolific and well-known scholar on Yezidism, and her significant scholarly contributions (in collaboration with Kreyenbroek) were highlighted in a special issue on Yezidism in *Kurdish Studies* in 2016.²⁹

In 2012, Nechirvan Barzani, the KRG's Prime Minister, also provided financial support for the *Mustafa Barzani Arbeitsstelle für Kurdische Studien* in Erfurt. It appears that the start-up funds given to Erfurt seemed comparable to the amount that was provided to the University of Leicester—a more modest sum than the financing that had established the Exeter Center for Kurdish Studies in 2006.³⁰ The Barzani Center in Erfurt is currently led by Ferhad Seyder, who arrived from the FU. In 2013, the center was fully integrated into the University of Erfurt system, which stabilized access to basic funding. However, nearly all Kurdish Studies programs in Western Europe grapple with providing sufficient scholarship support for the number of interested doctoral and master's level students. State funding sources have been limited in an environment of academic austerity in an effort to address budgetary deficits. In addition, the original funding the KRG provided to Exeter's Center for Kurdish Studies, for example, has run out. The KRG, however, appears to be interested in reinvesting in several Kurdish Studies Centers throughout Europe in the coming semesters.

Geographic and linguistic impediments to scholars

Two significant barriers created challenges for Kurdish Studies researchers during the past several decades, namely (a) the varying levels of accessibility to particular regions of Kurdistan and (b) the range of languages required for carrying out substantial archival and

field work. Some 30 years ago, it was extremely challenging to pursue any sort of ethnographic work related to Kurdish communities in Turkey as the war between the military/security apparatus and the Kurdistan Workers Party (PKK) was at its height. While opportunities for research in predominantly Kurdish provinces improved significantly in the last decade, current patterns of widespread repression in Turkey make it once again nearly impossible to carry out sustained fieldwork. The United Nations (UN) has accused the Turkish government of serious human rights violations during the state's targeting of Kurdish militants between July 2015 and December 2016. Its report suggested that up to half a million people have been displaced by the violence and that hundreds of civilians died during that time period.³¹ The UN High Commissioner for Human Rights, Zeid Ra'ad Al Hussein, also criticized the Turkish government for failing to initiate a proper investigation into the unlawful killings and displacements.³² Few scholars can expect to pursue systematic research under such conditions as that might endanger Kurdish communities as well as the researchers.

Comparatively limited knowledge exists about Iranian Kurds since the Islamic Republic started denying visas to international scholars in the 1980s. Meticulous studies about Kurdish communities in *Rojhilat* (East Kurdistan or the Iranian part of Kurdistan) are infrequent and often rely on secondary sources. At times, researchers of Kurdish origin with family connections to the region add contributions that represent exceptionally important insights. It is not surprising that the UN has affirmed a long familiar pattern of systemic repression that targets Kurds in Iran. Asma Jahangir, UN Special Rapporteur-designate for Human Rights in Iran, asserted that nearly half of all Iranian prisoners today are Kurdish, even though the Kurdish community in Iran makes up an estimated 7 million people, or 10 percent of the entire population.³³ Her report suggests that relentless brutality affects the lives of Kurds in Iran, and that one-fifth of all executions in 2016 targeted Kurds.

Researchers interested in Syrian Kurdish communities have also faced noteworthy obstacles that relate to the overbearing security apparatus. Traditionally, the Syrian state required scholars to apply for special visas or entry permits to ensure that government minders could keep an eye on scholars to control the flow of information. Today, of course, the country is enmeshed in a gruesome civil war, which presents its own set of challenges for researchers. Scholars with an interest in radical democracy (or democratic autonomy), however, have embraced opportunities to spend time in *Rojava*, the Kurdish-controlled cantons of northern Syria known as *Efrîn* (in the West), and *Cizîrê* and *Kobanê* (in the East).³⁴ Increasingly compelling journalistic and scholarly publications encourage a deeper study of Kurdish political structures. Both the socio-political realities in the *de facto* autonomous region and the use of militias, the YPG or Popular Protection Units that engage in fights against the Islamic State and Turkey, are of deepening interests to researchers.³⁵

In addition, the KRG in contrast to other parts of Kurdistan invites international scholars to pursue their research without constraints. When the region had been under Saddam Hussein's control, the area was entirely closed off—especially from the mid-1980s to 1988, when the Baathist regime's attacks culminated in the gassing of Kurds in communities surrounding Halabja. But following the 2003 war in Iraq, researchers entered the region on a constant basis. They began to teach at the newly established universities in Erbil, Sulaimani, Duhok, and elsewhere, and pursued transnational scholarly networks. Interestingly, and perhaps not surprising, publications related to Kurdistan today are dominated by projects in the KRG. It is essential to remember, however, that studies on the KRG do not necessarily represent interests that are broadly advanced in all of Kurdistan. Many Kurds (both in the KRG and across borders) perceive the KRG to be economically dependent on neighboring

Turkey, and accuse Ankara of advancing its preferred policies through linkages with the KRG. Research on Kurdistan must therefore be considered within the appropriate historical and geographic contexts rather than be accepted as representing a unified Kurdish position or regional agenda.

Finally, linguistic realities are also continuing to present impediments to scholars. While increasing numbers of Kurds speak English and German, and many European scholars have knowledge of *Kurmanji* and *Sorani*, archival documents still tend to be available in Arabic, Farsi, and Turkish. Access to language training, therefore, is essential for many students and deserves to be financially supported. While options to pursue Kurdish language study in Europe exist, an increasing number of students from Europe also flock to universities in Kurdistan to improve their languages. A few years ago, a heated debate over creating a unified written Kurdish language became politicized and ended up producing a “language war” that pitted supporters of *Sorani* against those who hoped to advance the use of *Kurmanji*. Hassan Ghazi articulated at the University of Exeter in 2009 that political posturing and the projection of cultural power play a significant role in this struggle. Ghazi suggested that the lack of a unified written Kurdish language was “unlikely to affect the development of Kurdish communities in economic, social, political and cultural spheres and it is not the source of the present division among the Kurds even in Iraq.”³⁶

National liberation and Kurdish Studies

In the 1960s, Kurdish Studies in Europe accelerated in terms of academic research related to socio-economic and political structures, language and cultural rights, and the intensifying ethno-national movements in Iraq, Turkey, and Iran (Syrian Kurdish agendas emerged fully after the Qamishli uprisings in 2004). More than 25 years ago, van Bruinessen had noted that between a quarter and a third of all Kurds effectively lived outside of the territorial region of Kurdistan and suggested that only a small minority might ever be able to return to the homeland.³⁷

Among the most significant political developments that allowed Kurdish Studies to gain traction at European universities was Mustafa Barzani’s revolt in Iraq in the 1960s and again in the 1970s. Scholars with an interest in Kurdish communities intensively focused their research on national liberation movements. Following the Iran–Iraq war (1980–1988) and the genocide carried out by the Iraqi Baathist regime against the Kurds (al-Anfal/Halabja), a growing body of work examined the existing knowledge on genocide, trauma, and memory.³⁸ A series of Turkish military coups (1960, 1971, and 1980) and then the rise of insurgent warfare led by the PKK (Kurdistan Workers Party) in the early 1980s also marked moments that contributed to growing academic interest in theories related to internal colonialism, rural sociology, and ideologies of resistance.³⁹ More recently (2003 and after), the field of Kurdish Studies was measurably reshaped by the establishment of the KRG, the rise of the Islamic State, the battle for Kobanê, and Turkey’s renewed emphasis on a military solution to the so-called Kurdish question. Kurdish Studies has been deeply and, at times, negatively affected by high levels of political sensitivity. Fragmentations within the field are a manifestation of restrictive environments in Kurdistan, the perception that research agendas are vulnerable to co-optation or misuse. The notion that political agendas are advanced by regional powers such as Turkey and Iran has created tensions in some academic departments.

The Kurdish experience with conflict, expulsion, and migration made the European-based Kurdish diaspora increasingly diverse, but also politically engaged and active. By the

late 1980s, Kurdish protesters reached out to engage with scholarly communities, collaborated with leftist intellectuals, and fed information to journalists. This pattern, over time, resulted in growing linkages between circles of political activists and the academic field of Kurdish Studies. A period of intensive politicization in a number of European countries (in particular in Belgium, Germany, and the Netherlands, among others) shaped future academic interests and interactions between diaspora Kurdish community members and scholars.⁴⁰

It is without question that Kurdish communities have been shaped by their experiences with expulsion and migration just as much as by their regional origins, social status, religious affiliations, cultural practices, and so forth. Kurdish cultural centers, social associations, and political organizations have long reflected levels of heterogeneity in the diaspora through varied ideological positions and cultural memberships. Yasemin Soysal observed early on that migrant populations, such as the Kurds in Europe, tended to bring with them an entire “organizational repertoire” that over time adjusted to the political sphere in the country of settlement.⁴¹ For example, the ethno-nationalist umbrella group KON-KURD (Confederation of Kurdish Organizations in Europe) differed in its membership and mobilization strategies from the transnationally oriented KOMKAR (Confederation of Association from Kurdistan).⁴² According to Bahar Başer, KOMKAR has been portrayed as a more “moderate” nationalist Kurdish organization in Europe, while KON-KURD maintained linkages with PKK close groups.⁴³

Today, between 1.5 and 2 million Kurds live throughout Europe, with about 1 million Kurds dispersed in Germany.⁴⁴ The Kurdish diaspora initially expanded during the 1960s, creating sizable communities in Austria, Belgium, France, Germany, Greece, the Netherlands, Sweden, Switzerland, and the UK.⁴⁵ Denise Natali asserted in 2007 that some 250,000 Kurds in Europe originated from Iraq, 50,000 Kurds hailed from Iran, and about 15,000 Kurds had arrived from Syria.⁴⁶ About 85 percent of Kurds living in Germany originated from Turkey, while Kurds in Scandinavia arrived mostly from Iran and Iraq.⁴⁷ Kurdish asylum seekers in Sweden, more highly educated in contrast to many Kurds in Germany, focused intensively on cultural and linguistic projects, in part because the Swedish state sponsored Kurdish academics, writers, and artists.⁴⁸ Khalid Khayati and Magnus Dahlstedt suggested that about 60,000–70,000 diaspora Kurds in Sweden were from “highly differentiated social background[s] and engage[d] in various skilled occupations in Sweden.”⁴⁹ The Syrian civil war and the refugee crisis over the past several years have made it harder to determine the size and composition of various Kurdish diaspora communities in Europe. Thousands of Kurdish refugees fled without papers; some relied on human smugglers; and many have been forced to remain in the shadows as undocumented laborers across the continent. In particular, the number of Kurdish arrivals from Iraq and Syria has risen dramatically over the past five years (especially in Scandinavian countries and in Germany). In response to these realities, Kurdish Studies can be expected to embrace a host of new studies and methodologies related to migration and war.

Contemporary research clusters

Scholarly activity in all aspects related to Kurdish Studies rely on multiple, innovative, and at times fused methodologies. This is particularly the case in reference to ethno-nationalism, cultural and linguistic manifestations, and diaspora politics, which have enriched existing knowledge about Kurds in Europe, but also advanced new narratives and new ways of conceptualizing transnational influences on Kurdish communities.⁵⁰

Innovative ideas that reach across disciplinary borders helped to reframe scholarly relationships by linking migration and ethnic identity, borders and political violence, feminism, media studies, environmentalism, and diaspora studies. Today, the most exciting opportunities for Kurdish researchers emerge through transnational and frequently online scholarly networks. Researchers from diverse academic fields increasingly share project ideas, announce conferences, and provide publication updates, while pursuing connections with colleagues in Kurdistan and beyond.

In 2009, Welat Zeydanlioğlu founded the Kurdish Studies Network (KSN), a global network for scholars interested in Kurdish Studies. Among his well-received work is a co-edited book (with Cengiz Güneş) on *The Kurdish Question in Turkey: New Perspectives on Violence, Representation, and Reconciliation*.⁵¹ As an exceptionally important research network, KSN welcomes a multiplicity of projects related to Kurdish scholarly activities. Zeydanlioglu also serves as the managing editor of the *Kurdish Studies* journal, which was launched in 2013, while van Bruinessen is the journal's editor in chief. Comparative, transnational, and interdisciplinary work is frequently published in *Kurdish Studies*. While the journal initially faced serious financial threats, its funding appears to have stabilized in recent years. The stated editorial goal has been to

revitalize and reorient research, scholarship and debates in the field of Kurdish studies in a multidisciplinary fashion covering a wide range of topics including, but not limited to, economics, history, society, gender, minorities, politics, health, law, environment, language, media, culture, arts, and education.

Kurdish Studies has published several innovative special issues, affirming its commitment to a wide variety of methodologies and geographic areas. In 2015, a special journal issue concentrated on the Kurdish diaspora (guest edited by Bahar Başer, Ann-Catrin Emanuelsson, and Mari Toivanen), and in 2016 on Yezidism (guest edited by Khanna Omarkhali and Philip Kreyenbroek).

The newly formed International Institute for the Study of Kurdish Societies (IISKS) in Germany also represents a network that links Kurdish Studies scholars with international scholars interested in all areas of Kurdistan. Founded as a non-governmental and non-political organization that emphasizes cultural and civilizational dynamics in Kurdish societies, the institute publishes reports and papers, and also organizes occasional conferences. Frankfurt's prestigious Goethe University agreed to host the society's first major conference in September 2017. In addition, IISKS also produces the *Journal of the Study of Kurdish Societies* (JSKS), which is an open access and peer-reviewed journal.

Contemporary Kurdish Studies is a field that can be expected to grow in the coming decades. The practice of establishing thematic research clusters at several European universities has produced strong collaborative relationships across recognized Kurdish Studies programs in Europe. It also appears that the KRG is committed to financially strengthening Kurdish Studies programs in the future to maintain relationships between a growing number of universities in Kurdistan and Kurdish Studies centers in Western Europe (and the United States). While renewed regional barriers are limiting access to archival sources and obstructing field work in some Kurdish communities, a wide range of methodological approaches have helped the field mature. This change allows younger researchers to gain entry into the field, especially since the KRG welcomes international students through its own articulated academic networks. Kurdish Studies has entered a dynamic phase as it has fully committed to an interdisciplinary and transnational outlook for the future.

Notes

- 1 A similar observation can be made about the state of research related to ethnicity and nationalism as a recent special issue of *Ethnopolitics* has demonstrated. Guest editors Erika Forsberg, Johanna Kristin Birnir, and Christian Davenport focused on the state of the field and its new directions for research in *Ethnopolitics* 16, 1 (2017).
- 2 For information, see “Kurdish Studies Summer School,” The University of Leicester at www2.le.ac.uk/departments/sociology/research/conferences-and-workshops/kurdish-studies-summer-school.
- 3 Ipek Demir, “Battling with *Memleket* in London: The Kurdish Diaspora’s Engagement with Turkey,” *Journal of Ethnic and Migration Studies* 38, 5 (2012): 815–831. Also, Ipek Demir, “Rethinking Cosmopolitanism, Multiculturalism and Diaspora via the Diasporic Cosmopolitanism of Europe’s Kurds,” in *European Cosmopolitanisms: Colonial Histories and Postcolonial Societies*, eds. Gurminder K. Bhambra and John Narayan (London: Routledge, 2017), 121–135.
- 4 A few recent journal articles indicate this pattern. For example, Bilgin Ayata, “Kurdish Transnational Politics and Turkey’s Changing Kurdish Policy: The Journey of Kurdish Broadcasting from Europe to Turkey,” *Journal of Contemporary European Studies* 4 (2011): 523–533; Wendelmoet Hamelink and Bariş Hanifi, “Dengbêjs on Borderlands: Borders and the State as Seen through the Eyes of Kurdish Singer-Poets,” *Kurdish Studies* 2, 1 (2014): 34–60; Vera Eccarius-Kelly, “The Imaginary Kurdish Museum: Ordinary Kurds, Narrative Nationalisms and Collective Memory,” *Kurdish Studies* 3, 2 (2015): 172–191.
- 5 My apologies to Kurdish Studies scholars in Central/Eastern Europe and Russia for the limitations set by this chapter. For example, a very active Kurdish Studies group emerged in 2008 within the Department of Iranian Studies in the Institute of Oriental Studies of Jagiellonian University in Krakow, Poland. The program is led by Dr. Joanna Bocheńska.
- 6 Martin van Bruinessen, “Kurdish Studies in Western and Central Europe,” in *Wiener Jahrbuch für Kurdische Studien* (Wiener Verlag für Sozialforschung, 2014), 18–96. Joyce Blau, “Kurdish Language,” *Encyclopedia Iranica*. Online edition (2009). Available at www.iranicaonline.org/articles/kurdish-language-ii-history-of-kurdish-studies. Clémence Scalbert-Yücel and Marie Le Ray, “Knowledge, Ideology and Power. Deconstructing Kurdish Studies,” *European Journal of Turkish Studies* 5 (2006). Available at <https://ejts.revues.org/777> In addition, see Michael M. Gunter, *Historical Dictionary of the Kurds*, 3rd ed. (Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield, 2018).
- 7 van Bruinessen, “Kurdish Studies in Western and Central Europe,” 20–28.
- 8 Blau, “Kurdish Language”.
- 9 van Bruinessen, “Kurdish Studies in Western and Central Europe,” 25–27.
- 10 Ely Banister Soane, *To Mesopotamia and Kurdistan in Disguise* (Boston, MA: Small, Maynard and Company, 1910).
- 11 For details about Edmonds’s life and work, see the Edmonds Collection housed at St. Anthony’s College www.sant.ox.ac.uk/mec/MEChandlists/GB165-0095-Cecil-Edmonds-Collection.pdf.
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PART II

Early Kurdish history



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3

THE KURDISH EMIRATES

Obstacles or precursors to Kurdish nationalism?

Michael Eppel

The main sociopolitical frameworks in Kurdistan in the premodern era were the tribes and the tribal, quasi-feudal principalities or emirates headed by emirs (or mirs). The emirates were ruled by strong Kurdish tribal dynasties, which dominated their tribes and subjected weaker tribes and non-tribal populations to their control, sometimes creating extensive supra-tribal political units. The major Kurdish tribal dynasties were the Hasanwahids (Hasanwiya) (959–1095), Banu Annaz (Annazids) (990–1116), Shaddadid (951–1075), and Banu Marwan (Marwanids) (984–1083).

Although the Kurdish emirates experienced varying degrees of autonomy, they continued to be vassals of successive Muslim overlords – the Abbasid, Seljuk, Turkmen, Ottoman, and Iranian (Safavid and Qajar) states and dynasties. From the tenth century, the Kurdish tribes and emirates were exposed to the growing pressure of migration from the east of Turkish tribes. In the eleventh century, the Seljuk sultanate arose a major force in the Muslim world. The Kurdish emirates and dynasties either submitted to the Seljuk rulers or were incorporated into their political arenas. The prominent Kurdish dynasty that won renown as Muslim fighters under Seljuk rule was the Ayyubi dynasty of Salah al-Din al Ayyubi (1137–1193), known as Saladin.¹

During the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries, the Kurdish emirates suffered from the destruction inflicted on the region by waves of Mongol conquests. From the mid-fourteenth century until the end of the fifteenth century, Kurdistan was dominated by Turkmen tribal confederations ruled by the “White Sheep” (*Aqqoyunlu*) and “Black Sheep” (*Karaqqoyunlu*) tribal dynasties.²

Their weak control of Kurdistan enabled the Kurdish emirates to recover. The relations between the Turkmen military tribal elites and Kurdish tribal society were essentially unstable. The Turkmen rulers accepted the autonomous, and at times even independent, status of the Kurdish tribes and emirates, which, in turn, accepted the Turkmen. Prominent among the Kurdish principalities was the Hasankeyf emirate, ruled by descendants of the Ayyubi dynasty in the service of Turkmen rulers.

During the fifteenth century, conflict broke out between the two Turkmen confederations. It was joined by the Kurdish emirates and tribes, many of which were allies, and indeed vassals, of the Black Sheep. Even in the early stages of its rise to power, in the years 1420–1436, the White Sheep confederation was forced to fight the Kurdish tribes and

emirates allied with the Black Sheep, but they had the help of some of the Kurdish tribes and emirates that they now ruled (see Endnote 2).

Following their victory, the White Sheep took over most of Kurdistan and Azerbaijan, and established their capital in Tabriz. Because the majority of Kurdish emirates and tribes were allies of the Black Sheep, the White Sheep leaders sought to eliminate the families of their emirs and tribal leaders, and appoint governors to take charge. Some Kurds found places at the court of the White Sheep rulers, but relations between the Turkmen military tribal elite and the Kurdish emirates and tribes were unstable, suspicious, and fraught with violent clashes. Against the background of the loose and unstable White Sheep regime, the virtually independent Kurdish emirates, especially the emirate of Bitlis, grew in strength. Even so, there was no uniformity in their actions. Each tribe and emir maintained an independent relationship with the Black Sheep confederation and its ruling dynasty, and subsequently with the White Sheep.

The Kurdish tribes and emirates thus divided their allegiance between the rival Turkmen dynasties. In the second half of the fifteenth century, the White Sheep conquered the old Hasankeyf emirate ruled by descendants of Ayyubis. Nevertheless, the Kurdish emirates continued to consolidate under the loose rule of the Turkmen. With the collapse of the White Sheep in the face of the strong, emerging Safawid–Iranian state and Ottoman Empire, the Kurdish emirates, although fragmented, became the major local forces in Kurdistan in the early sixteenth century.

At the end of that century, Emir Sharaf al-Din Bitlisi (or Bidlisi) published a famous book, *Sharafnama* (1597), about the history of the Kurdish states and emirates. In it, he lists the major emirates of his day, mainly in southern and eastern Kurdistan: Hakkari, Soran (Sohran), Baban, Ardalan, Bitlis (Bidlis), Chizire (Cizire, al-Jazira), Bahdinan (Bhadinan), Mush (Muks), and Chemiskezek (Chamishgazak) in the Dersim–Tuncheli area.³ He also mentions the emirate of Hasankeyf, whose emirs had accepted the suzerainty of the Turkmen White Sheep tribal confederation in 1455. With the conquest of Kurdistan by the Ottoman Sultan Selim I in 1514, the remaining emirates were subjected to direct Ottoman rule.

The role of the Kurdish emirates in the Ottoman–Iranian struggle

From the early sixteenth century, Kurdistan was divided between the two rival regional powers: the Ottoman Empire and the Iranian Safavid Shi'i state. The continual struggle between these two regional powers had a profound impact on the political and social conditions in Kurdistan, and created the environment in which the emirates survived, expanded, and eventually declined up until the first half of the nineteenth century.

The Ottomans, in the wake of their victory over the Safavid Iranians in the Battle of Chaldiran in 1514, took control of the greater part of Kurdistan. In the confrontation between the two powers, most of the Kurdish emirates had sided with the Ottoman Empire and played a significant role in the Ottoman conquest of Kurdistan and the Tigris and Euphrates valleys.

The successful cooperation between the Kurds and the Ottomans was the achievement of the Kurdish statesman and courtier, Mevlana Idris Bidlisi, who had been the secretary of the last White Sheep ruler before that dynasty was eliminated by the Safavids. He subsequently served at the court of the Ottoman Sultan Bayazid II (1481–1512) and of his heir, Sultan Selim I. On the latter's instructions, Bidlisi persuaded the 18-strong Kurdish emirs of the areas of Chemiskezek, Bitlis, Palu, Hasankeyf, Baradost, Baban, Soran, Amadiya, and Chizire (Cizire, al-Jazira in Arabic) to support the Ottomans.

The Kurdish emirs and tribes recognized the strength of the Ottomans as well as their common interest as Sunnis against the Iranian Shi'i state and against the Qizilbashi Sufi order, which was an ally of the Iranian Safavids. (The Shi'i Sufi order of the Qizilbashis had considerable influence among the Turkmen tribes, who were major rivals of the Kurds during the sixteenth century.)

The Kurdish emirs preferred the decentralized rule of their Ottomans because it allowed them to preserve some measure of autonomy. The policy of the Iranian Safavids, however, was to undermine strong emirs and independent emirates, and to favor marginal families dependent on and therefore loyal to the Iranian rulers. Ardalan was the only Kurdish emirate to maintain its autonomy as a vassal principality under Iranian rule. It played an important role in the struggle against the Ottoman Empire and was the main rival of the Ottomans' vassal emirates, which were the Bahdinan emirate in the seventeenth century and the strong Baban emirate in the eighteenth century. The emirs of Ardalan enjoyed considerable influence at the Iranian Shah's court. Some of the heads of Ardalan's ruling dynasty married into the Safavid dynasty and sometimes held significant positions at the Shah's court.

The Kurdish emirates: relative strength and cultural flowering

The emirates survived as long as their ruling emirs succeeded in maneuvering between different forces – other emirates, tribal Arab confederations, Ottoman *valis* (governors), and the Mamluk rulers of Baghdad. Their survival depended also on the developments in Ottoman–Iranian relations and on the fluctuations between the centralizing and decentralizing orientations of the Ottoman administration. In a list of Ottoman provinces dating from 1527, the leaders of 17 emirates are defined as the great emirs of Kurdistan.⁴

Over the course of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, the Ottoman Empire utilized the Kurdish emirates in the struggle with Iran but eliminated those that accumulated too much power or whose emirs became too independent. Although the Ottomans succeeded in gradually limiting the autonomy of the emirates by exploiting internal struggles in the emirs' dynasties and between various local forces, the emirates continued to exist and even to flourish until the 1830s.

As early as the mid-16th century, Sultan Sulayman the Magnificent had conquered the strong emirate of Chemiskezek (or Chamishgazak, between Mount Ararat and east Dersim, west of the northern Tigris River), which had existed since the thirteenth century. A dispute within the ruling family following the death of the strong Emir Pir Hüseyin enabled the Ottoman sultan to divide the lands among the emir's sons and thus to weaken the emirate, which became subordinate to the Ottoman *sanjaks* (administrative districts).

Bitlis

In the first half of the seventeenth century, the emirate of Bitlis emerged as the most dominant and prosperous of the Kurdish emirates. According to the historical narrative, the emirs of Bitlis were from the Rojiki (Rozhiki) tribe, a branch of the Marwanid dynasty, which took control of the city of Bitlis during the tenth century.⁵ Until the late fifteenth century, they remained under the patronage of the more powerful Turkmen tribal confederations. Bitlis emerged as an almost independent emirate after the death of the powerful Turkmen leader, Uzun Hasan, in 1573. In the early sixteenth century, the emirate supported the Ottoman forces of Sultan Selim I, and its emirs were awarded the title of "Noble

Khan". In 1530–1531, however, the emirate switched allegiance to the Safavid side, a move that led to its defeat by the Ottomans.

The period of greatest prosperity in Bitlis began in 1578, when Sultan Murad III restored the emirate's autonomy and installed Sharaf al-Din Bitlisi (Bidlisi), a member of the Rojiki tribe and the author of the *Sharafnama*, as emir. Under its talented and educated emirs, Bitlis flourished. In the first half of the seventeenth century, it became the strongest and most prominent of the emirates. The Ottoman traveler and official Evliya Chelebi and European travelers who visited Bitlis during this period were impressed by the emirate's military strength and economic vitality, and by the extent of its independence, and described it as a burgeoning cultural and religious center.

According to Chelebi, Bitlis in the mid-seventeenth century had 1,200 shops and workshops. It was a cultural hub with mosques, *medresat*, and influential Sufi orders – the Naqshbandiyya and the Bakhtashiyya – which maintained centers of religious and intellectual activity. The emirs of Bitlis owned 13 *zeamet* and 124 *timars*, feudal estates that were granted by the Ottoman sultans to the emirs and other local rulers in exchange for military services.

Chelebi's description reflects the special, quasi-Renaissance character of Emir 'Abd al-Khan Rozhiki (d. 1666?), the ruler of Bitlis, a man of considerable education and broad intellectual interests; a patron of the arts and sciences; and talented in architecture, poetry, medicine, and drawing. According to Chelebi, "Abd al-Khan's library contained thousands of books in Persian and Arabic and hundreds of European books, mostly in French, on geography, physics, astronomy and medicine". *Ulema*, who wrote poetry in Kurdish, were active in his court. Chelebi noted that the emir was able to call up 70,000 fighters (a figure that seems somewhat exaggerated).⁶

Jean-Baptiste Tavernier, a French traveler who visited the region in the seventeenth century, also gained the mistaken impression that it was independent and that its emir was not subject either to the sultan or the Shah. (In fact, despite his broad autonomy and relative power, the emir was subject to the sovereignty of the Ottoman sultan.)⁷

In the mid-seventeenth century, the emirate collided with the Ottoman Empire, which was worried by its growing power. Notwithstanding its relative strength, the emirate was unable to stand against Ottoman might. Its capital city, Bitlis, was conquered by the Ottomans. Its autonomy was limited, its emir was arrested and exiled, and it lost its strength and importance.

The decline of the emirate of Bitlis allowed the ascent of the emirates of Bahdinan, Baban, Soran and Botan. For various periods during the sixteenth through eighteenth centuries, the authority of the Bahdinan (Bhadinan) emirate extended over portions of the Hakkari area to the east and southeast of Lake Van, and the environs of the cities of Aqra, 'Amadiya, Zakho, and Barzan. Internal strife in the emir's dynasty in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries enabled the Ottomans to weaken it.⁸

Baban

The Ottoman–Iranian struggle was the background to the growth of the emirate of Baban in the second half of the seventeenth century. Its rise was probably facilitated by the regional vacuum created by the decline of the Bitlis emirate. The emirs of Baban exploited their location on the border of the Ottoman Empire with Iran in order to reinforce their status and independence in the local power game. In 1678, Suleiman Baba (Baban) was awarded the title of pasha and enjoyed a solemn reception in Istanbul, in recognition of his services to

the Ottoman Empire. Until 1784, the capital of Baban was the village and fortress of Qal'a Chilawan, but between 1784 and 1788, the Babans built their capital in Sulaymaniyya.

The emirs of Baban played an important and complex role in the political arena of the Baghdad *vilayet* and in the cities of Basra and Mosul. Its importance in the regional struggles was due to the proximity of Sulaymaniyya to Baghdad, its relative military strength, and its position as an important barrier against the Iranians. Nevertheless, the constant internal strife and domestic struggles within Baban enabled the Ottomans and the Iranians, and their proxy, the emirate of Ardalán, to interfere in Baban's affairs. In the wake of domestic struggles and Ottoman interference, the emirs of Baban and members of the House of Baban sometimes took refuge in Iran. Although the Babans were vassals of the Ottomans, because of their weakness they were obliged to pay taxes also to the Iranian governors of Shahrizor.⁹

The Babans preferred that the *valis* of Baghdad would be sent by the Ottoman authorities in Istanbul and not nominated from among strong local forces. A *vali* sent from Istanbul was dependent on local leaders, had limited ability to pressure the emirate, and would help the Babans to gain influence in Baghdad. For example, in 1788, Emir Ibrahim Baban Pasha forged an alliance with the Ottoman governor of Basra and the tribal Bedouin federation of Muntafik against the Ottoman–Mamluk *vali* of Baghdad.

Unlike their rivals, the House of Ardalán, which had considerable influence at the Shah's court, the emirs of Baban were not close to the Ottoman court in Istanbul, to which they ostensibly owed their loyalty. Their struggles for survival during the eighteenth century and the beginning of the nineteenth were against the Ottoman *valis* and other local forces: the Mamelukes in Baghdad, the House of Ardalán, and the Iranian governors of the nearby district of Shahrizur.¹⁰

The decline of the emirates in the nineteenth century

The changes in international relations after the Ottoman–Iranian wars ended with the Treaty of Erzurum in 1823, the growing involvement of Britain and Russia in the region, and a series of Ottoman and Iranian reforms that changed the conditions that had fostered the continuing existence of the Kurdish emirates. First of all, the emirates lost their importance as proxy forces in the Ottoman–Iranian confrontation. The Russian push toward Istanbul and through the Caucasus in the direction of the Persian Gulf were important factors that had led Britain to adopt, since the 1830s, a policy intended to preserve the Ottoman Empire as a buffer against Russia. In line with this, Britain supported the Ottoman Empire against local centrifugal forces, among them the Kurdish emirates.

The Ottoman Tanzimat reforms, promulgated successively between 1839 and 1876, were characterized by a centralization and modernization of the administration, which led to confrontations with the Kurdish emirates. The Ottoman Empire sought to suppress any autonomous forces whose independence ran counter to the strengthening of central authority and to the control of the centralized, modernizing administration. However, the primacy of tribal and emirate interests hindered the Kurdish emirates from uniting against the Ottomans. In the quasi-feudal conditions of Kurdistan, the emirs were embroiled in their local struggles. Those who harbored ambitions of regional dominance were unable to accumulate sufficient political and military might to give them a chance in a confrontation with the Ottoman Empire.

At the beginning of the nineteenth century, three of the emirates had maintained their strength and autonomy as Ottoman vassals: the emirate of Baban in the Sulaymaniya region; Soran, centered around Rawanduz; and Botan (Bohtan), based around the city and fortress

of Jazirat bin 'Umar. The other emirates, Hakkari and Bahdinan, were weak and either had their autonomy limited by the Ottoman authorities or were dominated by the stronger emirates.

The strongman of the House of Baban at the end of the eighteenth and the beginning of the nineteenth century was Emir 'Abd al-Rahman Baban (ruled 1789–1813). He was deeply involved in the power struggles in Baghdad, and sometimes he achieved a degree of influence there and could engineer the rise or fall of the Ottoman *valis*. However, the struggles in the Baban family enabled the Ottomans and Iranians to meddle in the emirate and in Baban's affairs. In the context of these convoluted struggles, Baban was forced to flee from Sulaymaniyya to Iran no less than five times.¹¹

The Treaty of Erzurum in 1823 between the Ottoman Empire and Iran sidelined the Baban emirate. It lost its importance as an asset in the Ottoman–Iranian rivalry and its ability to maneuver *vis-à-vis* the Ottoman authorities. The internal conflicts in the Baban dynasty and emirate were exploited by the Ottomans to interfere in its affairs and to weaken it.

The final steps to subdue the emirate and reduce its territory were initiated by the Ottoman *vali* in Baghdad, Najib Pasha, in 1847. Emir Ahmad Pasha (1838–1847) was ousted, and the Ottomans appointed his brother to replace him. The Baban dynasty continued to head the emirate, but the emirs were appointed by the Ottoman authorities. The emirate finally disappeared in 1851 with the appointment of Isma'il Pasha, a Turkish officer, as *kaymakam* (district governor) of the area.

Soran

The emergence of the Soran emirate, led from 1814 by Emir Muhammad Kor, as the most powerful local force in Kurdistan, was against the background of the decline of the Baban emirate, Ottoman weakness following the war with Russia in 1828–1829, and the conquest of Syria in 1831 by Egypt's ruler Muhammad Ali. Muhammad Kor expanded and fortified Soran's capital, the city of Rawanduz, and built a citadel there.¹²

Most of Kor's military force relied on the tribes, but it included a Regular Army unit, cavalry, infantry, and even some artillery. Kor also established workshops for the manufacture of swords, rifles, and even cannons. The minting of coins bearing his name and the references to him in Friday sermons in the emirate's mosques were further signs of his ambition. He set up a *diwan*, or advisory council, and cultivated the support of the "*ulama*".

In the 1820s and early 1830s, the emirate of Soran under Muhammad Kor became the leading power in southern and central Kurdistan. During those decades, he forcibly extended his sovereignty to the Hakkari emirate and the Baradost, Surchi, and Mamish tribes, taking over Rawanduz, Zakho, Dohuk, and Amadiya, the capital of the Bahdinan emirate. Kor deposed the rulers of the old emirate of Bahdinan, which dated back to the fourteenth century. Officially, Bahdinan continued to exist after Muhammed Kor was defeated by the Ottomans in 1834; however, it never fully recovered, and its rulers were nominated by the Ottomans. In 1843, as part of their centralization policy, the Ottomans incorporated Bahdinan into the *vilayet* of Mosul and finally dissolved the emirate.

Only the emirate of Botan remained free of Mohammed Kor's hegemony. In 1833, following his suppression of the Yazidis and the conquest of Bahdinan, Muhammad Kor attacked Botan and conquered its capital, Jazirat ibn 'Umar. Bedir Khan's forces, however, continued to hold a series of fortresses, which Muhammad Kor attempted to capture. The resistance by Bedir Khan and his supporters, along with the revolts that broke out in Amadia and other places, forced Muhammad Kor to break off his offensive and retreat.

In the summer of 1834, Muhammad Kor succeeded in repelling the Ottoman offensive against Soran. The Ottomans were worried by possible cooperation between Kor and the army of the rebellious governor of Egypt, Muhammad Ali, who had conquered Syria. The Ottoman offensive in the summer of 1836 forced Muhammad Kor to retreat and entrench himself in Rawanduz. When it became apparent that the Ottomans were prevailing, his allies, the Kurdish tribes acted in their own interests and refrained from assisting him.

Kor was dealt an additional blow by the *ulama* in the city of Rawanduz. Possibly under Ottoman influence, they objected to the mention of him in Friday sermons instead of the Ottoman sultan and declared their opposition to the conflict with the sultan. The mufti of Rawanduz even issued a *fatwa* prohibiting war against the sultan.¹³ In the light of Iranian unwillingness to assist him or give him shelter, in addition to his isolation against Ottoman strength and its British backing, Muhammad Kor agreed to surrender. He went to Istanbul, apparently on the basis of a promise by the Ottoman commander, Rashid Pasha, that if he surrendered and accepted Ottoman sovereignty, he could continue to govern in Soran.

During the six months that he spent in Istanbul, Mohammed Kor was again promised continued control of the emirate, although with limited autonomy and under Ottoman sovereignty. However, on his way back to Soran via the Black Sea, he disappeared, and it is safe to assume that he was murdered by the Ottomans.

The emirate of Soran and its ambitious ruler fell victim to the changed international conditions, following the involvement of Britain and Russia in the region, the end of belligerence between Iran and the Ottoman Empire, and the accelerated reforms and trends toward centralization within the Ottoman Empire.¹⁴

After the fall of Soran, only Botan remained as the last Kurdish emirate. Its ruler, Muhammad Bedir Khan, took the Ottoman side in the Ottoman–Egyptian conflict and was awarded an Ottoman military rank. Bedir Khan sought to exploit his status and ties with the Ottomans in order to increase his autonomous position within the empire. He enjoyed the broad-based support both of Kurds – tribes and non-tribal peasants alike – and Armenians, from Van in the northwest to Sulaymaniya in the southeast. In view of the weakness of the Hakkari emirate, Bedir Khan extended his patronage to it.

With the end of the Ottoman–Egyptian war and the retreat of Muhammad Ali's forces from Syria in 1840, the tensions experienced by Bedir Khan and the Kurdish tribes with the Ottoman authorities diminished, but Bedir Khan's relations with the Ottomans became entangled in the Muslim–Christian tensions. These had intensified with the growth of missionary activity and the impact of the Ottoman reforms.

Mir (Emir) Nurallah Beg, the ruler of the emirate of Hakkari (southeast of Lake Van), was officially the suzerain of the Nestorian community, but his relationship with the Nestorians deteriorated in the 1830s. During that decade, American and British Protestant missionaries became active in the Hakkari area, seeking to convert Christian Nestorians to Protestantism. The American missionaries exploited the concessions to build churches that had been granted to them under the Tanzimat reforms. This aroused the suspicions of the Kurdish Muslim population in Hakkari, who feared Christian infiltration and the strengthening of the local Christian population.¹⁵

Ottoman officials, annoyed by the Western missionary activities, encouraged Nurallah Beg to impose his authority over the Nestorians. Hakkari was a weak emirate, and Nurallah Beg approached Bedir Khan for assistance in 1839. However, Bedir Khan used the opportunity to strengthen his patronage over Hakkari. The influence of the *alim* (religious scholar) Shaykh Taha of Nehri also appears to have affected Bedir Khan's conduct. The American

missionaries and British travelers who reported on these events emphasized the Islamic religious fanaticism that characterized both Emir Bedir Khan and Shaykh Taha.

The Muslim–Christian tensions and clashes that had rumbled throughout the Ottoman Empire since the 1830s, took the form in Kurdistan of an internal conflict between Kurdish, Nestorian, and Assyrian groups, and between Kurds and Armenians. The tensions between the Kurds (Muslims) and the Nestorian–Assyrian and Armenian Christians at times reflected the socioeconomic rifts between Kurds and Turkmen, who were primarily, but not only, a pastoral–tribal population, as opposed to the mainly sedentary Christians, who were peasants as well as merchants and craftsmen.¹⁶

The slaughter of 7,000 to 10,000 Nestorian–Assyrian Christians in 1843 by Bedir Khan's forces was reported by Western missionaries and travelers in Kurdistan, and sparked strong British protests and pressure to overthrow Bedir Khan. From the Ottoman perspective, Bedir Khan had been useful in weakening Western Christian activity, but at the same time they sought to block him from becoming too strong a local power.

Bedir Khan's coalition with Emir Nur Allah Beg of Hakkari and Khan Muhammad of Mush could not withstand the might of the Ottoman army, which had been modernized and trained by Prussian officers. Moreover, Yezdansher Khan, a relative of Bedir Khan and one of the most prominent commanders in his army, had switched to the Ottoman side. In the face of Ottoman strength, Bedir Khan surrendered in 1847 and was exiled from Kurdistan. He was later pardoned and awarded the title of pasha, and he served the Ottoman state for several more decades. Two hundred members of the Bedir Khan family underwent a process of Ottomanization, like many other members of the Kurdish tribal feudal elite who had emigrated or were exiled to Istanbul, and became integrated into the Ottoman establishment. However, his grandchildren Sureyya (1883–1938), Celadet (1895–1951), and Kamuran (1893–1978) became Kurdish nationalists and were among the most important spokesmen for Kurdish nationalism in the first half of the twentieth century.

The conflict between the emirate of Botan under Bedir Khan and the Ottoman Empire was an expression of Kurdish opposition to the Ottoman trends toward centralization and reform. The elimination of the emirate suited both Ottoman and British interests. The Ottomans aimed to impose a centralized authority over the peripheral, semi-independent forces within the empire and to strengthen Ottoman rule in eastern Anatolia and Kurdistan. Bedir Khan's involvement in Muslim–Christian tensions was useful to Britain, whose interest lay in strengthening the centralist reforms in the Ottoman Empire, and to the Ottomans themselves as a pretext to get rid of Bedir Khan and subdue the last remaining Kurdish emirate.

Implications of the destruction of the Kurdish emirates

The Kurdish emirates and the dynasties of the ruling emirs, which had identified themselves as Kurdish throughout their generations, were an expression of Kurdish ethnic distinctiveness. Nonetheless, the tribal, quasi-feudal nature of the emirates, the constant struggles waged among and within them, and the dominance enjoyed by the Ottoman and Iranian states in the region prevented the emirates from unifying and coalescing into an independent state or political force strong enough to contend with the power of the Ottoman Empire or of Iran, which between them had divided up Kurdistan since the sixteenth century. None of the Kurdish emirates became strong enough to impose effective sovereignty over other emirates and tribes, and none became a focus for the development of a central political power in Kurdistan beyond the tribal/quasi-feudal stage. These sociopolitical and economic

conditions were not conducive to the growth of an affluent urban bourgeoisie that used Kurdish as its high language and whose modernization was in Kurdish.

The implications of the Ottoman Tanzimat reforms in the first half of the nineteenth century, the change in regional international conditions that accompanied the end of the Ottoman–Iranian wars, and the growing influence of Britain and Russia reduced the capacity of the emirs to maneuver *vis-à-vis* the dominant powers. The emirates lost their strategic importance, and, unable to unite, they collapsed separately, one after another, overcome by the superior power of the Ottoman Empire and the Iranian state, whose centralist, modernizing policies precluded the continued existence of semi-independent power centers within their borders. Thus, the demise of the Kurdish emirates in the nineteenth century created a vacuum that paved the way for the strengthening of the tribes and Sufi shaykhs in Kurdistan as the century progressed.

The emirates had constituted a potential nucleus for statehood, and their decline, along with the weakness of the Kurdish language, the geopolitical conditions prevailing in Kurdistan, and the slow development of the modern bourgeoisie, greatly hindered the development of a Kurdish national movement, which did not begin until the late nineteenth century.

The Kurdish emirates thus played a rather contradictory role in the development of conditions for the emergence of the Kurdish national movement. The very existence of emirates that imposed their authority on weaker tribes and later developed into supra-tribal formations constituted a nucleus of Kurdish statehood and created an early Kurdistan political arena. The very existence of emirates that imposed their authority on weaker tribes and later developed into supra-tribal formations constituted a nucleus of Kurdish statehood and created an early Kurdistan political arena. On the other hand, their rivalries, tribalism, and intertribal dissensions were fundamental obstacles to the dawning of a supra-tribal and supra-emirate Kurdish national sentiment, and to the emergence of a central political power willing and able to unify the tribes and emirates.

The merchants and *ulama* that flourished in the small urban centers created buds of development of a bourgeois class. But the tribalism and tribal quasi-feudal structure of the emirates, together with the geopolitical and economic conditions of Kurdistan, and the obstacles to the spread of the high Kurdish language, impeded the growth of the Kurdish bourgeoisie with Kurdish national consciousness. Most of the small number of modernized Kurds in the nineteenth century were incorporated into the Ottoman and the Iranian bureaucracies and the empire's military and political establishment. The slow modernization in Kurdistan took place in the Turkish, Arabic, or Persian languages.

However, despite their demise, the emirates were undoubtedly significant, alongside tribal and religious identities, in perpetuating a sense of Kurdish distinctiveness. This was an important social factor facilitating the political growth of the Kurdish national movement and the dissemination of a Kurdish nationalist consciousness in modern Kurdish society.

Notes

- 1 About the Kurdish emirates and tribes in the Middle Ages, see: Sharaf Khan al-Din Al-Bidlisi, *Sharafnama, Fi ta'rikh al-duwal wa-al-imarāt al-Kurdiyyah*, 2 vols. Translation into Arabic by Muhammad 'Ali 'Uni, edited by Yahia al-Khashab (Damascus: Dar al-zaman liltiba't wa-a-nashr wa-al-tawz'i, 2006); Sharaf al-Din al-Bidlisi, *The Sharafnama, or, The History of the Kurdish Nation*, Book 1. Translation into English and commentaries by M. R. Izady (Costa Mesa, CA, Mazda, 2005); Ibn al-Athir, *Al-Kamil fi-al-Taarikh* (Beirut: Dar Beirut liltaba't wa-al-nashr, 1966), vol. 6, pp. 506–507; vol. 9, pp. 598–599; Ibn al-Athir, *The Chronicle of Ibn al-Athir for the Crusading Period from al-Kamil fi'l-ta'rikh*, Part 1, *The Years 491–541/1097–1146; The Coming of the Franks and*

- Muslim Response*. Translated by D. S. Richards (Aldershot and Burlington, 2006), pp. 240, 307, 367; H. F. Amedroz, "The Marwanid Dynasty at Mayyafariqin in the Tenth and Eleventh Centuries AD", *Journal of the Royal Asiatic Society* (January 1903), pp. 123–154; Vladimir Minorsky, "Annazids", *Encyclopaedia Islamica*, New edition (Leiden: E. J. Brill, 1954–2003), vol. 1, pp. 512–513; and Ibn Khaldun, *Ta'rikh al-'alamat* (Beirut: Dar al-Katib al-Lubnani, 1958), vol. 4, pp. 674–686, 1093. For basic research on the Shadadids, see: V. Minorsky, *Studies in Caucasian History* (London: Taylor's Foreign Press, 1953). Minorsky strongly maintained that the Shadadiya was a Kurdish dynasty.
- 2 John E. Woods, *The Agqoyunlu: Clan, Confederation, Empire* (Minneapolis, MN and Chicago, IL: Bibliotheca Islamica, 1976).
 - 3 Al-Bidlisi, *Sharafnama*, *Fi ta'rikh al-duwal*; and Bitlisi, *The Sharafnama*, pp. 20, 47.
 - 4 I. Metin Kunt, *Sultan's Servants: The Transformation of Ottoman Provincial Government, 1550–1650* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1983), p. 108.
 - 5 On the ancient origin of the al-Ruzkia (Rojiki/Rozhiki/Roshaki) tribe and the active role of the emirs of Bidlis in the Ottoman–Iranian struggle, see Bitlisi, *The Sharafnama*, pp. 339–442; Hakan Ozoglu, *Kurdish Notables and the Ottoman State: Evolving Identities, Competing Loyalties, and Shifting Boundaries* (Albany, NY: State University of New York Press, 2004).
 - 6 *Evliya Celebi in Bitlis*. Translated and edited by Robert Dankoff (Leiden and New York: E. J. Brill, 1990), pp. 283–295. This description of 'Abd al-Khan's library is based exclusively on Chelebi's report. It was apparently the only source that described it. Von Hammer, an Austrian historian, diplomat, and scholar of Middle Eastern studies, wrote at the beginning of the nineteenth century a detailed history of the Ottoman Empire. He relied on Chelebi for his account of the conquest of the emirate. In his brief description of the palace treasures, based on Chelebi, he saw fit to point out only the books in Persian. M. De Hammer, *Histoire de L'Empire Ottoman*, vol. 3, Book III (Paris: Imprimerie de Bethune et Plon, 1844), pp. 37–38.
 - 7 Jean-Baptiste Tavernier, *Les Six voyages en turquie, en perse, et aux indes* (*Six Voyages to Turkey, Persia, and India*), vol. 2 (Paris: François Maspero, 1981).
 - 8 Sadiq al-Damaluji, *Imarat Bahdinan al-Kurdiyya au imarat al-'Amadiya* (Irbil: wizarat al-tarbiyya, 1999) (Arabic) (*The Kurdish emirate of Bahdinan or emirate al-'Amadiya*); and Amir Hassanpour, "Bahdinan", *Encyclopaedia Iranica*, vol. 33, p. 485. Available online, accessed 23 August 2011: www.iranicaonline.org/articles/bahdinan-kurdish-region-river-dialect-group-and-emirate.
 - 9 E. I. Vasileva, *Yugo-Vostochniy Kurdistan b 17-nachale 19 veki – ocharki istorii emiratorv Ardalan i Baban* (*Southeastern Kurdistan from the Seventeenth Century to the Beginning of the Nineteenth Century: Chapters in the History of the Emirates of Ardalan and Baban*) (Moscow: Academia Nauk USSR, Nauka, 1991) (In Russian).
- The account of the agent resident of the East India Company in *Basra in the Beginnings of the Nineteenth Century*: C. R. Rich, *Narrative of a Residence in Koordistan*, vol. I (London: James Duncan, 1836; Reprinted: Farnborough: Gregg International Publishers, 1972). D. Jalil, *Kurdi Osmanskoy Imperii w Pervoy Polovine 19 Beka* (*The Kurds of the Ottoman Empire in the First Half of the 19th Century – Russian*) (Moscow: Nauka, 1972).
- 10 See also *Chronicles of the Principality of Ardalan*, written in the nineteenth century by Emir Husraw ibn Muhammad Bani Ardalan, *Chronika – Istoria Kniazestwa Bani Ardalan*. Translation from Persian to Russian, editing and introduction by E. I. Vasileva (Moscow, 1984).
 - 11 Claudius J. Rich, *Narrative of a Residence in Koordistan*, vol. 1, pp. 96–97; S. H. Longrigg, *Four Centuries of Modern Iraq* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1925), pp. 232–243; and Tom Nieuwenhuis, *Politics and Society in Early Modern Iraq: Mamluk Pashas, Tribal Shaykhs and Local Rule between 1802–1831* (The Hague and Boston, MA: M. Nijhoff, 1982), p. 97.
 - 12 H. C. Rawlinson, "Notes of a Journey from Tibriz, through Persian Kurdistan, to the Ruins of Takhti-Soleiman, and from Thence by Zenjan and Tarom to Gilan in October and November, 1838; with a Memoir on the Site of Atropatenian Ecbatana", *Journal of the Royal Geographical Society of London* 10 (1840), p. 25.
 - 13 For a detailed description and discussion of the fall of Muhammad Kor, see Jalil, *Kurdi Osmanskoy Imperii*, pp. 100–102; Richard Wood, *The Early Correspondence of Richard Wood, 1831–1841*. Edited by A. B. Cunningham (London: Royal Historical Society, 1966), p. 97. See also an account by a British traveler: W. F. Ainsworth, *Travels and Researches in Asia Minor, Mesopotamia, Chaldea and Armenia* (London: John Parker, 1842), vol. 1, pp. 323.

- 14 An important source about the relations between the Kurds and Russia in the period of the demise of the Kurdish emirates is P. I. Averianov, *Kurdi b voynakh Rossii c Persiei i Turkei w techeniye 19 stoletia* (*The Kurds in the Russian Wars with Persia and Turkey in the Nineteenth Century*) (Tiflis (Tbilisi): Press of the General Command of the Caucasus Military Region, 1900) (In Russian).
- 15 The missionary activity, the Nestorian sect, and the events set forth here are discussed in a series of primary sources and studies that reflect the viewpoints of missionaries and local Christians. See Kamal Salibi and Yusuf K. Khoury, eds., *The Missionary Herald, Reports from Northern Iraq 1833–1847*. A more balanced account may be found in the books by the British traveler and archaeologist Sir Austen Henry Layard, *Discoveries in the Ruins of Nineveh and Babylon: With Travels in Armenia and Kurdistan, and the Desert*; and Sir Austen Henry Layard, *Popular Account of Discoveries at Nineveh* (London: John Murray, 1851), pp. 122–170. See also John Joseph, *The Nestorians and Their Neighbors* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1961); and Gordon Taylor, *Fever and Thirst: Dr. Grant and the Christian Tribes of Kurdistan* (Chicago, IL: Academy Chicago Publishers, 2005).
- 16 For a detailed discussion of the relations between Bedir Khan and the Nestorians, see Wadie Jwaideh, *Kurdish National Movement: Its Origins and Development* (New York, NY: Syracuse University Press, 2006), pp. 62–74.

4

AN OVERVIEW OF KURDISTAN OF THE 19TH CENTURY

Hamit Bozarslan

The imperial décors of the 19th century

Some historians call the European 19th century the “long Century”.¹ That is also largely true as far as the Middle East is concerned. The century constitutes, indeed, a long period marked by violent discontinuities, conflicts, and re-structuration. While the old references died out in a very short period, and all the landmarks, from the good production to the communications, from the education system to the urban planning, changed in a relatively short period, international competitions, nationalisms, and radicalisms reshaped the entire region. Historians would agree that this century continued until the 1906 Constitutional Revolution in Persia and the 1908 Unionist *pronunciamiento* in the Ottoman Empire, if not until the end of World War I. But they would probably have more difficulty in finding a common date of the century’s beginning: did the Persian “new era” start with the establishment of the Qajar dynasty between 1786 and 1794 or with the Russian-Persian war of 1828? Should one take 1789, the year of enthronement of Selim III, as the starting point of the Ottoman “new era” or rather 1808, the year of his assassination?

Whatever time limits one may propose, however, it is obvious that already by the end of the 18th century, the former imperial model, which the Ottomans called *nizam al-alem*, had no more viability. Notwithstanding the solidity of the central powers, namely in the Ottoman case, the centuries-long military, social, political, interethnic, and interreligious organization was falling apart, and provoking a serious cognitive/epistemological crisis. Both empires were in fact aware that Europe’s military and economic wealth, and worldwide domination could not be explained solely by its military and technical superiority; this was deeply rooted in a broader equation including politics, justice, management of space, perception of time, and means of production of knowledge. Thus, it was simply impossible to envision the restoration of the old *nizam* in order to overcome the crisis as the Ottoman Koçi Bey (d. 1650) could still propose in his lifetime. No wonder then that, in spite of their peculiarities, both the Persian and the Ottoman Empires decided to adopt a new *nizam* called *nizam-i jadid*: “new order”. This ambitious project meant nothing less than experiencing a state-building process within the frameworks of existing and indeed very old states. As the Ottoman high-ranking bureaucrat and historian Cevdet Pacha, who was also a reader of 14th thinker Ibn Khaldun, put it, reforming an existing state appeared to

be much more complex than building an entirely new one.² The reforms of Nizam-i Jadid were decided in the capitals by a tiny bureaucracy, but they have affected the two empires' "core provinces" as well as their peripheries, where they have shaken up old power structures. The "vanishing out of the old world" and the emergence of a chaotic and yet new one both provoked strong reactions among the local elites and gave birth to new allegiances and patron-client relations.

The changes were also related to the very map of the region: if it is true that by 1869, the Ottoman-Persian border had been stabilized, in spite of many tensions, which were often related to the Kurdish transborder populations, the two empires left the period of open conflicts behind them. But the two states were now challenged in their territorial assets by a newcomer: Russia. Russian wars with these two empires constituted, at once, an outcome of the Russian expansions in the 18th century and the prolongation of the Russian wars in Europe. Whatever their specific circumstances, the 1828–1829, 1853–1856, and 1877–1878 wars transformed Saint Petersburg into the capital of an "Oriental Empire" with an almost total domination in the Caucasus. While previously, the Kurds allied themselves to the Persian or/and Ottoman forces, now, they had to take into account a third imperial force. More than 150,000 Kurds were under the domination of the Russian administration, which played an active or passive role in both Kurdistans.³ "Among the participants in the battles in the Kars area in December 1853, was an irregular force of approximately fifteen thousand Kurdish cavalry. Both the Russians and the Ottomans mobilized Kurdish tribes to fight on their side".⁴ After the 1877–1878 Ottoman-Russian war, Kars and Ardahan, which had a quite important Armenian and Kurdish population, also passed under the control of Russia. The Kurds could enlarge the scope of their "frontier wars".⁵

One last macro-level change should also be mentioned: the emergence of the Armenian issue, which had a double dimension. The first one concerned the transborder feature of the Armenian population, which was located at the crossroad of the three empires. As the other non-Muslim communities of the empire, the Armenians had been sensitive to the "awakening of the nationalities", a movement that was accelerated with the emergence of a Westernized intelligentsia and the revolutionary committees. While not secessionist as such, the Armenian militants rejected the domination of both the Ottomans and the local Kurdish dignitaries, and asked for radical reforms in "historical Armenia", which widely overlapped with Kurdistan. For the Armenian revolutionaries, the emancipation of the Ottoman Armenians was their main goal, but the Armenian community was also active in Persia, where it was well integrated into a broader economic and social context, and would play a decisive role in the 1906 Constitutional Revolution. The Armenians in Russia, who constituted the bulk of the Caucasian proletariat, evolved in a conflicted system of interactions with Russians, Azeris, and the "Tatars"; however, the Ottoman-Russian frontier was a zone of passage of revolutionary militants, who transformed the Narodniks' motto "going to the people" into "going to the homeland".

Imperial presence in Kurdistan

This changing landscape largely determined the evolution of Kurdistan in the 19th century, which was marked by a variety of tensions, contradicting interests, and changing alliances. One could, on one side, observe a renewed interest in the two imperial centers for the Kurds, but, on the other hand, they did not respect anymore the former juridical and tacit contracts⁶ that had previously regulated the relations between the central powers and the Kurds, and

recognized the autonomy of the Kurdish emirates. Both the Ottoman Empire and Persia, indeed, were keen on centralizing their empires, rationalizing their tax revenues, and managing their quite important Kurdish populations.⁷ They also wanted to impose a generalized military service as well as unified educational/cultural policies throughout their vast lands. The Tanzimat bureaucrats of the Ottoman Empire did not know exactly, either during this period or later on, what Kurdistan really meant geographically.⁸ Still, they felt the necessity of “a second conquest” of Kurdistan where their power basis was far too weak and where the local power-holders could mobilize important economic resources and tens of thousands of fighters.⁹ The “re-conquest” required the physical presence of the state, but, more importantly, new patron-client relations as well as the production of knowledge on the Kurds and Kurdish (as well as Kurdish-Armenian) inhabited areas. This interest was partly linked to the emergence of a new kind of “knowledge-state”, based on rationalization, statistics, and inquiries, that went well beyond the previous means of managing territories. Being a part of the “European concert of the nations”, the Ottoman state was not only learning from the experiences of the neighboring Russian and Austrian-Hungarian Empires but was also expected to match a series of requirements formulated by them.

Istanbul understood quite early the necessity of “knowing” Kurdistan as a border area. It was in fact highly suspicious of the former intermediary elites that it wanted to replace with its own bureaucracy, but it was also extremely worried by the interimperial shape of the Kurdish population, which could not be contained through the previous border delineations between the two states, which in fact allowed a high degree of fluidity. The *Seyahatname-i Hudud* of 1847 is, from this point of view, a highly interesting document.¹⁰ Similarly, as Metin Atmaca shows in his study on the formation and the consolidation of the city of Suleymaniye in the frontier zone with Persia, Kurdistan became a space to “manage” and to “master”.¹¹ It is obvious that the invention of an urban area in such a sensitive region unleashed at the end the dynamics that the state could not domesticate; still, this step was a clear sign of the Ottoman state’s new administrative engineering. Although less spectacular, in many other Kurdish towns too, new administrative centers with quite distinct architectural features have been constructed. Najat Abdallah has also shown that both empires wanted to dispose of client groups on the other side but were at the same worried by nomadic transhumances, the double or switching loyalties of the tribes, and the transborder affiliations of the religious brotherhoods.¹²

As far as I am aware, the Persian Empire, which was far too remote from Europe and much less centralized than its Ottoman neighbor, had rather limited ambitions in its peripheries, where it badly needed the loyalty of local tribal forces. That was also true as far as Kurdistan was concerned: the Qajar dynasty, which could be defined as a largely premodern one, was basically interested in having an *ad minima* central power and in limiting the Ottoman influence in Kurdistan. It also wanted to use as harmlessly as possible the tribes, such as the Mukris and Shikaks.¹³ As McDowall states, “with the larger and more accessible confederations, the Qajars tried to foster and manage feuds and rivalries and thereby to rule through dependent chiefs rather than without them”.¹⁴ In contrast, the post-Tanzimat Ottoman Empire considered its Arab and Kurdish provinces as its colonial domains.¹⁵ It is true that these territories were under its control since the beginning of the 16th century, yet they were also perceived as the Ottoman equivalents of the British, French, Dutch, and to a lesser extent Belgian and German colonies, and they had to be militarily controlled, disciplined, and “civilized”.¹⁶

This evolution had important consequences. As Serif Mardin put it many years ago, until the beginning of the 19th century, the notion of the “center” corresponded in the Ottoman Empire to the “state” and not to a territorial hard-core.¹⁷ Gradually, however, the idea that

there had to be a correlation between the state and a national/geographic entity was adopted. It is true that during the Tanzimat decades, the idea of forming an “Ottoman” entity was a prevailing one; but this idea, which for a variety of reasons appeared to be impossible to realize, was supposed to warrant a multi-sectarian coexistence and not to address intra-Muslim differences. The “Ottomanism” of the Tanzimat was not based, at least explicitly, on the idea of a Turkish-dominated ethnic and religious plurality; however, as is well known, the Young Ottomans, who were at once the children of the Tanzimat and its most radical contesters, advocated the ideal of supremacy of the Turks in the empire. Abdülhamid II, who reduced the Young Ottoman opposition into the ashes, had in fact put this idea into praxis and defined his empire as an entity with a Turkish hard-core¹⁸ that should be protected and reinforced by the non-Turkish Albanian, Arab, and Kurdish peripheries. While maintaining his colonial vision of Kurdistan, he also advocated the progressive assimilation of the Kurds to Turkishness.

One understands thus that throughout the 19th century, the Kurdish dynamics have evolved within much more complex equations so that the new Ottoman politics would henceforth include both “nation-state” and “colonial” features. On the one side, as Şemseddin Sami and other *encyclopédistes* put it, the broader Kurdistan, that is, including today’s Northern and Southern Kurdistans, did not belong to Anatolia,¹⁹ a concept that indeed did not correspond to the territorial asset of the current Turkish Republic. On the other side, the Ottomans were well aware of the existence of a Kurdish region, no matter how vaguely it was defined, and knew that strategically, this region had a vital interest in the survival of their empire. This “basic knowledge” pushed them to take two successive, but fundamentally contradictory, administrative steps: in 1847, the *eyelet* of Diyarbêkir was enlarged up to the city Van, located on the Caucasian border, but, more importantly, it was renamed “Kurdistan”. This unification could be explained by Istanbul’s will to unify and rationalize its military and administrative resources under one single commandment. But it also showed that this aim could not be matched unless the central power interpreted the “problems” it faced in the region within a “Kurdistani framework”.²⁰ One also sees that while deploying an unprecedented level of coercion in the region, the imperial power did not hesitate to name this huge area, covering almost entirely today’s Northern Kurdistan, “Kurdistan”. Although this recognition remained exclusively administrative and has not been accompanied by any special status, it has probably played a role in the deepening of the ethnic/national self-awareness of the Kurds. As Özoğul puts it, “I will speculate that the Kurdistan province of the Ottoman Empire inspired the Kurdish nationalist leadership to envision Kurdistan not only as an autonomous administrative entity but more importantly, as an independent state”.²¹ Moreover, the fact that this province was distinct from the “Mosul” province (first governed as a sanjak and later on as a vilayet) showed that Istanbul was aware of the internal differentiations that existed within the Kurdish space. The internal division of Kurdistan was narrowly related to broader ethnic politics, including those adopted *vis-à-vis* the Armenian issue.

The second step was taken in 1867, when the Sublime Porte changed the name of this province once again to Diyarbêkir. This decision was obviously not related to the fear that Istanbul had of the growing national consciousness, which was still extremely weak among the Kurds; still, one can think that Istanbul did not want to stock the region with overemphasized ethnic categories, as was the case in some other provinces, such as Albania.

This explicit or implicit recognition of “Kurdistan” was reaffirmed, however, in a context in which Istanbul was breaking the centuries-long contract linking the Kurds to the Ottoman Empire. As is well known, it was the moral “charter”, which was negotiated

between Idris-i Bidlisi and Selim I during the Ottoman-Persian War of 1514–1515, that allowed the Kurdish participation in the war against the Safavides in exchange for the hereditary autonomy of the Kurdish emirates that had been respected, or even reinforced, by successive Ottoman sultans.

In the beginning of the 19th century, there were still important emirates, such as the Soran, Baban, Bahdinan, Botan, and Muksi as well many other more or less autonomous or at least putative Kurdish emirates in the Ottoman Empire,²² and the well-known and prosperous Ardalán Emirate still existed in Persia. These emirates, which had often conflicting relations with each other and were also often internally fragmented, were destroyed between 1806 and 1855. As Helmuth von Moltke's letters showed, this destruction was accomplished mainly by extremely coercive policies, but the Sublime Porte also profited from the internal divisions.²³

With the weakening of the emirate of Baban, the two remaining prominent emirates were Soran and Botan. The first ... was headed by the powerful emir Muhammad Kor... The second was centered in al-Jazira and headed by Emir Bedir Khan.²⁴

Botan, the last emirate, tried in vain to resist and unify large sectors of Kurdish territory; Emir Bedir Khan tried to build a coalition with his enemies and was successful enough to create quasi-state structures, with a quite high rationality in security and fiscal fields. While in his official correspondence, Bedir Khan always adopted an extremely faithful style *vis-à-vis* the sultan and the Istanbul authorities, in the khutbas of the region under his control, the name of the caliph was not systematically mentioned.²⁵ His failure was partly due to the betrayal of his cousin Zeydan Ser, who in his turn undertook a military uprising that was only defeated in 1855.

Although there is no concrete document yet available, the Kurdish emirs, who encountered the Egyptian forces²⁶ and took part in the decisive Nizip battle on the Ottoman side, seem to have been influenced by the model of Muhammed Ali in Egypt. But Kurdistan was not Egypt. First of all, in contrast to Egypt, Kurdistan lay relatively close to Istanbul, where it could deploy its forces with much more efficacy. Second, Ibrahim Pasha's incursion, which covered important parts of Anatolia (1839–1841), had convinced Istanbul to strengthen its positions in order to avoid future threats in its backyard. Third, again in contrast to Egypt, Kurdistan was politically much more fragmented. In Egypt, the Ottoman conquest of 1515 preserved the highly centralized Mameluke structures, while Kurdish authorities were historically divided. There is no doubt that in the past, this division had reinforced them in the sense that it allowed them to survive in the interstices of empires.²⁷ But it also weakened them by preventing them from giving birth to a *primus inter alles* able to build a "Kurdish front". Muhammed Ali could exterminate in the most brutal form the Mameluke elite but preserve their state apparatus. In the Kurdish case, however, the impossible task was to build a new structure. In Persia, where few more or less autonomous Kurdish entities had existed since the beginning of the 16th century, the last emirate, that of the Ardalans, "died out", rather being destroyed in 1867.²⁸

In spite of many differences between the two empires, which were partly linked to the existence of a massive Armenian population in the Ottoman case, the two empires' Kurdish politics had indeed some similarities. They both considered the half-autonomous entities, which traditionally had a lesser status as major obstacles for their policy of centralization, but were not able to evaluate the midterm consequences of their destruction. While disposing an internal autonomy, these entities had locally established viable patron-client relations and

a system of regulation and arbitration within their territorial frameworks and therefore had a great deal of legitimacy and efficiency. They were also the main pillar of local security. The civil servants nominated by a remote authority and for a relatively short period could in no way replace them. Their destruction could but lead to a widespread instability. As Abbas Vali puts it,

The Kurdish principalities were undermined and eventually destroyed by the combined effects of internal political decay and external pressures exerted on them by the centralizing processes and practices of the Qajar state in the late 19th century. The political vacuum created by the fall of the Kurdish principalities was filled by tribal confederacies and, to a lesser extent, Sunni religious orders, whose relationship with the state was very different: the tributary structure characteristic of the principalities was replaced by direct fiscal relations involving payment of taxes levied on agrarian property to the state. This relationship was founded on the articulation of tribal lineage and land ownership. It ensured not only the predominance of the tribal landlords in the socio-economic structure and political organization of the Kurdish community, but also their pivotal status in the large landlords' regime which dominated state power for five decades after the Constitutional Revolution in 1905.²⁹

That was also the case in the Ottoman Empire. As Albert Hourani suggested, while in the first half of the 19th century, Egypt was experiencing a massive wave of urbanization, the Arab provinces of the Ottoman Empire were passing through a wave of re-nomadization.³⁰ As we will see later, it is true that the Ottoman administration could implement itself in the Kurdish cities, but as some testimonies show, it was highly corrupted. It was also true that new urban dynasties, which were very different from the former *ayan* families,³¹ emerged in most cities, but they could not exert any notable influence outside the city. Only the tribes, previously controlled by the emirates, were able to present a symbolism of unity, an *ad minima* protection and resource distribution to their members. As Martin van Bruinessen points out, after the 1858 Land Reform, many tribal leaders as well as aghas registered land under their name.³² But as Mesut Yeğen suggests, the "tribalism" was a means of survival, but probably also of resistance *vis-à-vis* the central state.³³

On the other hand, the tribal world could have a viability only if it was divided along a complex system of alliances and enmities; it had certainly a social coherence, but not a potential of collective resistance against the central power. As Süavi Aydın puts it, the Ottoman state could thus negotiate alliances with some tribal confederations or isolated tribes, but at the same time canalize the Kurdish potential of anti-state violence toward an intra-Kurdish space.³⁴ The French financial inspector Vital Cuinet, who also acted as the secretary general of the *Düyükün-i Umumiye* (Ottoman Public Debt Administration) and prepared impressive statistical analyses of the empire, also suggested that the Ottoman state profited from the fragmentation of the tribal world including its policies of taxation and military recruitment.³⁵

The prestigious dismissed

As one could expect, the destruction of the 19th century emirates was all but "pacific" and was the main factor of a long series of Kurdish revolts. The available Ottoman documentation, collected and analyzed by Hakan and Kardam, shows that these emirates had certainly "Kurdish feelings"; while remaining loyal to the sultan-caliph, they were aware

that the Ottomans were betraying the old *sened* ("Charter"). Mir Muhammed of Rawanduz, for instance, declared in 1835 to the British Council, that "neither him nor his fathers were ever subjected to pashas, or paid taxes to the Sultan and could not understand why he should be forced to do so".³⁶ They also knew that they were fighting for "Kurdistan" ("Kürt Kavgası"/"Kurdish struggle"). They were strongly opposed to the implementation of the Tanzimat reforms in their respective regions (the urban populations could also share this demand),³⁷ not only because they were directly threatening their power, but also because they were imposing a heavy military and fiscal pressure upon them.

Still, one should also admit that they were, at once, against the state and against state's policies, which changed drastically between the beginning and the end of the 19th century. The Tanzimat, namely, were authoritarian in their essence, but as Şükrü Hanioglu puts, they also had some liberal aspirations.³⁸ While excluding any idea of citizenship as such, they were promoting, either willingly or under constraint, the idea of equality between Muslims and non-Muslims.

Even before the Tanzimat, a religious conservatism could be observed all over Kurdistan. Shaykh Khalid, for instance, thought "that God would annihilate the Jews, Christians, fire-worshippers (majus) and the Persian Shi'ites".³⁹ The two waves of massacres of the Nestorians by Bedir Khan Beg in 1843 and 1847, which resulted in some 20,000 victims, constituted a brutal answer to the liberal promises of the Tanzimat. It is true that neither the Sublime Porte nor its locally nominated governors were particularly alarmed by what they qualified "small incidents";⁴⁰ however, it is also obvious that Bedir Khan and other Kurdish mirs could not accept the end of the zimmi contract and the disobedience of what they considered as their own *reaya*.⁴¹ The non-elected representative bodies called *medlis* ("Assembly"), which the Tanzimat bureaucrats wanted to promote all over the empire, included the non-Muslims, but *de facto* non-equality between Muslims and non-Muslims remained.

The destruction of the Kurdish emirates did not mean the end of any kind of negotiation between the former power-holders and the center. One observes a major difference between the imperial codes of repression, and the ones that Persia and Republican Turkey would elaborate after 1920s, and would find their ultimate expression in the execution or killing of Sheikh Said, Seyyid Riza, Simko, and Qadi Muhammed. In the 19th century, the killings of the Kurdish *reaya* (and certainly of the Yezidis⁴²) by the state remained unaccounted for, but while massively spoiling their wealth, the central powers preferred to capture and not to kill their leaders who had great prestige. Those exiled dignitaries had an *ad minima* retributions and could obtain symbolic titles. For instance, after their exile in Crete, the Bedir Khans were hosted in Istanbul, integrated into the Ottoman administration, and nominated, at least for a short while, to important positions. The available literature suggests that they remained politically active and developed a more politicized Kurdish awareness while being in exile. However, following the assassination of the "*şehremini*" of Istanbul Ridvan Pacha, the Bedir Khans would be collectively exiled or jailed in most difficult conditions.⁴³

That was not necessarily the case of the others. But the example of the Zerkis, studied by Ugur Bahadır Bayraktar, shows that they too maintained their contacts with their former clients and that after a while Istanbul ended up by considering they were still the best option for tax-collecting and security. Zerki Bey was also able to use the empire's argumentative regime to deliver a juridical battle against Istanbul. It is worth noting that ultimately, he was rehabilitated and allowed to retake control of his lands, but without recovering his hold on power.⁴⁴

Tribes and religious brotherhoods

The reinforcement of the tribal world went hand in hand with the reinforcement of religious brotherhoods, such as the Qadiriyya, but particularly with the renewed Naqshibandiyya, which were quite strong but spread all over the empire and well beyond. In fact, as van Bruinessen puts it, in the post-Tanzimat “Hobbesian situation there remained only one type of ‘traditional’ authority who could restore some kind of order: the *shaykhs*”. He adds, “Gradually, some shaykhs took over a part of the role of the former emirs. After a few decades of chaos and insecurity, we find shaykhs as the most influential political leaders all over Kurdistan”.⁴⁵ The *tariqats*’ dynamism was related to many factors, among them the transformation that the Sunni Muslim landscape experienced in the 19th century with the European penetration, the over-bureaucratization of the ulemas that left room for other religious actors, and the spread of the rigorist and vigorous Wahabiyya in the Arabian Peninsula. It is, however, also obvious that there were close relations between the *tariqats* and tribes as locally implemented power-holders. Here, as elsewhere in the Muslim world, the tribes probably played the role of mediators and arbiters of local conflicts.

The coexistence of these two invigorated actors, however, has created the ground for new and contradictory strategies. On the one hand, some of these “traditional” actors switched toward what one could call nationalist feelings. The famous Shaykh Ubeydullah was the most prestigious, but also the most audacious, of these figures. Descendant of a prestigious religious family with the title of *sadat* (“belonging to the family of the Prophet”), Ubeydullah was a respected Qadiri shaykh. We know, however, namely from Metin Atmaca’s work, that many relations existed between the Kurds from the two countries and the religious authorities such as Ubeydullah, and in his wake, his sons and family members, such as Seyyid Taha, exerted a great deal of influence among the Iranian Kurds. It is quite difficult to know if the idea of Ottoman Kurdishness included a broader definition of Kurdishness. Ubeydullah did convene a Kurdish congress with many dignitaries from both Kurdistans. However, he deliberately chose to attack Iranian Kurdistan as “the weakest country”⁴⁶ in the name of the Kurdish nation as such.

According to a British representative, he

was one of those sent [to Istanbul] and on his return he told the Sheikh [Ubeydullah] that the Turkish Empire was in a dying state and would be divided between the European Powers especially England and Russia, and advised him to strike for independence.⁴⁷

Ubeydullah was, at once, a defender of the Kurdish cause as well as a rigorist Islam, and seemed to be obsessed by the issue of internal justice that allowed distinguishing the “good” from the “bad” Kurds.⁴⁸

According to another testimony,

‘The Ottoman Empire was established about 555 years ago. The Ottomans built their empire by means of illegal rebellion. Islamic law demands the Sultan be a descendant of the Prophet. [Hence] Ottoman rule over the Islamic world is illegal.’ Moreover, alluding to the *Tanzimat*, he [Ubeydullah] claimed that ‘the Ottoman government has acknowledged the infidel’s laws and given up Islamic law. As a result it is weakening and decaying’. After condemning the rule of the Turks, he continued: ‘It is not only the Ottomans [who are infidels]; the Iranians too are infidels for the Iranian government have forbidden Sunnis from performing the call to prayer and they neither respect our blessed ancestors or their graves.’⁴⁹

In another testimony, Ubeydullah declared,

The Kurdish nation, consisting of more than 500,000 families, is a people apart. Their religion is different, and their laws and customs distinct. We are also a nation apart... . The Chiefs and Rulers of Kurdistan, whether Turkish or Persian subjects, and the inhabitants of Kurdistan, one and all are united and agreed that matters cannot be carried on in this way with the two Governments [Ottoman and Iranian], and that necessarily something must be done, so that European Governments, having understood the matter, shall inquire into our state. We want our affairs to be in our hands, so that in the punishment of our own offenders we may be strong and independent, and have privileges like other nations... . This is our object Otherwise the whole of Kurdistan will take the matter into their own hands, as they are unable to put up with these continual evil deeds and the oppression which they suffer at the hands of the [Ottoman and Iranian] governments.⁵⁰

After his capitulation, Sultan Abdulhamid II decided to keep good relations with Ubeydullah and even granted salaries to his wounded soldiers. He was welcomed in the Yildiz Palace and was exiled to Mecca only after his “escape” from Istanbul to Hakkari where he was arrested.⁵¹ Ubeydullah represented in reality the most radical, but also the ending-point of a process marked by state coercion and revolts that marked most of the 19th century. By the 1880s, in fact, Kurdistan had an entirely different administrative, territorial, and religious landscape than in the beginning of the century or the Tanzimat decades. The “state” was henceforth present in the region, but it was different from the self-confident Tanzimat state. Abdülhamid, who had been enthroned in 1876, had in fact an entirely different conception of the state, which he had successfully redefined as patrimonial. The power was almost entirely concentrated in the hands of the sultan, who was not only the head of the official Ottoman state, but also of the unofficial state entrusted to his close clients. This state was willing to co-opt the leading Kurdish tribal and religious leaders and to create a social basis for the central power in Kurdistan, as was the case of the Cossacks in Russia. The sultan understood, in fact, that only the integration of the enemies of the central authority would allow the state to effectively control the Kurdish territories.

For many Kurdish tribal leaders, Sultan Abdulhamid II's offer to build “light” tribal cavalries under the command of Zaki Pasha (and later Shakir Pasha) in 1891 meant that the sultan was transforming the anti-state potential of the Kurds into state-controlled violence. Sixty-three regiments, regrouping 863 officers and 32,000 troops, armed and paid by Istanbul, were formed among such tribes as the Cibran, Hasenan, Zırkan, Milan, Karakeçili, Berezen, Milan, Heyderan, Ademan, Tokariyan, Zilan, Celali, and Sipkan. The leaders of these cavalries such as Ibrahim Pasha Milli, Hacı Musa Beg, and Kör Hüseyin Paşa obtained honorific titles as well as important resources and became the most favored Kurdish lords.⁵² Some chiefs, such as Ibrahim and Halit Cibran⁵³ or Sultan Bey of the Haydaranlı, were nominated kaymakam, *binbaşı* (Mehmed Ağa) or *Kolağalık* (Ali Ağa).⁵⁴ The sons of some of the tribal leaders were sent to Istanbul partly as nonofficially designed hostages and partly in order to be educated in the Hamidiye Tribal School in Istanbul.⁵⁵

Through fragmenting the Kurdish society by excluding many tribes, Abdulhamid II indeed allowed his informal state to dispose a social basis on the ground and transformed the Kurdish anti-state potential of violence into an intra-Kurdish violence. The cavalries, which

were in charge of protecting the borders and resisting the Russian influence among the Kurds, were also supposed to be an efficient arm against the Armenian revolutionary committees. However, some Armenian-Kurdish cooperation still proved possible:

For a long time *I discredited all together the idea of a Kurdo-Armenian alliance*. It seemed to me preposterous that there should be any harmony between two races apparently so antagonistic, but it appears that negotiations under the pretext of trade are at this moment being carried on with the Dersim Kurds, and also with a powerful Chief in the neighborhood ... while for more than a month past relations have been entered into with Sheikh Obeydullah.... *I am also informed that some Kurdish tribes of Armenian origin are not only ready to assist in any enterprise but wish to embrace the Christian faith.*

(FO 195/1316; William Everett Capt, June 25, 1880, Erzeroum, emphasis added.⁵⁶)

One can, thus, easily see, that there was, *de facto*, a double Hamidian policy *vis-à-vis* Kurdistan: while what would become Southern Kurdistan was in fact governed through patron-client relations and a complex game of co-optation, Northern Kurdistan was much more integrated into the state structures. A similar strategy in Persia was supported after the Constitutional Revolution in the urban areas in Kurdistan where local *enjumans* ("Councils") were constituted, but the Kurdish tribal forces, including the Simkos, were supportive of the monarchical forces.⁵⁷

The emergence of the intelligentsia

A similar divide could also be observed among the members of the intelligentsia. The Kurdish space, as most parts of the Muslim world, found itself in a process of Westernization, which was much more perceptible in the Ottoman Empire than in Persia. This process involved mainly the non-Muslim communities, but thanks to the Tanizmat, and thereafter Abdülhamid's efforts to create high-quality schools that could challenge the missionary and minority schools, some cities such as Diyarbêkir have transformed themselves into intense intellectual life. Ziya Gökalp, for instance, became "a sociologist", learned French, and initiated himself in Durkheim's work, without leaving his city. Gökalp was also involved in the local power relations. This elite represented the political margins of the Ottoman society and was involved in imperial politics, or even imagined itself as the saver of the empire.

This was also the case of Ishak Sukuti and Abdullah Cevdet, who figured among the founders of the Committee of Union and Progress (CUP) and had a European experience. These men would sometimes hesitate between their Kurdishness and their allegiance to the Ottoman Empire. Gökalp, for example, would even become one of the main theoreticians of Turkish nationalism. On the other hand, some others, namely the descendants of the Bedr Khans, would opt for Kurdish-Ottomanist positions. The journal *Kurdistan*, which was published in exile by Midhat Mikdad Bedir Khan and his brother Abdurrahim, shows clearly this tendency. Özoğul suggests that at the turn of the 20th century, "a great majority [of the Kurdish nationalist leaders] were high ranking Ottoman officials... . The second similarity among Kurdish nationalist leaders was their mandatory residence outside Kurdistan".⁵⁸

Together with Arab and Albanian nationalisms, Kurdish nationalism constituted the third wave of "Ottoman nationalisms". The Istanbul authorities, who indicated that Kurdistan was transforming itself into a "new Montenegro",⁵⁹ were well aware of the switch of some

Kurdish dignitaries toward nationalist positions. The exiled Young Turks were also aware of this “danger”. One of their organs, *Osmanlı*, declared in 1900 that

under the influence of the European civilization, the Albanians demand their autonomy. The Kurds, who are far away from this civilization and have a tribal life, don't have ... a will of independence, but because of the Hamidien system, they could progressively switch towards [such] a position.⁶⁰

There is no doubt that Bedir Khan was not friendly *vis-à-vis* the non-Muslims. It is, however, also clear that the journal *Kurdistan* adopted a pro-Armenian position and promoted Armenian-Kurdish fraternity.

I know that during the Kurdish-Armenian War, the Kurds have killed many innocent Armenians. God is not happy with this situation. The Kurds have sinned because they were ignorant. They did not know that killing an Armenian was exactly the same thing as killing a Muslim. Part of the responsibility of this sin belongs to the Muslim savants.

“O you Kurds, abandon massacres and pillages. Collaborate with the Armenians.”

“Killing some poor Armenians will mean nothing else than ruining your own country.”⁶¹

As it has been already mentioned, the Armenian movement, which was one of the most dynamic ones in the Caucasus and influenced by the left-wing movements in Russia, radicalized itself in the second half of the 19th century. It promoted a double emancipation, for the Armenians as a nation, and also for humanity. It is obvious that the Ottoman Empire, which it considered as an empire of darkness, had nothing to offer either to the Armenians or to the politicized Christian communities in the Balkans.

In what one could call the Armenian-Kurdish region, the Armenians were subjugated to a double policy of taxation; the official one imposed upon them by the state; and the non-official one, also called *kafirlik*, imposed by the Kurdish landowner. The refusal to accept this double taxation, which led to a local revolt in the Sassun region in 1894, unleashed a wide-scale massacre in which the Hamidian rule played a direct role. While the official state did not assume any kind of responsibility, but also did not condemn the atrocities, at least 200,000 Armenians were slaughtered. Sadettin Bey (subsequently pasha), whom Abdülhamid sent to the region as his emissary, had a real complaisance with the Kurdish tribes involved in these massacres: “The state has certainly the right to punish (*terbiye etmek*) the Armenians, but for [the] while being (*şu aralık*) we will not use this right”.⁶² But the tribes were not the only actors to take part in these atrocities. In an appeal signed by the well-known Süleyman Nazif and 400 urban dignitaries of Diyarbekir in 1895, one could read,

We too, we ask for justice. The aim of the Armenian traitors is to break down the holy link between the population of this area, which is a most courageous and devoted one to the state, and the Caliphate. We cannot tolerate this.⁶³

The consequence of these massacres, which lasted some two years, was the confiscation of many arable lands by the Kurdish landowners and the beginning of the famous Armenian agrarian question, as well as a massive exile of Armenians to North and South America. The massacres, which took place only a couple of years after the foundation of the Hamidien Cavalries and constituted a sort of pattern for the later genocide of 1915, changed dramatically

the very nature of the demographic context in many parts of Kurdistan and consolidated the alliance between the Yildiz Palace and many tribal, religious, and urban dignitaries.

Notes

- 1 Bauer.
- 2 Finley, VIII.
- 3 Gasratyan et al.
- 4 Eppel, 58.
- 5 van Bruinessen, *Kurdish Ethno-Nationalism*, 140.
- 6 Cf. for this notion, Mardin (1972–1973), 108.
- 7 According to Ahmed Rifat, author of an Ottoman geographical handbook, the Kurds numbered almost 1.5 million out of almost 23 million Ottomans cf. *Osmanlı Araştırmaları*, 273.
- 8 Cf. *Osmanlı Araştırmaları*, 16–21.
- 9 Hakan, 254; Kardam, 51.
- 10 Hurşid.
- 11 Atmaca.
- 12 Abdulla.
- 13 On the Shikaks cf. van Bruinessen, *Kurdish Ethno-Nationalism*, 138 and on.
- 14 McDowall, 68. Cf. for some concrete examples, 71–72.
- 15 Eldem.
- 16 Klein.
- 17 Mardin, “Center-Periphery”.
- 18 Kushner.
- 19 Cf. Bozarslan and Kürt Araştırmaları.
- 20 Bilir and Akpınar.
- 21 Özoğlu, 67.
- 22 Epözdemir, 278.
- 23 Moltke.
- 24 Eppel, 53.
- 25 Cf. *Osmanlı Kurdistanı*, 332.
- 26 Lazarev and Mihoyan, 122.
- 27 James.
- 28 Ardalan, 195.
- 29 Vali (2016).
- 30 Hourani, 62.
- 31 Salzmann.
- 32 van Bruinessen (1992), 182–183.
- 33 Yeğen.
- 34 Aydın, 167.
- 35 Cuinet, 185.
- 36 McDowall, 40.
- 37 Kardam, 215.
- 38 Hanioğlu, 84.
- 39 McDowall, 52.
- 40 Kardam, 200.
- 41 Jongerden and Verheij (ed.).
- 42 Gökçen.
- 43 Lütfi.
- 44 Bayraktar.
- 45 van Bruinessen (2000), 130.
- 46 Gasratyan, 40, 42.
- 47 Quoted in Soleimani (2016), (FO 195/1316: No. 24, Political (Confidential), Clayton to Trotter: Raschid Bey [the Kaimakam of Shaddakh]).
- 48 Celîl, 33–34.
- 49 Bajalan, 111.

- 50 Bajalan, 113.
- 51 Akpınar, Bilir, and Sebükten, *art. cit.*, 229–248.
- 52 Cf. Klein.
- 53 Fırat, 168.
- 54 Önal, 19.
- 55 Fortna.
- 56 Quoted Soleimani.
- 57 Vali (2011) and Gasratyan.
- 58 *Idem.*, 122.
- 59 Akpınar, Bilir, and Sebükten, 234.
- 60 Ünal, 72.
- 61 *Ibid.*, 63.
- 62 Önal, 22.
- 63 Beysanoğlu, 704.

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5

THE DEVELOPMENT OF THE KURDISH NATIONAL MOVEMENT IN TURKEY FROM MAHMUD II TO MUSTAFA KEMAL ATATÜRK

Ahmet Serdar Akturk

The modern history of Kurds in the Ottoman Empire and modern Turkey dates back to the first half of the 19th century. In the 1830s, the Ottoman central government reconsidered the status of autonomous Kurdish hereditary principalities (emirates) that had been ruling Ottoman Kurdistan since the early 16th century. The Ottomans had integrated the greater part of Kurdistan as a result of their pivotal victory over Persia's Safavid dynasty in the Battle of Chaldiran in 1514. Many Kurdish chiefs had sided with Ottoman Sultan Selim I against his Safavid counterpart, Shah Ismail. Sunni Kurdish chiefs had naturally allied with Sunni Ottomans tackling Shia Safavids in Anatolia and Mesopotamia. They had also resented the Safavids for replacing the Kurdish chiefs with Turkoman and Persian governors. Idris Bidlisi, an Ottoman Kurdish statesman, arranged the historic deal between hereditary Kurdish chiefs and the Ottoman imperial government which would last for over three centuries. Contrary to its centralist tendencies, the Ottoman government rewarded Kurdish chiefs with various degrees of autonomy. For the Kurdish emirs, Ottoman rule meant a long era of stability and recognition. For the Ottomans, autonomous Kurdish principalities served as vassals in a buffer zone with Persia, which ruled a small portion of Kurdistan.¹

The Ottoman reconquest of Kurdistan

The Kurdish principalities that endured into the early 19th century were Bohtan, Baban, Soran, Hakkari, Bahdinan, Mahmudi, Mush, Palu, Egil, Bitlis, and Bradost. These emirates, or proto-kingdoms, marked a long era of Kurdish self-rule. Each harbored a vibrant cultural, literary, and religious heritage that the Kurdish intelligentsia since the late 19th century re-captured as a golden age in Kurdish history. The Ottoman central government's decision in the 1830s to exert full central control over Kurdistan prevented these emirates from lasting into the 1850s. This major break in Kurdish history can only be understood against the backdrop of broader changes affecting the Ottoman Empire. By the early 19th century, the

Ottomans had embarked upon a series of Westernizing reforms to catch up with the military, industrial, technological, and institutional superiority of Europe. In Kurdistan, a more complex web of international actors had come to replace the traditional Ottoman-Persian rivalry. European diplomatic representatives as well as Christian missionaries monitored developments in Kurdistan for its strategic location and the fate of local Christians.²

The Ottoman “re-conquest of Kurdistan” began during the reign of Mahmud II (r.1808–39) and continued during the ensuing era of reforms, Tanzimat (1839–76). Creating a centralized provincial administration was among the Ottoman modernizing reforms during the Greek Rebellion (1821–32), the war with Russia (1828–29), and an Egyptian crisis (1831–33). Located in a strategic location *vis-à-vis* the Russian threat and the Egyptian crisis, Kurdistan seemed too important to leave to the autonomous Kurdish emirs. The Ottoman central government pursued direct control at the expense of the principalities.³

Suppression of the Kurdish principalities did not take place all at once. In fact, the Ottoman government worked with loyal emirs while displacing rebellious ones. The chief of the Soran Emirate, Muhammad Pasha of Rawanduz (Muhammad Pasha the Blind), constituted the first major challenge. He expanded his influence beyond his principality when the Ottomans were busy with the Egyptian crisis and cooperated with the invading Egyptians. Sultan Mahmud II dispatched his army against the rebellious Kurdish emir in 1834. Displaced emirs cooperated with the Ottoman army against Muhammad Pasha the Blind, whose resistance ended in 1836. Though pardoned in Istanbul, the emir suspiciously disappeared in 1838 while returning to Kurdistan. Next, Bedir Khan, the emir of the Bohtan principality, rose up. While the Ottomans originally favored him as a loyal partner in 1837 and encouraged his alliances with neighboring emirs, Bedir Khan overstretched with his resistance to the Tanzimat administrative overhauls, his disagreements with local officials, and his infamous massacres of Nestorian Christians in the Hakkari region. Quickly suppressing Bedir Khan’s rebellion in the summer of 1847, the Ottoman central government banished the emir and confiscated his territories, subduing the last prominent emirate.⁴

What followed was the submission of the remaining Kurdish emirates, which marked the end of the age of autonomous Kurdish principalities. As a result of the so-called “re-conquest of Kurdistan,” the Ottomans ended the age of semi-independent Kurdish principalities and created an “official” province of Kurdistan. Other hereditary Kurdish families followed Bedir Khan’s fate. Exiled to Crete with his family, Bedir Khan was allowed to return to Istanbul in 1868 before moving to and passing away in Damascus in 1869. The Ottoman imperial system absorbed the Bedirkhanis and other Kurdish princely families, whose sons and grandsons attended Ottoman schools and worked in various branches of Ottoman civil and military bureaucracy. The Bedirkhanis, Babans, and other scions of former Kurdish emirs became part of the Ottoman social and political fabric throughout the empire. These Ottoman Kurdish gentlemen would also be among the leading members of the Kurdish cultural and, later, political awakening in the late 19th and early 20th centuries.⁵

The rise of the Shaykhs

The emirates’ downfall was an important step toward administrative centralization, but centrally appointed Ottoman officials lacked the emirs’ legitimacy and power. Without the Kurdish emirs’ proclaimed heritage from early Islamic heroes and mediation as supra-tribal leaders, disorder erupted throughout Kurdistan. Kurdish shaykhs of the Naqshbandi and Qadiri Sufi orders, who already enjoyed transnational influence, with followers throughout the Ottoman Empire and in Persian Kurdistan, filled the resulting power vacuum. The

shaykhly families, such as the Barzanis, Barzinjis and Shamdinanis, also assumed political leadership. A prominent example, Naqshbandi Shaykh Ubaydullah of Shamdinan, took over some of the territories from the former Botan, Bahdinan, and Hakkari principalities in the Ottoman Empire in addition to the Ardalan region in Qajar Persia. Claiming descent from the Prophet Muhammad, Ubaydullah's spiritual and political legitimacy was paramount.⁶

The Ottoman Sultan Abdulhamid II (r.1876–1909) appointed Shaykh Ubaydullah as commander of Kurdish tribal forces during the Russo-Turkish War (1877–78). Ubaydullah did not view the central government as competent enough to save Kurdistan from Russian encroachments and Armenian territorial claims backed by Western powers. Following the war, he and his son, Shaykh Abdulqadir, rose up to establish an autonomous entity encompassing Kurdish territories of the Ottoman and Persian Empires. What made Ubaydullah a pioneer in Kurdish history was his use of a modern concept of nation to define Kurdish people and to distinguish them from other communities such as the Turks. The Qajar forces defeated him, and he surrendered to the Ottoman Empire. He was exiled to Istanbul and passed away in Mecca in 1883. His legacy would continue on both sides of the Ottoman-Persian frontier through his family members.⁷

Abdulhamid II's Kurds and "Young Turkish" Kurds

Abdulhamid II attached special importance to Kurds for the Ottoman Empire's survival. Secessionist nationalist movements among the empire's Christian communities led Abdulhamid to modify liberal Ottoman nationalism by emphasizing the solidarity of Muslim communities. He also sought to curb ethnic nationalism among non-Turkish Muslim communities, such as Kurds, Arabs, Albanians, and Circassians. Consequently, he viewed Kurds as an indispensable ally against Russian imperialism and Armenian nationalism. Kurdish traditional chiefs also worried about Russian support for Armenians. Kurdistan was demographically heterogeneous, including Christian communities, such as Armenians and Assyrians. The Ottoman Empire's weakness and increasing pressure from Western imperialism empowered non-Muslim communities whose territorial claims clashed with those of Kurds. These common threats led Abdulhamid to create an irregular cavalry out of Kurdish tribes in the model of the Russian Cossack Brigades, the Hamidiye Light Cavalry (Hamidiye Hafif Süvari Alayları). He also opened a school in Istanbul for sons of Kurdish and Arab tribal chiefs to further cement their loyalty: the Imperial Tribal School (Mekteb-i Aşiret-i Humayun). Though the alliance seemed logical, this strategy conflicted with a broader Ottoman ideal of a modern state apparatus in the periphery for the welfare of all Ottomans, regardless of religious and ethnic identity. Under Milli İbrahim Pasha and other Kurdish tribal chiefs, the Hamidian Light Cavalry perpetrated crimes against Armenians as well as vulnerable Kurds.⁸

Ottoman Kurdish gentlemen were also in the forefront of the political opposition against Abdulhamid's authoritarian rule. With Ottoman compatriots of Turkish, Albanian, Arab, Greek, and Armenian origin, these gentlemen hoped to restore the constitution the Sultan had suspended in 1878. Named the "Young Turks," they championed a representative government to restore the confidence of all Ottoman people and prevent the twin threats of secessionist nationalism and European imperialism. Because of the Hamidian regime's repression, the Young Turks operated in distant provinces of the empire and Europe. They formed secret societies, such as the influential Committee of Union and Progress (CUP). The CUP's founders included two Kurdish, one Albanian and one Circassian, students at Istanbul's Military Medical School. Their bond was based on their desire to save their empire without an autocratic ruler, and their ethnic identity was secondary. Embodying the

fulfillment of Ottoman civic nationalism during and after the Hamidian era, these Kurdish gentlemen included prominent Baban, Bedirkhan, and Shamdinan families, banished and relocated to Istanbul or other urban centers since the 1840s.⁹

Sons of Bedir Khan actively involved in the Young Turks, Miqdat Midhad and Abdurrahman, published *Kürdistan* (1898–1902), a newspaper in Kurdish and Ottoman Turkish. First published in Cairo and later in Geneva, London, and Folkstone due to Hamidian pressure, *Kürdistan* spoke to a Kurdish audience. Abdurrahman, along with Hikmet Baban, attended the 1902 Young Turk Congress in Paris. *Kürdistan* represented a twofold mission. First, Ottoman Kurdish gentlemen wished to expose Abdulhamid II's mismanagement of the empire and warn against the Hamidian Light Cavalry and other such excesses. Second, they tried to keep alive the legacy of their princely family, as when serially publishing *Mem û Zîn*, a 17th-century, Kurdish-language literary saga taking place in the Botan Principality. The Ottoman government banned *Kürdistan* and remained skeptical of influential Kurdish families. Some ambitious Bedirkhanis, for example, attempted to reclaim power and influence in Kurdistan, and negotiated with foreign imperial powers during and after Abdulhamid's reign, yet the central government took any sign of disloyalty seriously and punished those involved with imprisonment and exile. However, prior to World War I's end, it would be anachronistic to discuss a Kurdish nationalist movement opposed to Ottomanism, Islamism, and even nascent Turkism for an Ottoman sociologist of Kurdish origin, Ziya Gökalp (1876–1924), became a founding ideologue of Turkism.¹⁰

The 1908 Young Turk Revolution and the Ottoman Kurdish movement

The 1908 Young Turk Revolution orchestrated by the CUP initiated the Second Constitutional Era. The restoration of the constitution and the reopening of Istanbul's Ottoman Parliament created excitement all over the empire and among the Kurdish elite. Free press and assembly during the initial political atmosphere revitalized Ottoman Kurdish activism. Members of princely and shaykhly families spearheaded Kurdish associations and publications in Istanbul. Those of the Bedirkhan, Baban, and Shamdinan families founded the Kurdish Mutual Aid and Progress Society (Kurd Teavun ve Terakki Cemiyeti). Another major Kurdish association was the Society for the Propagation of Kurdish Education (Kürd Neşri Maarif Cemiyeti). *Kürdistan*'s publication resumed in 1909. *The Kurdish Mutual Aid and Progress Gazette* (*Kürd Teâvun ve Terakki Gazetesi*) also appeared in the early years of the new regime (1908–9). Kurdish students in Istanbul formed the Kurdish Students' Hope Society (Kürt Talebe Hêvî Cemiyeti) in 1912, disseminating *Rojî Kurd* (1913) and *Hetawî Kurd* (1913–14).¹¹

The CUP's hope that the end of Hamidian tyranny and restoration of political liberties would forge a new sense of Ottoman solidarity faded quickly. Western powers' indifference to the new regime's attempts to save the integrity of the empire, continuing territorial losses, and rising appeal of ethnic activism among the empire's diverse communities forced the CUP to modify its political strategies toward a more authoritarian direction. CUP leaders realized that Ottoman civic nationalism resonated only with Muslim communities, while the new, free political atmosphere harnessed Christian communities' demands for secession. After a failed counter coup in 1909, the CUP deposed Abdulhamid, silenced the liberal opposition, and forced some leading Kurdish figures to leave. In Kurdistan, the CUP's policies quickly evolved into pragmatism to prevent the Ottoman Empire's disintegration. While the Hamidian Light Cavalry initially dissolved, the need for local allies to combat Russian imperialism and Armenian nationalism instead revitalized local Kurdish militia forces under a new name: the Tribal Light Cavalry. As their centralist and secularist policies provoked a

number of uprisings by Kurdish tribal and religious chiefs, the CUP never became as popular as Abdulhamid II in Kurdistan. Despite this disappointment, Kurds remained vested in the Ottoman Empire. In fact, the unprecedented territorial losses and the Western imperialist threat consolidated Kurds' attachment. During the Balkan Wars (1912–13), members of aristocratic Kurdish families served in the Ottoman Army and protested the resulting territorial losses.¹²

Kurds fighting for the Ottoman sultanate and caliphate in World War I

World War I set the stage for a dramatic turn of events. The war's onset in 1914 triggered a new wave of Ottoman patriotism among Kurds. Kurds, like their Ottoman Turkish Muslim brothers, mobilized to defend the Ottoman sultanate and caliphate. Many Kurdish gentlemen served in the Ottoman army. Kurdish elites wrote patriotic poems praising Ottoman soldiers fighting the British in Egypt. Once recalled, Ottoman Kurdish students in Europe returned to join the Ottoman Army. Cooperation of Kurds in Kurdistan was also vital for Ottoman strategies against Russia and Armenian nationalists. The central government's policy of deportation and 1915 massacres of Ottoman Armenians epitomized the tensions between Ottoman Muslims and non-Muslims in Kurdistan. Kurds too were concerned about the prospect of Russian invasion backed by Armenian nationalists, with their involvement in the Armenian massacres damaging their image in the West. Though Armenians became the primary victims in Eastern Anatolia, the war years also created catastrophes for Kurds as a result of violence, deportation, and famine, as when the CUP government resettled many Kurds in the empire's western provinces.¹³

President Woodrow Wilson, Mustafa Kemal Pasha, and Kurds

The Bolshevik Revolution and the removal of Russia from the war saved Ottoman Kurdistan from invasion. When the Allied Powers defeated the Central powers, the CUP leadership fled, and the Ottomans officially accepted the Mudros Armistice on October 30, 1918. The years immediately after presented Kurds with favorable conditions to have a state of their own. Kurdish, Arab, Armenian, and Turkish nationalists under Ottoman rule welcomed U.S. President Woodrow Wilson's Fourteen Points and the principle of national self-determination. Some Ottoman Kurdish gentlemen immediately took up self-determination, while others continued imagining Kurds as part of the defeated but still existent Ottoman Empire and Caliphate.¹⁴

The defeat of the Ottoman Empire, the Mudros Armistice, the Wilsonian principle of national self-determination, and the British invasion of Istanbul in late 1918 saw some self-appointed Kurdish elites argue for the case of Kurdish independence. Sureya Bedirkhan (1883–1938), a grandson of Bedir Khan, established the Committee of Kurdish Independence in Cairo and contacted the British in the name of Kurds and his princely family. General Muhammad Sharif Pasha, a member of Kurdish Baban family and well-known former Ottoman diplomat in Europe, declared his willingness to be the ruler of an independent Kurdistan. Shaykh Taha also claimed the leadership of a united Kurdistan in Ottoman and Persian territories. In post-war Istanbul, Kurdish activism resumed with the revival of Kurdish associations and periodicals. In December 1918, two prominent Kurdish figures in the city, Amin Ali Bedirkhan and Shaykh Abdülqadir of Shamdinan, established the Society for the Advancement of Kurdistan (Kurdistan Teali Cemiyeti), also known as the Kurdish Club, with branches in Kurdistan. In 1919, the Society for the Advancement of Kurdish Women (Kürd Kadınları Teali Cemiyeti) emerged in Istanbul. As in *Jîn* (1918–19), post-war

Ottoman Kurdish periodicals reflected the intelligentsia's cheering Kurdish national self-determination. On the one hand, they tried to prove the existence of a unique Kurdish national community with its own characteristics; on the other hand, Ottoman propaganda tried to discredit these claims.¹⁵

Ottoman Kurdish elites in Istanbul approved Sharif Pasha to represent Kurdish demands at the 1919 Paris Peace Conference. One of Sharif Pasha's main tasks was negotiating with the Armenian representative, Bogos Nubar Pasha. This produced the Kurdo-Armenian solidarity agreement, an important step to overcome Western powers' prejudices toward Kurds for involvement in the Armenian massacres. However, Kurdish elites in Istanbul did not accept the agreement as its map of Kurdistan had granted some Kurdish-populated territories to the proposed Armenian state. Amidst harsh criticism, Sharif Pasha stepped down. Armenian nationalists opposed the agreement and applied for all six Ottoman vilayets, Erzurum, Van, Bitlis, Mamuretulaziz or Kharput, Diyarbakir, and Sivas, which Kurdish nationalists regarded as Kurdish territories. Regardless, Kurdish nationalists in Istanbul were not unified. President of the Council of the Ottoman State, Shaykh Abdulqadir of Shamdinan, proposed autonomy for the Kurds within the Ottoman Empire. On the other hand, Amin Ali Bedirkhan advocated secession of Kurdistan from the empire. Due to historic tensions between the Shamdinanis and Bedirkhanis over regional influence, Amin Ali Bedirkhan's secessionists left the Kurdish Club and created the Kurdish Social Organization Society (Kürd Teşkilat-ı İctimaiye Cemiyeti).¹⁶

Kurdistan remained a battleground between two futures. Kurdish nationalists hoped to mobilize for independence. However, former CUP activists disseminated strong pro-Turkish propaganda. The real threat to the Kurdish independence movement came when Ottoman Sultan Mehmed Vahdeddin appointed an Ottoman officer, Mustafa Kemal, as military inspector to the 9th Army in the north Anatolian town of Samsun in May 1919. Tasked to demobilize the Ottoman army, Mustafa Kemal instead assumed leadership of Anatolia's Ottoman independence. An Ottoman colonel and a war hero, he transformed already existing resistance groups into a more organized national movement: the Kemalists. The resulting War of Independence (1919–23) claimed to save the Ottoman Sultan-Caliph, considered a captive of the British in Istanbul, and to liberate the Ottoman fatherland from foreign occupation. Mustafa Kemal's arrival in Anatolia in May 1919 coincided with the Greek invasion of Smyrna, which terrified Kurdish chiefs saw as a precursor to Armenian takeover of Eastern Anatolia with Allied support. Viewed as a savior for Muslim Turks and Kurds because of his military service and relationships with Kurdish urban notables, tribal chiefs, and shaykhs, Mustafa Kemal utilized an overtly religious discourse and embraced all Ottoman Muslim people regardless of ethnicity. As part of their national pact (*Misak-ı Milli*), the Kemalists declared the six, Armenian-claimed, eastern vilayets as an integral part of the Ottoman fatherland.¹⁷

Kemalist propaganda during the War of Independence emphasized a religious brotherhood of Turks and Kurds. Though Mustafa Kemal secured many Kurdish chiefs' support, Kurdish nationalists pursued their own cause. With the Greek invasion and possible Armenian independence, Kurdish nationalism divided Anatolia. Istanbul's central government closed down Kurdish associations, while Mustafa Kemal denounced an independent Kurdistan as fratricide. This coincided with a British inquiry for an independent Kurdistan. With Istanbul's approval, British military intelligence officer Major Edward William Charles Noel investigated the feasibility of Kurdish independence. He sympathized with the Kurdish cause and viewed Kurdish nationalism as an important ideology to combat pan-Islamic propaganda. Accompanying Noel were Jaladet and Kamuran Bedirkhan and Diyarbekir's Akram Jamilpasha. Mustafa Kemal regarded Noel's mission as a plot against himself and the

independence movement in Anatolia, but, without a definitive British plan for the Kurds, Noel's mission bore no fruit.¹⁸

The Allied Powers at the San Remo Conference (April 19–26, 1920) partitioned the Ottoman Empire. The empire's representatives had no alternative but to sign the Treaty of Sevres (August 10, 1920), envisioning an independent Armenia in the four Ottoman provinces of Trabzon, Erzurum, Van, and Bitlis. The treaty granted local autonomy for predominantly Kurdish areas lying east of the Euphrates, Armenia's southern boundary, and north of Turkey's frontier with Syria and Mesopotamia. The former Ottoman Province of Mosul, southern Kurdistan, was attached to Mesopotamia (Iraq) under the British Mandate, able to be added to an independent Kurdistan. The Treaty granted Kurds international recognition for statehood and one year to appeal to the League of Nations for complete independence. However, many Kurds opposed the deal. The proposed Armenian state received most of Eastern Anatolia, the French took some Kurdish territories, and the treaty separated lands west of the Euphrates from the Kurdish autonomous region. Thus, influential Kurdish leaders in Istanbul and Kurdistan preferred a unified autonomous Kurdistan under Ottoman rule to an independent but fragmented one.¹⁹

British dissolution of the Ottoman Parliament in March 1920 already made Anatolia's Kemalists, vowing to preserve the empire's independence in Western Thrace, Anatolia, and Mosul's non-Arab territories, the sole representatives of the Ottoman people. They established the Grand National Assembly in Anatolia on April 23, 1920. The Assembly adopted the National Pact (*Misak-ı Milli*) that included Kurdish populated territories in Eastern Anatolia and Mosul. Despite some Kurdish nationalists' attempts to cooperate with Greeks and outbreak of a rebellion in the mostly Alevi Kurdish Dersim region in 1921, Kemalists enjoyed Kurdish support against Greeks and Armenians. This cooperation, Bolsheviks' material support, and other factors were vital for victory during the War of Independence. Signing a treaty with the French in October 1921 and defeating Armenian and Greek armies by late 1922, Kemalists sought to negotiate a new peace treaty replacing the Treaty of Sevres. The Grand National Assembly in Ankara abolished the Sultanate on November 1, 1922. War hero and close friend of Mustafa Kemal, İsmet (İnönü) presided over the Turkish delegation at the Lausanne peace talks, and his government claimed to represent both Kurds and Turks. With the Treaty of Lausanne (July 24, 1923), Kemalists got everything they wanted with few exceptions.²⁰

If the Treaty of Sevres had envisioned an independent Kurdistan, the Lausanne Treaty and resulting independent Turkey dashed the idea of Kurdish independence. In contrast to Kurdistan's centuries-long sovereignty, this postwar era initiated an era of unprecedented fragmentation. The newly established states of Syria, Iraq, and Turkey separated Kurdish tribes and families. For their contribution in the War of Independence, Turkey's Kurds hoped for recognition. Though mentioning Kurdish autonomy as late as January 1923, a more secular and Turkish nationalist Mustafa Kemal led the new Turkish Republic after October 1923.²¹

Kemalist Turkish Republic and “Reactionary” Kurdish rebellions

Though Kemalists abolished the Sultanate, exiled members of the Ottoman family, and allowed one Ottoman family member to stay in Turkey as Caliph, the real shock came with the caliphate's abrogation in March 1924. The abolishment of the Caliphate, the centuries-long bond between Turks and Kurds, conflicted with Mustafa Kemal's earlier emphasis on Turkish-Kurdish religious brotherhood. In reforms building a secular Turkish national identity,

the Kemalist Turkish Republic abrogated sharia law, closed Kurdish madrasas, and denied Kurdish political and cultural rights. While Kemalist rhetoric emphasized pre-Ottoman and pre-Islamic Turkish ethnic identity, the new Turkish state was much more pragmatic and inclusive toward non-Turkish Muslim communities. Having witnessed Christian secessionist movements threatening the Ottoman Empire's integrity, Mustafa Kemal's nation-building project welcomed former Ottoman Muslim ethnic communities of Turks, Kurds, Circassians, and Laz to assimilate under the new Turkish identity and adopt the secular vision of Kemalism. Despite its inclusive approach toward Kurds, the regime repressed any ethnic, political, or cultural demands conflicting with this new nationalist ideal, as in the case of Kurdish rebellions during the 1920s and 1930s.²²

Mustafa Kemal's secular, Turkish nationalist vision conflicted with the overt religious propaganda used to mobilize Kurdish leadership, disillusioning Naqshbandi Kurdish spiritual leader Shaykh Said and other traditional tribal and religious chiefs. Promising to restore the Caliphate, Shaykh Said collaborated with Shaykh Abdulqadir and the Kurdish nationalist organization Freedom (Azadi), made up of former Ottoman Kurdish military officers, intellectuals, and urban notables. With the coalition of aghas, shaykhs, and nationalist elites, the Kurdish national movement finally gained a broader character, but international support no longer existed. Beginning in February 1925, the Rebellion became the first major Kurdish challenge to the Kemalist republic. Crushed, rebel leaders were tried at infamous independence tribunals, found guilty, and executed in June 1925. Relocating prominent shaykhs and aghas to western parts of Turkey, the Kemalist Turkish state downplayed the rebellion's nationalist character, branding it a religious reactionary movement against modernizing reforms to emancipate Eastern Turkey from traditional leaders' yoke. Mustafa Kemal used the 1925 rebellion as a catalyst to silence political opponents and introduce further secularizing reforms.²³

The Kemalist Turkish regime tried discrediting executed Shaykh Said with allegations of British financial support. The timing of the rebellion was in fact very critical since it broke out when a League of Nation Commission was in Mosul to determine if the province's predominantly Kurdish residents wanted to be a part of Iraq or Turkey. At the Lausanne peace talks in 1923, the British and Turks could not agree on Mosul and decided to submit their dispute to the League of Nations. The League dispatched a commission in January 1925. While Mustafa Kemal ruthlessly suppressed the Kurdish demands in Turkey, he supported the Kurdish movements in Iraq as well as in Iran since the end of World War I. The Kemalists were in touch with Shaykh Mahmud Barzinji of Sulaymaniya who rose up against the British plan to include Mosul in the state of King Faisal's Mesopotamia (Iraq). Shaykh Mahmud claimed to be the king of the Kurds and demanded self-determination for Mosul. The Kemalists regarded Mosul as a part of their national pact and, thus, supported Shaykh Mahmud's anti-British movement. The Shaykh Said rebellion in Turkey undermined Turkey's position in Mosul. Kemalist Turkey's claim to a predominantly Kurdish province sounded unrealistic when Turkey's Kurds were in rebellion against the Turkish state. Kemalist Turkey's modernist discourse to legitimize the ruthless suppression of the Shaykh Said rebellion in Turkey contradicted the Turkish propaganda in Mosul, which focused on Islamic unity of Turks and Kurds against the British. The secular and Turkish nationalist reforms in Turkey proved to be untimely and revealed the contradictions of the Kemalist regime with regards to Kurds. It was also ironic that, while the Shaykh Said rebellion was in full swing in Turkey, many Kurds in Mosul were willing to join Turkey. Mosul officially became a part of Iraq as a result of the Treaty of Ankara between Turkey and Great Britain in the summer of 1926.²⁴

Kurdish nationalism in exile, the Ottoman legacy, and Kemalism

The Mosul Question and Turkey's claims to former Ottoman territories demonstrated the continuing legacy of the Ottoman Empire in the post-war Middle East. Syria and Lebanon under the French mandate were two other places which deeply influenced Turkey's Kurdish question. Not only did the Kemalist Turkish regime lay claim to the Sanjaq of Alexandretta in Syria for its alleged Turkish majority, but Syria and Lebanon became a safe haven for the opposition, including Kurdish émigrés from Turkey, against the Kemalist regime. Even though the Syrian-Turkish border was delineated by the Turkish and the French mandate authorities in 1921, there would be no strict border control for a few decades to come. Particularly after the failure of the 1925 Shaykh Said rebellion in Turkey, Kurdish nationalist resistance against Turkey moved to Syria and Lebanon.²⁵ In addition to the three Kurdish enclaves in northern Syria (Afrin, Jarablus, and the Jazira) along the Turkish-Syrian border, there were also Kurdish quarters in Syrian urban centers, such as Damascus, Aleppo, and Hama. Since the early 1920s, thousands of Kurdish refugees from Turkey joined the already existing Kurdish population of Syria and Lebanon. This influx, along with former Ottoman Kurdish gentlemen, stimulated a nationalist movement among Kurds in Syria directed particularly toward Turkey's Kurds. Damascus, where the Kurdish presence dates back to the time of Saladin in the 12th century, became a major center of Kurdish political and cultural activism under the French mandate. The Turkish authorities closely watched the activities of Kurdish émigrés in Syria and Lebanon and shared their concerns with the mandate authorities. For the French, Kurdish nationalism was vital for their policy of empowering ethnic and religious minorities against the rising threat of Syrian Arab nationalism challenging French rule in Syria.²⁶

The former Ottoman Kurdish émigrés from Turkey established a new Kurdish national organization, Khoybun ("Be Yourself"), in Beirut in 1927, with Jaladet Bedirkhan as its president. Khoybun brought together leading Kurdish figures including former Ottoman Kurdish intellectuals, military officers, and tribal leaders alienated by the Kemalist regime, especially following the 1925 Shaykh Said Rebellion. Khoybun also made an official alliance with the Armenian Dashnak Party in the Levant to work together for the independence of Kurdish and Armenian territories from Turkey. With representatives in Syria, Lebanon, Turkey, Iraq, Egypt, France, and the United States, Khoybun intellectuals and activists published booklets in various languages to make the Kurdish cause known in the West. On the Turkish-Iranian border, Khoybun spearheaded the Ararat Rebellion (1928–30), the second major Kurdish rebellion against the Turkish state. Ihsan Nuri Pasha, a former Ottoman officer and prominent figure in the Shaykh Said rebellion, was the leader of the rebellion. Turkey contained the Ararat uprising only after convincing the Iranian government to end the rebels' free border crossings.²⁷

The failure of the Ararat rebellion and rivalries among Kurdish leadership weakened Khoybun. Jaladet (1893–1951) and Kamuran Bedirkhan (1895–1978) left the organization and dedicated themselves to a Kurdish cultural renaissance during the 1930s and 1940s. In addition to Iraq and Soviet Armenia, Damascus and Beirut became two centers of Kurdish cultural revival. Central to the Kurdish cultural movement were the publications of books and periodicals in Kurmanji Kurdish and French on Kurdish language, literature, history, and social issues. Jaladet Bedirkhan published *Hawar* (1932–35 and 1941–43) and its illustrated supplement, *Ronahî* (1942–45), in Damascus, while Kamuran Bedirkhan published *Roja Nû/Le Jour Nouveau* (1943–46) and its supplement, *Stêr* (1943–45), in Beirut. French orientalist officer-scholars in Syria and Lebanon were also actively involved in the Kurdish

cultural movement. The Kurdish cultural movement in the Levant contributed to the articulation of Kurdish national identity, particularly for Kurmanji-speaking Kurds in Syria, Iraq, and Turkey. With their publications, the former Ottoman Kurdish gentlemen in Syria and Lebanon hoped to reach Kurds in Turkey, which banned Kurdish cultural and political activities. The 1930s were also known as the “High Kemalist era” in Turkey. The Kemalist Turkish state harnessed its efforts to assimilate Kurds into Turkishness by means of education, resettlement, and weakening the power of Kurdish religious and tribal leaders. Kurdish nationalists in the Levant, particularly Jaladet and Kamuran Bedirkhan, tried to expose these assimilationist policies.²⁸

Kemalist Turkey tried to hinder Kurdish activism in Syria with periodically announced amnesties for Kurdish exiles and diplomatic pressure on French mandate authorities. The Kemalist state considered Kurdish activism as a threat to the Turkish interests in Syria. Some Kurdish nationalists residing in the autonomous Syrian Sanjaq of Alexandretta actively worked against Turkey’s claims until the state’s annexation of the Sanjaq (subsequently called Hatay by Turkey) with French approval in 1939. Turkey also worried about Kurdish nationalist activism in other parts of northern Syria, namely, in the Kurdish enclaves along the Syrian-Turkish border. French mandate authorities suggested that Kurdish tribal and nationalist elites focus their activities in Jazira, one of the three disconnected Kurdish regions in northern Syria. Jazira became a multi-ethnic and multi-religious region with localist inclinations. In addition to the Arab and Kurdish communities, Armenian, Suryani, Kaldani, Greek Orthodox, and Assyrian communities resided in Jazira. French authorities encouraged the settlement of tribes and cultivation of land, turning Jazira into a major province. The newly created town of Qamishli was situated directly across from the town of Nusaybin on the Turkish side. Members of same families or tribes on both sides of the border remained closely in touch. Turkey closely watched developments in Jazira region during the 1930s when Kurdish and Christian notables demanded special status for Jazira, like that of the Alawi and Druze regions or the Sanjak of Alexandretta. The Turkish state secretly backed Syrian nationalists and conservative Kurdish chiefs who opposed the French-backed alliance between the Kurdish nationalists and Christian community leaders whose demands for autonomy were not realized.²⁹

Dersim: the last Kurdish challenge to Mustafa Kemal Atatürk

Back in Turkey, Mustafa Kemal by 1934 consolidated his power and adopted the last name Atatürk (Father of the Turks). However, he had to deal with another Kurdish rebellion taking place in the mostly Alevi Kurdish Dersim (1937–38) during the last years of his life. Turkish forces suppressed the rebellion by force, killing hundreds of insurgents and civilians. The leader of the rebellion was Sayyid Rıza, an Alevi religious chieftain. His appeal to the Western powers during the rebellion did not save Dersim. He surrendered to the Turkish forces, only to be hung along with other rebel leaders in November 1937.³⁰

By the time Mustafa Kemal Atatürk passed away in November 1938, Kemalist Turkish nationalism seemed triumphant. Kemalist ideology replaced the Ottoman cosmopolitan culture and attempted to mold all people living on Turkish soil into Turkishness. The Kemalist state expected its Kurdish citizens to view themselves as Turks. Though silenced, the Kurdish national movement did not die out. Kurdish language publications were smuggled to Turkey from Syria and Lebanon. Kurds in the border regions followed Kurdish language radio broadcasts from the neighboring countries, and news of Kurdish resistance in Iraq kept the spirit high among Turkey’s Kurds. The resurgence of the Kurdish national

movement in Turkey, however, had to wait for a few more decades.³¹ Kurdish nationalists in exile continued their resistance and reflected on the experience of Kurds in Turkey. In his 1944 editorial of a Kurdish magazine from Beirut, Kamuran Bedir Khan used family as a metaphor to lament what Kurds had been going through since the collapse of the Ottoman Empire. He wrote that every ethnic group which had made up the Ottoman Empire and Caliphate got their own share once the empire collapsed, similar to brothers who divide up the belongings of their deceased father. Only Kurds did not get their share, Kurdistan. Kamuran noted that, when Kurds claim justice, the other nations (Turks and Arabs) say, “We are all Muslims, we are all brothers, and there is no difference among us.” He responded, “Even if that statement was right, what they did is not fair.”³²

Notes

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- 3 Erik J. Zürcher, *Turkey: A Modern History* (New York: I.B. Tauris, 1995), 32–74; McDowall, *A Modern History*, 40–42; Bruinessen, *Agha, Shaikh, and the State*, 175–76; Özoğlu, *Kurdish Notables*, 65–68; Klein, *The Margins of Empire*, 58–60; Hakan, *Osmanlı Arşiv Belgelerinde Kürtler*, 65–71; Gunter, *The Kurds*, 12–13; and Hanioglu, *A Brief History*, 49–108.
- 4 Ahmet Kardam, *Cizre-Botan Beyi Bedirhan: Direniş ve İsyân Yılları* (Istanbul: Dipnot, 2011); Chris Kutschera, *Kürt Ulusal Hareketi*, trans. Fikret Baskaya (Istanbul: Avesta, 2013), 23–28; Jwaideh, *The Kurdish National*, 55–74; McDowall, *A Modern History*, 42–48; Bruinessen, *Agha, Shaikh, and the State*, 176–80; Özoğlu, *Kurdish Notables*, 59–60 and 70–72; Klein, *The Margins of Empire*, 57–58; Hakan, *Osmanlı Arşiv Belgelerinde Kürtler*, 71–236; Ateş, *The Ottoman-Iranian Borderlands*, 66–80; Michael Eppel, “Historical Setting,” 52–60; and Strohmeier, *Crucial Images*, 11–12.
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- 9 Jwaideh, *The Kurdish National*, 102–3; McDowall, *A Modern History*, 87–92; Strohmeier, *Crucial Images*, 18–20; Hanioglu, *A Brief History*, 109–49; and Zürcher, *Turkey*, 75–94.
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PART III

Kurdish culture



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6

EHMEDÊ XANÎ'S *MEM Û ZÎN*

The consecration of a Kurdish national epic

Michiel Leezenberg

More than any other work, Ehmedê Xanî's *Mem û Zîn* (henceforth *MZ*), a mystical romance or *mathnawî* poem in 2,655 bayts, or distichs, written in Kurmancî or Northern Kurdish, symbolizes and reflects the Kurds' aspirations toward liberation and national independence. This story of two tragic lovers who are not allowed to marry in life, and who – despite being buried together – remain separated by a thornbush, even in death, is usually seen as an allegory of the division of Kurdish society by outside forces and of the Kurds' inability to unite among themselves. The manuscript evidence and the oldest available sources suggest that from early on, Xanî and his poem have held a place of prominence, if not dominance, in Kurdish letters; initially, however, the poem was generally read, like other *mathnawî* poems, as a work of mystical love (*mahabba*). It was only in the late nineteenth century that Xanî was gradually elevated to the status of Kurdish national poet and his poem to the Kurdish national epic; accordingly, the work was increasingly interpreted as carrying a secular nationalist message. This chapter will attempt to trace the shifting reception of Xanî's romance and briefly discuss how it acquired a central place in Kurdish national consciousness over the course of the twentieth century.

About Xanî's life, we know little with any confidence. In *MZ*, he states that he was born in 1061 AH/1650 CE (b. 2653) and that he finished his epic when he was 44 years old, that is, in 1095 AH/1695 CE.¹ He is known to have died in 1706 or 1707 CE in Beyazîd, where he was also buried; his tomb, near the famous Ishak Pasha Palace, can still be visited. Apart from this, he writes nothing about himself beyond conventional, and hyperbolic, statements about how sinful he is, calling himself 'the commander of sinners' (*pêshirewê gunahikaran*, b. 2651). He is also known to have written two short didactic works in verse: the *Eqîdeyê êmanê* ('Profession of the Faith') and the *Nûbihara piçûkan* ('First-Fruits for the Little Ones'), a rhymed Arabic-Kurdish vocabulary, both of which, it is said, were among the first works rural Kurdish medrese pupils had to read and memorize after the Qur'an.² Another profession of faith, the *Eqîdeya Îslamê*, partly written in prose, is also ascribed to Xanî, but large parts of this text are identical to a late-nineteenth-century *eqîde* by one shaykh Abdullah of Nehri which is known to have originated in Khalidî-Naqshbandî circles and hence can hardly have been written by Xanî.³ Xanî's fame and standing among the Kurds are due primarily, if not exclusively, to his story of two tragic lovers; his other works, though significant

in their own right, have hardly become known outside the medrese environment from which they originate and for which they were composed.

The story of *MZ* concerns the tragic fate of the beautiful youths Mem and Zîn, who first meet during a celebration of Newroz, the New Year's celebration on March 21, and fall in love at first sight. The local prince, however, egged on by his evil counselor Bekir, refuses to grant permission for the youths' marriage; as a result, both lovers slowly wither away. Then, during a game of chess with the prince, Mem publicly confesses his love for Zîn, upon which the prince has him imprisoned. After a final visit from his beloved in prison, Mem dies; shortly thereafter, Zîn passes away too.

There are numerous oral versions of the story, which often, but by no means always, circulate under the title *Memê Alan*. A few short versions had been published in the Soviet Union in the 1930s, but the first book-length rendering (in fact, a composite version blending recitations of several bards) was published by Roger Lescot in 1942. In 1991, Michael Chyet published a study of a much larger number of versions, most of which had previously been published. Often, Xanî is described as having found the inspiration for his tale from these local oral traditions, but it cannot strictly be proven that these actually antedate Xanî's literate version. Moreover, the oral tradition from which his is claimed to have drawn inspiration is generally tacitly assumed, or explicitly claimed, to have been 'purely Kurdish,' but Kurdish oral practices clearly form part of a wider Persianate or Iranian cultural space which is known to have been a rather more cosmopolitan affair and to have involved a complex interaction between written and oral forms of cultural expression. Finally, not only are both Armenian *ashugs* and Jewish bards known to have sung tales in Kurdish, but there are also varieties of *Memê Alan* in languages other than Kurdish in existence.⁴ Whatever its character, Xanî was probably inspired by this local tradition, but his version of the story differs considerably from the oral versions that have come down to us. Most significantly, Mem is a rather nobler character in Xanî's version, while *perîs* (fairies) and, more generally, various forms of folk religion, including sorcery and magic, which are quite prominent in most oral renderings, are almost completely absent in Xanî's work.⁵

The lovers first meet during Newroz, the New Year's celebration during the spring solstice. This festival forms a carnival during which people are allowed to do things that are not normally condoned. Specifically, local boys and girls are allowed to intermingle and to dance together, with the aim of choosing a partner to marry. Both Mem and his male companion, Tajdîn, and Zîn and her sister, Sitî, are cross-dressed, and they are initially bewildered by their love. Intriguingly, there is an asymmetry in this cross-dressing and seemingly homoerotic love; however, whereas the girls are scolded by their wet-nurse for falling in love with what they think are females, nobody reproaches the boys for falling in love with beardless males. Clearly, the image of the (human or divine) beloved as a beardless boy, so widespread in the classical Arabic, Persian, and Ottoman Turkish traditions, had also reached Kurdish letters. But human love and sexuality is not what *MZ* is primarily about.⁶ In line with the Persianate mathnawî tradition from which it derives, *MZ*'s tale of the unconsummated love between two humans is given an allegorical mystical significance: precisely because the love is not consummated and remains pure, it can be transmuted into a divine love. The great model for this kind of poetry is, of course, Nizamî Genjewî's (d. 1209 CE) *Laylî va Majnûn*, which is frequently alluded to by Xanî.

Xanî shows himself to be well aware of the fact that he stands in a wider Persianate literary tradition. Clearly, the imagery used in *MZ*, of roses and nightingales, of moths and flames, and of famous lovers like Layla and Majnun and Farhad and Shirin, is very much

based on the tradition of Persianate mystical love poetry; in fact, Xanî explicitly alludes to classical Persian poets like Nizâmî and Abdulrahmân Jâmî (d. 1492 CE):

Kes nakite meyerê xwe Camî
Ranagiritin kesek Nizamî.
No one would make Jami his groom/
No one would employ Nizamî.

(b. 257)

Apart from these explicit references, however, it is difficult, if not impossible, to say with any degree of confidence that Xanî was actually familiar with the works of such classical Persian poets as, most importantly, Firdawsî, Rûmî, and Hafez. Indeed, there are indications that he knew at least part of these poets through later oral versions rather than from their own written texts. Thus, he repeatedly refers or alludes to characters and episodes from Firdawsî's *Shahname*, like the hero Rostam, and the unhappy lovers Bizhan and Manizha, but – surprisingly, if not astonishingly – he nowhere mentions the story of Kaveh the blacksmith, which occurs early in Firdawsî's epic, and which is explicitly linked to the origin of the Kurds. Either Xanî was unaware of this episode, which occurs quite early in the *Shahname*, and by extension, possibly, of the *Shahname* as a whole, or he *did* know it but may have concluded that this tale of a people rising against its ruler did not fit his own literary, religious, or political objectives.

Obviously, Xanî knows that other poets have composed works in Kurdish before him; in fact, he mentions several of these predecessors by name:

Bîna ve rûha Melê Cizîrî
Pê hey bikira 'Elî Herîrî
Keyfek we bida Feqiyê Teyran.

(b. 251–252)

I would have resurrected Melayê Cezîrî's soul/And would have returned Elî Herîrî
back to life/I would have brought joy to Feqiyê Teyran.

At first blush, this awareness seems to contradict Xanî's boast that his writing his verse in Kurdish is a novelty, indeed, a heretic innovation (*bid'et*, b. 237). This apparent contradiction, however, disappears when one realizes that Xanî is not talking about Kurdish-language poetry *tout court* but specifically about the learned verse of the mathnawî genre. This eagerness to develop a learned Kurdish poetry also helps to explain Xanî's famous comment that he has written his poem in order to present the Kurds as a people of learning and (mystical) love:

Da xelq-i nebêjîtin ko Ekrad
Bê me'rîfet in, bê esl û binyad.

(b. 240)

So that people will not say that the Kurds/Are without learning, without principles or foundations.

Clearly, Xanî himself saw his tale as a mystical allegory of worldly and divine love. Already in the very opening lines of his poem, he speaks of this theme, calling God the literal and

metaphorical beloved (*mehbûbê heqîqî û mecazî*, b. 2). Yet this is not the way, or at least the primary way, in which his poem has been read by modern-day readers. Nowadays, *MZ* is generally seen as an allegory of the political fragmentation of Kurdistan and of the Kurds' seeming inability to overcome their divisions, to unite, and to gain their liberty in a state of their own. This reading started gaining ground in the late 19th century, but it has a basis in Xanî's own text, notably in Chapters 5 and 6 of the introduction (*dîbaçe*). These two chapters have received a disproportionate amount of attention from readers because they seem to express a distinctly modern desire for Kurdish national independence. In particular, Xanî writes,

Gerd ê hebuwa me serfirazek... Neqdê me dibû bi sikke meskûk... Zahir vedibû ji bo me bextek.

If we had a leader... Our currency would be minted coinage... Our fortune would have brightened.⁷

(b. 199–203)

He adds that, because the Kurds are divided, others, like the (Ottoman) Turks, the Arabs, and the Persians, have been able to rule over the Kurds (b. 216–234). For Kurdish nationalists, such and similar lines prove that the Kurds are a distinct nation with a long-standing claim to statehood. Foreign scholars, however, have been puzzled by the seemingly anachronistic character of Xanî's verses. How is it possible, they ask, that a late 17th-century text from the periphery of the Ottoman empire appears to express the romantic nationalist sentiments that would not appear in Western Europe until the turn of the 19th century? Many modern commentators have been at a loss to adequately explain this passage, with one even confessing that he initially suspected it was an interpolation by a modern nationalist.⁸ The lines under scrutiny, however, appear in all known manuscripts of the work, including the oldest ones, which date back to the 1730s.

On closer inspection, however, this seeming anachronism disappears: whatever sentiment Xanî is expressing here, it is not a romantic nationalist call to a revolutionary struggle for national liberation or independence. First, and significantly, the toponym *Kurdistan* nowhere appears in this work. Xanî only rarely uses the substantive *Kurd* or the adjective *kurdî*; more often, he uses the plural noun *Ekrad*, 'the Kurds,' and the term *Kurmanc* or the adjective *Kurmancî* for their language. Second, Xanî calls not for a territorial nation-state based on political liberty or popular sovereignty, but rather for a land ruled by a Kurdish prince instead of a Turkish, Persian, or Arab one. It is only in *Koyî* that we will first encounter the romantic nationalism of liberty and independence, and the term *Kurdistan* as a political rather than a geographical sense. More precisely, Xanî wants a local Kurdish sovereign not just to rule the Kurds, but also to, in a sense, redeem them. For Xanî, it is the ruler who can give currency to the poet's vernacular words and who by the same token can transmute the base metal of the poet's verbal coinage into gold. In this vision, the ruler has not only a political but also an eschatological role to play. It is not by chance that Xanî says of the local prince *Mîrza* that his 'mere look is alchemy' (*nezera wî kimya ye*, b. 275). Thus, in the story, it is the seemingly evil prince *Zeyneddîn* who, by his refusal to allow *Mem* and *Zîn* to marry, enables them to transmute their human, or metaphorical, love into a divine, that is, literal, one. Moreover, in the end, both *Mem* and *Zîn* recognize this role of their prince and praise him for it.

Mem and Zîn in its medrese setting

Originally, then, *MZ* was not a nationalist tale of a people's liberation, but a mystical allegory of love. This feeling is strengthened by the fact that it was originally written for a religious audience. The manuscript evidence suggests that relatively large numbers of copies were made from early in the eighteenth century; unlike the manuscripts of works for local princely patrons, like Sheref al-Dîn Bidlîsî's *Sherefname*, let alone works for royal customers like Firdawsî's *Shahname*, all of these copies are simple and unadorned, and lack lavish illustrations. This fact alone suggests that, unlike many another mathnawî work, *MZ* was never primarily intended for, or directed to, a courtly audience. Unlike most other Persianate poems, *MZ* also lacks a chapter of elaborate and hyperbolic praise for a local patron. There is a brief passage on prince Mirza (b. 274–285), but this ruler is exhorted in an almost reproachful tone.

Instead, both the available textual evidence and the – scanty – testimony we have from medrese alumni point to its having been primarily written for, and appreciated by, an audience of medrese pupils in, specifically, Northern Kurdistan. As such, it may be seen as part of a wider process of vernacularization, or shift toward new literate uses of the spoken vernacular, in the Kurmancî-speaking areas during the late 17th and 18th centuries: in this period, a number of introductory Kurmancî-language works on Arabic lexicon and grammar, and religious learning were written, and soon became a regular part of the *rêz* or medrese curriculum in rural medreses all over Northern Kurdistan.⁹ No such vernacularization took place, however, among Kurds further south. In the area where Central Kurdish (later called 'Sorani') was spoken, the hujras and medreses continued to employ Arabic and Persian as the exclusive languages of instruction. Thus, it may be no coincidence that neither the Kurmancî textbooks nor Xanî's mathnawî poem gained a wider circulation in Southern Kurdistan. There are also remarkably few, if any, oral versions of the Memê Alan tale from Sorani-speaking areas that have come down to us. The question of long-term cultural differences between the Kurmancî – and the Sorani-speaking areas, however, is best left for another occasion.

Transformation into a national epic

An important later stage in the Kurdish reception of Xanî is marked by Mela Mahmûdê Bayazîdî (d. 1860). Although unknown by his contemporaries, Bayazîdî is an important source in his own right. In his brief sketch of the major classical Kurdish poets (in Jaba 1860), he writes of Xanî that, 'of all the Kurdish poets, he is the most famous, and perhaps the most esteemed and praised of all poets' (*ji sha'riyêd Kurdistanê hemtîyan jî meshhur û fayîq e, belko ji hemû she'iran meqbul û memduh e*) (Jaba 1860: 15 Ar.); he adds that *MZ* is a 'book on lovers and beloveds' (*kitêbek 'ashîq û ma'shuqan*), giving no hint that he considers the nationalist-sounding passages of central importance to the work. Even more intriguingly, he gives a prose summary which strips Xanî's tale of all its mystical elements, thus paving the way for a more secularized notion of a (national) literature. Bayazîdî's version is clearly based on Xanî's poem rather than on any oral version; in fact, Bayazîdî expresses no familiarity with oral versions of the story in any of his writings.¹⁰ He does not even mention it in his discussion of Kurdish songs in his ethnographical work, the *Adet û rusumatnameê Ekradiyye* (cf. Dost 2010).

For two centuries, *MZ* only circulated in manuscript form. It was not until the final years of the 19th century that the first fragments of the epic were printed, and the first complete edition would only appear in 1919. The first locally printed fragment appeared in *Kurdistan*

periodical, which had started in 1315/1898, edited by Miqdad Mîdhat Bedir Xan, one of Bedirxan Beg's sons. In the second issue, dated 14 zulhicce 1315 (May 6, 1898), Miqdad introduces *MZ* to his readers, promising that he will print a fragment of the poem in every issue of the journal and expressing his desire to print the work as a whole in book form. He praises the poem abundantly as containing 'many meanings and much wisdom' (*gelek meqsed û hisse û hikmet*). Although he falls short of calling it a national epic, or of labeling Xanî a 'national poet,' he unmistakably sees literature in specifically national terms; hence, Berdixan's comment that he had 'showed the work to Turkish and Arab scholars (*ulemayên Tirk û Ereb*),' who were impressed with it. *MZ*, in this line of reasoning, is not only a work of a national literature and a source of national pride for the Kurds, but it also makes them worthy as a nation.

It was also in *Kurdistan* that a famous poem on Xanî by Soranî poet Hajî Qadir Koyî (1815 or 1817–1898) was first printed. Reportedly written down in Koyî's copy of *MZ*, it states that

Le kurdan xeyrî Hacî û Shêxî Xanî
 Esasî nezmî kurdî danenawe¹¹
 Among the Kurds, apart from Hajî [Qader Koyî] and shaykh [Ehmedê] Xanî/
 None has laid the foundations of Kurdish poetry.

These comments, of course, solidify not only the position of Xanî, but also, and in the same breath, that of Koyî himself. As far as I know, Koyî is the first Kurdish poet to employ the romantic nationalist discourse of liberty (Arabic *hurriyah*, Kurdish *azadî*) and love of the fatherland (Ar. *hubb al-watan*, Kd. *hubbî weten*). Thus, he writes that 'love of fatherland is a sign of faith' (*hubbî weten e delîlî êman*), and in his famous poem, *Xakî Cizîr û Botan*, he laments,

Kiwa ew demey ke kurdan azad û serbixoy bûn
 Where is the time that the Kurds were free and independent?

(*Dîwan*: 84).

Thus, Koyî's is a backward-looking nationalism in the sense that it glorifies a past of alleged Kurdish liberty; it is also rather more unambiguous in its praise of the Kurdish mîrs than Xanî's poem. One would like to know in greater detail exactly when and how Koyî became acquainted with Xanî's epic and exactly what role the Bedir Xan family played in this process. Given that we have no evidence of either the oral or written versions of the tale circulating in Southern Kurdistan, Koyî is unlikely to have heard or read it before arriving in Istanbul in or around 1840. It is also unclear whether he was told of the epic's significance by members of the Bedir Xan family or, conversely, whether it was Koyî who impressed upon the Bedir Xans the poem's national importance. Given the lack of reliable sources, we may never know. According to Bedir Xan, Hajî Qadri Koyî had called *MZ* 'the book of our nation' (*kitêba milleta me*), but this quote comes from a relatively late source and cannot be found in any of Koyî's extant writings.

The early 20th century saw an increasingly antagonistic rivalry between different national movements in the Ottoman empire. Among Kurdish activists and intellectuals too, the sense grew that the Kurds were a nation in part precisely because they had a national literature. The culmination of this process was the first printed edition, edited by Hemze Muksî, which appeared in Istanbul in 1919, on the initiative of the Kürdistan Ta'mîmî Ma'arif ve Neshriyat Cemiyeti, the cultural section of the nationalist *Kürdistan Te'ali Cemiyeti* (KTC), the 'Society for the Rise of Kurdistan.' Even more strongly than Bedir Xan, Hemze implies that any

nation worthy of the name should have a national poet, and a national literature, of its own: 'Each people or nation that wants to create its national existence and sovereignty must first give strong care to its literature and literary works' (*her qewm û millet ku arzûya mewcûdiyet û seltêneta xwe ya millî bikin, lazîm e ji ewwel emir ve îhtîmamekê qewî bidîne edebîyat û asarê xwe yê edebî*). He adds that, like Firdawsî, Xanî 'worked for his nation' (*Xanî wek Firdewsî jibo milliyeta xwe xebitîye*), but unlike the former, he did not completely succeed in reviving his nation since his age, unlike Firdawsî's, was 'evil and hard' (*berbad û çetin bû*).

Around the same time, the first dramatic rendering of the story was published. In 1918–1919, Rehmî Hekarî published a theatrical version, *Memê Alan*, in which Mem sets out to fight for the fatherland, much to the chagrin of both his mother and his beloved Zîn. Published in an era of unprecedented national, and military, mobilization, this work owes rather more to plays like Namik Kemal's *Vatan yahut Silistre* (1873) than any oral or written version of the story of Mem and Zîn as we know it.

Mem û Zîn in the modern nation-state

By a cruel irony, the publication of Hemze's printed edition was also an end point, at least for the Northern Kurds. The KTC was banned in 1920, and in the new Republic of Turkey, all spoken, written, and printed uses of Kurdish were outlawed. It would be almost 50 years until the next printed edition of *MZ* appeared on Turkish soil. In 1968, Mehmet Emin Bozarslan published a new edition of Hemze's text in Latin transcription, supplemented with a Turkish translation and an extensive vocabulary. As noted, he left out the passages on the division of the Kurds and the call for a strong leader; yet the very language in which the book was printed caused uproar. An order banning the book and summoning the author to court was issued; Bozarslan writes that half of the first print run of 6,000 copies was seized by the Turkish police and burned (1995: 97/101). After Bozarslan's acquittal in 1973, however, a second edition, identical to the first printing, appeared in 1975. A third edition, likewise a photographic reprint, was published in 1990. On the whole, however, any literary activity in Kurdish, and Kurdish cultural activities more generally, remained out of bounds in Turkey well into the 1990s. Clandestine Kurdish-language medrese activities continued, however, despite the official ban on both the Kurdish language and religious education. As but one example of this, I once found a printed copy of an undated (but visibly 20th-century) manuscript entitled *Mîzan al-adab* ('Balance of Literature') in a religious bookshop in Diyarbakir, which on closer inspection turned out to be a handwritten copy of Xanî's epic. Oral versions of *Memê Alan* also continued to be recited, especially in the more remote rural areas, where a large part of the population remained illiterate.

Of necessity, many Kurdish intellectuals who had fled the republic of Turkey continued their work in diaspora. A first wave of refugees settled in mandate Syria, including Celadet Bedir Xan (see the following); another wave emigrated to Western Europe in the late 1970s and early 1980s, and resumed Kurdish cultural activities in countries like Sweden, France, and Western Germany. Diaspora publishing houses like Roja nû in Sweden and Komkar in Germany published versions like the Kurdish text of Lescot's *Memê Alan* and Armenian-Kurdish playwright Eskerê Boyik's theatrical adaptation (1989). Likewise, in 1989, the Kurdish Institute in Paris published a Hejar's Sorani version and commentary of Xanî's epic.

In mandate Syria, the French authorities tolerated, and to some extent encouraged, Kurdish cultural activism, as part of a divide and conquer strategy to prevent a strong and unified Syrian nationalist opposition from emerging. In this climate, Celadet Bedir Xan fled from

Istanbul in 1923. Among others, he developed a Latin alphabet for Kurdish and started publishing a periodical, *Hawar*, in 1932. In this publication, he continued the consecration of Ehmedê Xanî and his romance that had been started in journals like *Kurdistan* and *Jîn*. Writing under the pseudonym of Herekol Ezîzan, Celadet Bedir Xan praised Xanî as ‘the prophet of our national faith, and the prophet of our race’s religion’ (*pêxemberê diyaneta me a millî, pêxemberê ola me a nijadî*).¹²

Also, after the end of the French mandate in 1946, Kurdish activities could continue, until the rise of a more assertive, and more repressive, Arab nationalism in the late 1950s and the 1960s. Thus, in 1947, a reprint of Hamza’s *editio princeps* was published in Aleppo. It was also here that the famous religious scholar, Muhammad Sa’id Ramadan al-Bûtî (1929–2014), the future mufti of Syria, composed and published his Arabic prose rendering of Xanî’s tale (1957). Although al-Bûtî closely follows Xanî’s narrative, he omits not only the poem’s Kurdish nationalist-sounding *dîbaçe*, but also its mystical elements. In doing so, he radically lifts the work out of its Kurdish and Sûfî setting, and makes it palatable for an international (or, more specifically, Arab) audience with a preference for straightforward narratives of pure and tragic love, and more conventional Islamic piety. As such, it has become quite popular in the Arab world and has seen numerous reprints, not only in Syria but also in other Arab countries.¹³

In monarchical and republican Iraq, the reception of the tale of Mem and Zîn, and of Xanî’s epic, followed a rather different trajectory. In the Sorani-speaking areas, as noted earlier, neither the oral tales of Memê Alan nor Xanî’s literary elaboration had gained a wider circulation in premodern and early modern times. Starting with an adaptation by Pîremerd published in 1928, the story became known to a larger – and partly illiterate – audience primarily through theatrical adaptations, mostly, if not exclusively, in the Sorani dialect of Sulaimaniya and with increasingly nationalist and revolutionary overtones. It seems to have been during this period that the reading of Xanî’s epic started gaining a definitive foothold.¹⁴ Although Gîw Mukriyani published an edition of the Kurmancî text in 1954, which was reprinted in 1967, it was not until 1960 that a full Sorani translation, by Iranian-born Hejar, was published, by coincidence in the same year that an armed Iraqi Kurdish movement emerged.

It was also in Iraq that the first full-length monographic study of *MZ* appeared, authored by Bulgarian- and Soviet-educated Izzeddîn Resul. The author’s educational background becomes clear from chapter titles like ‘Xanî and Dialectics’ and from occasional references to Marx, but it also features an extensive discussion of the poem’s Sûfî backgrounds and dimensions. Resul appears to take Xanî’s consecration for granted, writing that he does not know of any other Kurdish poet whose significance is recognized and valued as universally as Xanî’s (2007: 26).

Among the Kurds in Iran, the majority of whom speak a variety of Southern Kurdish rather than Kurmancî, the story of Mem and Zîn does not appear to have circulated widely before the 20th century; but here too both the oral and the literate versions have steadily gained popularity since then.

Developments in the Soviet Union, in particular the Soviet Republic of Armenia, deserve particular attention. The 1930s were a time when all Soviet peoples were hastily granted national poets and national epics as a matter of state policy. In the Caucasus, the jubilee of *Vepxistqaosani* (The Man in the Panther Skin) by Shoto Rustaveli and the millenary of the Armenian *Sasuntsi David* were celebrated, while in Central Asia, the *Manas* was promoted to the Kyrgyz national epic. Likewise, in 1938, the famous Soviet orientalist Orbeli ranked Xanî alongside such acknowledged national poets as Firdawsî and Rustaveli; in his preface to Rudenko’s 1962 edition, Qanatê Kurdoev openly stated that *MZ* is ‘the national epic of the Kurds.’¹⁵

On the whole, however, the early Soviet Union, with its atheist state policies, had little interest in promoting works of classical Islamic learning or literature, even if they had been written in vernacular languages. Instead, they lifted the oral traditions of the Kurds and other Soviet peoples into national traditions. Thus, in 1930s folklore collections, one encounters scholars like Heciyê Cindî and Emînê Evdal talking of oral epics like *Zembilfrosh* or *Dimdim* as the 'Kurdish national epic' (*eposa millî a kurdan*). The story of how these Soviet conceptions shaped later Kurdish self-perceptions, especially in Iraqi Kurdistan, remains to be told.

It was only during the 1960s that Soviet academic interest in classical Kurdish literature increased. In 1962, Margaret Rudenko published a text edition with a Russian translation, which is the sole genuine critical edition to date. With the numbers of manuscripts relatively easily available in places like London, Oxford, Petersburg, and so forth, it should by now be possible to prepare a new critical edition based on a larger – and possibly geographically broader – range of manuscripts than Rudenko was able to.

Mem û Zîn today

For long, Rudenko's 1962 Russian rendering remained the sole translation of Xanî's epic into a Western language. Early in the 21st century, however, several translations into Western European languages appeared. Unfortunately, both Saadalla's (2008) and Gerdi's (2009) English translations appeared with publishing houses in the region, as a result of which they have hardly reached an English-speaking audience elsewhere. There is also a French translation, at times rather liberal, by Alexie and Hasan (2002). At the time of writing, German and Dutch translations are in preparation.

In the late 20th and early 21st century, Xanî's standing among the Kurdish public is uncontroversial; however, one wonders how many Kurds have access to the poet in his own words. Most Kurds in Turkey have little if any knowledge even of present-day spoken Kurmancî, let alone of the classical written language as used by Xanî; even in places where Kurdish is taught at elementary and high school level, like Iraqi Kurdistan, pupils hardly if at all actually read anything from Xanî's poem itself.¹⁶

Clearly, the language of the 17th-century original, shot through with Arabic and Persian loan words and reproducing the complex conventional imagery of the Persianate tradition of mystical mathnawî poetry, forms a major stumbling block for present-day readers, even those with a solid command of Kurmancî. Hence, it should come as no surprise that numerous translations in other regional languages have appeared, even into modern Kurmancî or *Kurdiya xwerû*.¹⁷

Nowadays, the story of Mem and Zîn is increasingly transmitted and reproduced with the aid of technological media like film and television, cassette tapes and CDs, and most recently the internet. In 1991, a film adaptation, directed by Ümit Elçi and shot on location in, among others, Hoshap castle and Hasankeyf, though not in Cizre, where the original story is set, appeared. Although the Turkish ban on the use of Kurdish had been officially lifted in the same year, the taboo on that language remained very much in place. Hence, the film was spoken entirely in Turkish, although it featured fragments of the poem's *dîbâce*, recited in the original language by Kurdish poet Musa Anter (who himself would be murdered by unknown assailants in the following year). The movie's soundtrack, composed by Mazlum Çimen and featuring a number of well-known Kurdish artists alongside Anter's recitation, seems to have known a substantial circulation of its own. In 2002, moreover, the Iraqi Kurdish satellite channel Kurdistan TV produced *Memî Alan*, an adaptation of the folk epic, as a miniseries directed by Nasir Hasan; apparently, this version had a rather larger cast, and larger budget,

than Elçi's adaptation. The figures of Mem and Zîn continue to inspire ever new generations of Kurdish musicians as well: in the songs of numerous younger generations of artists, the story of Mem and Zîn manages to harmoniously blend the love lyrics characteristic of the pop song with Kurdish national sentiment.

All of these reproductions and adaptations reassert and solidify the story of Mem and Zîn as a piece of Kurdish national heritage par excellence and, to a lesser extent, cement Xanî's status, or stature, as the Kurdish national poet. Thus, it can be asserted with confidence that no other work of Kurdish literature has anywhere near as wide a circulation, whether as an oral folk tale or a medrese manuscript' whether in Kurdish or in other regional languages; or whether as a mathnawî poem, a theater play, or a television miniseries, or in popular music. Nowadays, Mem and Zîn are seen as not only tragic lovers, but also as Kurdish national heroes.

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Notes

- 1 Seccadi (1971: 190) doubts the accuracy of Xanî's statement; but there seem to be no good reasons, let alone authoritative sources, to sustain such doubts.
- 2 Thus, for example, Mahmûdê Bayazîdî in Jaba (1860: 16 Ar.); Zinar (1993: 78–80); Öztoprak (2003: 165).
- 3 Cf. MacKenzie (1962). Hassanpour (2003: 124) appears to conflate both eqîde texts ascribed to Xanî into a single work. Moreover, he wrongly asserts that this work was a lexicon and that it did not become part of the medrese curriculum.
- 4 On some of the complexities of this Iranian oral tradition, see, for example, Yamamoto (2003). Chyet (1991) includes two versions of the oral epic in Aramaic and one in Armenian.
- 5 For a more detailed confrontation of Xanî's version with the oral tradition, see in particular Chyet (1991: ch. 2).
- 6 MZ displays a number of interesting views on gender and sexuality, but these would take us too far afield here. For a more detailed discussion, see Leezenberg (forthcoming).
- 7 In fact, when Bozarslan published his transcription and Turkish translation of the text in 1968, he left out much of these chapters, thus hoping to escape the Turkish censors. To no avail: the book was banned, and Bozarslan had to face charges in court.
- 8 Van Bruinessen (2003: 43). These comments led to a lengthy rejoinder, presented as a 'friendly discussion,' by the prominent Kurdish literary scholar, Kerîm (1998).
- 9 Leezenberg (2014); cf. Zinar (1993); Öztoprak (2003).
- 10 For the Kurdish text of Bayazîdî's summary, see Duhokî (ed.) (2008); for a French translation, see Hakim (1989).
- 11 Hacı Qadir Koyî, *Diwan*, p. 21.
- 12 *Hawar*, no. 33 (1 October 1941), pp. 9–10; cf. no. 45 (1945). See also Van Bruinessen (2003: 53).
- 13 One Kurdish friend (p.c.) reported having found a copy in Saudi Arabia, the colophon of which stated that there had been several local reprints. For a more detailed discussion of al-Bûtî's rendering, see Christmann (2008).
- 14 The rise of this revolutionary Kurdish nationalism has yet to be traced as a cultural phenomenon. For a fascinating study of Kurdish theater during a slightly later period, see Rashidi (2015).
- 15 See Orbeli's preface to *Gosudarstvennyj Ermitazh* (1938); for Kurdoev's comment, see Rudenko (1962: 9).
- 16 Interviews, undergraduate students, Salahuddin University, Erbil, May 2009; Soran University, April 2014; school teachers, Mergasor, April 2014; interview, Duhok, August 2015.
- 17 The most important translations into Turkish are Bozarslan (1968), Tek & Açıkgöz (2010), Yıldırım (2010), Temo (2016); into Persian: Barzani (2012); into Soranî Kurdish: Hejar (1960); into modern Kurmancî Kurdish: Bozarslan (1995), Dost (2009).

7

CLASSICAL AND MODERN KURDISH LITERATURE

Hashem Ahmadzadeh

Introduction

In this chapter the concept of Kurdish literature will be discussed thoroughly. It is meant to, first and foremost, define the concept and the extension of Kurdish literature and its connotation. Furthermore, this chapter will shed light on the classical and modern period of Kurdish literature. By comparing these periods this chapter will discuss how the modern period and the rise of nation states have caused division in the content and mission of Kurdish literature. By discussing these characteristic features of Kurdish literature, this chapter will evaluate the possible effects of literature on the Kurdish nationalist movement and at the same time the reflection of the nationalist movement on Kurdish literature. The chapter argues that there is a clear relationship between the political situation and the flourishing of Kurdish literature. In other words, whenever the political conditions are supportive of democratic rights, Kurdish literature flourishes and develops. It has played a decisive role in showing the long existence of a people with their own linguistic and cultural peculiarities, different from the other dominant ethnic groups and nations in the Middle East. This chapter aims to shed light on Kurdish literature in its both classical and modern forms and periods. At the same time the characteristic features of Kurdish literature in both periods will be discussed. The rise of the modern Kurdish literary discourse coincides with the emergence of the new nation states in the region, following the collapse of the Ottoman Empire. The new era affects both the form and the content of Kurdish literature.

Kurdish literature: definition and connotation

Since the emergence of the nation states there have been clear associations between the labelling of a certain literature and the related nation states. In fact, any reference to the various literatures based on the used language cannot free itself from indicating its belonging to a certain country, that is, nation state. An obvious example is of course English literature, which, despite being written in the English language, is ultimately divided into some subdivisions linked to English-speaking countries, like America, England, Canada and Australia. In other words the literature of a certain nation is not solely identified by its language. The identity of the literatures is not necessarily indicated by the language but by the cultural and constructed features of the nation states. Furthermore, the literature produced

in languages that are common for more than one nation state, for example, Arabic, Spanish and Swahili, carry the various existing sociopolitical conditions of the nation states they belong to. Any study of these literatures is supposed to take the context of each nation state into consideration.¹

If by a certain literature, one means a unified literature which is produced in a certain language and orthography in a certain country, it cannot be applied to Kurdish literature. On the contrary, Kurdish literature refers to a diverse body of literature in different dialects and even different orthographies in at least five different and sometimes hostile nation states. Kurdish literature, due to the specific historical and political conditions of the Kurds and their lack of a nation state, which aims to unite them culturally and politically, can hardly be described as a definable and concrete literature with some distinguished features. As it has been subjected to the various political, economic, cultural and linguistic strategies of at least four nation states in the Middle East, namely, Turkey, Iran, Iraq and Syria, since the early decades of the 20th century, one can talk about Kurdish literatures rather than a Kurdish literature.

Nation states usually contribute to the establishment of a unified education system with a certain language, which results in the development of the language and its standardisation. Different dialects of the language being used by the public sphere and its various institutions become closer to each other, and a standardised language dominates the communication and education system of a certain nation state. This general fact does not include the Kurdish language and its dialects. On the contrary, while the establishment of the nation states and the policy of modernisation sped up the process of the standardisation of the 'national' and 'official' languages, that is, Turkish, Arabic and Persian, the Kurdish language was left behind the facilities of modernisation. Consequently, the politics conducted by the nation states that govern the Kurds have resulted in their much more fragmented and divided linguistic identity. Subsequently, Kurdish literature has been mainly produced in two dialects, namely, Northern and Central Kurdish, and in three orthographies, namely, Cyrillic in the former Soviet Union, Latin in Turkey and Syria and a modified Arabic/Aramaic orthography in Iraq and Iran.

Classical Kurdish literature

Until the early 20th century, Kurdish classical literature was nothing other than Kurdish poetry. In fact, it was once only poetry that was considered as literature in almost all neighbouring communities. Similar to many Middle Eastern literatures Kurdish literature was dominated by Kurdish poetry for many centuries. This firmly established tradition has been very central to Kurdish literature, even during the golden period of Kurdish prosaic literature in the 20th century. The Kurdish poetic heritage was in fact a part of the dominant Arabic and Persian literary cultural capital in the Islamic context of the second half of the second millennium.

Indicating the genealogies of Kurdish literature is challenging. The challenges are mainly rooted in our modern perception of the Kurdish language and its dialectal divisions. Regardless of the ways in which we perceive the diachronic development of the various dialects of the Kurdish language, there are at least three different classical heritages for what we call Kurdish language synchronically. These three classical heritages originated in different parts of Kurdistan within the frame of both the Ottoman and Safavid/Qajar empires.

A major division in the territories where the Kurds were the main inhabitants occurred following the determining Battle of Chaldiran between the Ottomans and the Safavids in

1514. Following this struggle, the Kurds and their territories acted as a buffer between the two competing empires. Several Kurdish principalities (emirates) acted as the rulers of the vast Kurdish areas within the framework of both empires. These principalities were in a close relationship with the empires but enjoyed a semi-autonomous status. Among the well-established and powerful principalities, one can refer to Botan, which became the centre for the rise of the early Kurdish literary figures.

It is in this principality and with the patronage of its Kurdish princes (emirs) that a strong literary tradition celebrated its birth with the poems of Malay Jaziri (1570–1640) in Jazira, the capital of the principality. Malay Jaziri, whose real name was Sheikh Ahmad, was later considered the founder of a certain literary school of Kurdish poetry. In his poems one sees a clear sign of the common features of the Persian and Arabic Islamic mystic/Sufi world view, though with a strong affiliation to his land, Kurdistan, which is explicitly mentioned in his poems. The influence of Persian and Arabic poetry on the Kurdish classical poets is obvious. In the poems of the most famous Kurdish Sufi poet, Mahwi (1830–1906), one can see the inspirational traces of Hallaj, Hafez, Rumi and even the Iranian miniatures.² In fact, Malay Jaziri established a tradition, which was followed by some other influential poets in the same region.

A few decades after Jaziri's poems another legendary Kurdish poet, Ahmad-i Khani (1651–1707) referred admirably to him and a couple of other poets, Faqe Tayran and Ali Hariri, in his everlasting epic of *Mam u Zin*. This epic work functions as an inspiring source for the revival of Kurdish identity and nationalism from the early decades of the 20th century onwards.³ Khani's *Mam u Zin* is still reflected in modern Kurdish literature. Khani's life and work have become the main themes of some historical Kurdish novels published during the first two decades of the 21st century.⁴ There are not any reliable records available from the rich tradition of poetry in Botan principality. Nevertheless, some other Kurdish principalities became the new centres for the rise and development of Kurdish classical poetry, though without a direct relation to the Botan tradition and the dialect it used. Two other Kurdish principalities, Ardalan and Baban, acted as the main patronage for some other generations of Kurdish poets until the end of the Kurdish principalities in the beginning of the second half of the 19th century.

In the Baban principality a school of Kurdish poetry developed that is now forming the basis of the currently standard Kurdish that is used by the Kurds of both eastern/Iranian and southern/Iraqi Kurdistan. Among the most known faces of the Baban school of Kurdish poetry all literary sources agree about the central role and position of three poets: Nali (1797–1857/1873), Salim (1800–1866) and Kurdi (1812–1850). These three poets have been referred to as the three angles of the Baban school of Kurdish poetry. It seems that the collapse of the Baban principality following the harsh policies taken by the Ottomans to centralise their weakening empire directly affected Nali's life and destiny. He leaves his city and takes refuge in territories far from his homeland, where he dies without leaving any signs of the place of his burial. The epistolary poems exchanged by Nali in exile and the other well-known Kurdish poet Salim, in Silemani, describe the bitter situation of the period when the Ottomans had seized the city of Silemani in the middle of the 19th century. In Nali's poems there are clear references to the Baban principality and its somehow glorious and independent status. Following the collapse of Silemani at the hands of the Ottomans, the outstanding years of the principality came to an end. This resulted in the sunset of the Baban school of Kurdish classical poetry. During the second half of the 19th century a few more Kurdish poets wrote in the central Kurdish dialect. Among the very influential Kurdish poets who wrote in the same central dialect one can refer to Rahim Wafayi (1844–1902) and Haji Qadir Koyi (1817–1897).

In the Ardalan principality the Goran/Hawrami dialect was used. Among the famous poets of this principality one can name Khanay Ghubadi (1700–1759), Mawlawi Tawagwezi

(1806–1882) and Besarani (1641–1702). While the Kurdish dialects that were used in the Baban and Ardalan principalities were quite different from the one that was used in the Botan dialect one can still see some thematic similarities in the poetries produced in all of them. Among their central themes one can refer to Sufism, which is highlighted in the works of the representative poets of each Kurdish principality. While Jaziri represented the Botan principality, Besarani (1641–1702) and Mahwi (1830–1909) represented the Ardalan and Baban principalities, respectively. Differences in dialect, time and location did not hinder the development of a similar Sufi theme in the works of these Kurdish poets. In fact, this was a general paradigm in the dominant Islamic world view of the whole region that had its representatives in both Persian and Arabic poetry.

The end of empires and the arrival of modern nation states

For many centuries prior to the First World War the administration of the geographic areas where the Kurds lived was conducted by two main empires: the Ottomans and the Safavids. The politics of these two empires—each being in conflict with the other and each with their different ethnic, religious, political and cultural specificity—resulted in two more or less different Kurdish societies. When the ideas of nationalism were spreading in the Ottoman and Qajar empires towards the end of the 19th century the Kurds were far from ready and unified to be able to determine their destiny and create a Kurdish nation state. Consequently they came under the governing politics of the new emerging nation states, with their strong ethnic bounds and affiliations. The new nation states, namely, Iran, Iraq, Turkey and Syria, far from being inspired by democratic ideas, did not bring any sympathy for the Kurds and their linguistic and democratic rights. These states, each under different political and social systems aiming to homogenise their states, obviously created quite different discursive formations. The various policies of these states regarding the Kurds over the years, from a pure and absolute denial to some sort of limited autonomy with some limited cultural rights, have resulted in quite separated and fragmented identities of the Kurds in each part of Kurdistan. The emerging nation states, following the collapse of the Ottoman Empire, acted as ‘the others’ towards the Kurds, and they conducted a policy of denial against them. This policy, of course, caused a resistance by the Kurds and a constant struggle for their democratic rights. The consequent dialectic of denial and resistance marked the characteristic features of the Kurdish identity. Due to the different destinies of modernisation in the nation states that hosted the Kurds, and depending on their ways of conducting the denying policy, the Kurdish movements have had different ‘selves’ against their different ‘others’.⁵

Modern Kurdish literature did not put an end to the diversity of dialects in Kurdish classical literary heritage. The rise of the modern nation states in the region was gradually followed by the standard languages of Arabic, Persian and Turkish. Due to the lack of a Kurdish nation state and the absence of any language planning to construct a standard Kurdish language, modern Kurdish literature also developed in different Kurdish dialects. The existing Kurdish classical literary heritage did not get a chance to be taught in the schools in order to contribute to the formation of a standardised Kurdish language. The specific historical and political conditions of the Kurds and their lack of a political and geographical unity made it almost impossible to consider them as a united nation in the juridical-political sense. The lack of such an administrative and political body deprived the Kurdish language of being a standardised medium for the creation of a distinct Kurdish literature instead of different literatures in different dialects and even orthographies. Kurdish literature in different parts of Kurdistan, due to the suppressive policy of the states that host the Kurds, has been developed in isolation.⁶

The rise of modern Kurdish literature(s)

Modern Kurdish literature, contrary to the classical one that was only poetry, emerged in both poetic and narrative/prosaic forms.

Modern Kurdish poetry

During the early decades of the 20th century, alongside various social and political changes, Kurdish cultural life was experiencing a profound change in the field of literature. The dominant classical poetry was gradually giving way to modern Kurdish poetry. Likewise, the modern literary narrative discourse, that is, the short story and the novel, was gradually celebrating its emergence. It was the time of the spread of nationalism and formation of new nation states. These new nation states, by imposing their totalitarian agendas and aiming at forming a homogenised nation, hindered the Kurds from different parts of Kurdistan from sharing their literary heritage and creating a new common literary capital. Not allowed as the language of education, the Kurdish language was not given any opportunity to develop in the modern era. The language of the newly rising public sphere and all administrative and official communications had to be the imposed official language. The modern education systems also had their own compulsory orthographies. While in Turkey, the Latin script became the official orthography, in Iraq, Syria and Iran, the Arabic script remained in use. In the former Soviet Union, where many Kurds lived, the Cyrillic alphabet was imposed upon all citizens. The Kurds were subjected to these different orthographies, and this made any communication between them almost impossible.

The process of modernisation in the Ottoman and Qajar Empires resulted in profound changes in their social and political structures. Among the clear and determining signs of this process one can see the formation of a new middle class, which gradually adopted its own cultural and literary discourse. 'The contact with the West also introduced new ideas, new occupations, and eventually a new middle class'.⁷ The new affiliated intelligentsia with this new middle class strived for radical changes in all aspects of social and cultural life. The classical Arabic, Turkish and Persian poetry reflected this tendency of change in the modern era and gradually gave its place to modern poetry. The Kurdish poets, though a bit later, were influenced by these changes and started writing modern Kurdish poetry during the early decades of the 20th century. Due to the more suitable linguistic and political conditions, it was in Iraqi Kurdistan that this tendency was actualised first and foremost.

Two main poets, Nuri Sheikh Salih (1905–1958) and Abdulla Goran (1904–1962), have been referred to as the pioneers of modern Kurdish poetry in central Kurdistan. In Goran's poetry one sees the dominant trend of the early decades of the 20th century as far as the purification of the language and innovation in the form of poetry are considered. The influence of modern Turkish poetry is quite visible in the early stages of Kurdish modern poetry.⁸ The changes of patterns in both Turkish and Kurdish poetry reflect the ambition of these two literary discourses towards the construction of national identities. In fact, in both Persian and Turkish cases there was a radical tendency for purifying the language from foreign words. Both Turkish and Persian nationalism aimed at showing the capacity of their languages by coining new non-Arabic words. In the case of Turkey, it went so far as to even substitute the Arabic-based orthography into a Latin-based one.

The rising Kurdish nationalism had a reactive character as far as struggling for a purified Kurdish language is considered. The Kurdish texts belonging to the early decades of the 20th century show a clear rupture from the Kurdish poetic and lexical heritage. It was not

accidental to see the culmination of all modern desires and achievements in Goran's poetry. The modern era for Goran and his followers in the coming decades meant to end the formal obligations of classical poetry and its rather complicated prosody, which were mainly an Arabic and Persian heritage. The cultural and literary elite coming from the newly forming Kurdish middle class were involved actively in politics, and Goran became a known member of the Iraqi Communist Party. This ideological affiliation was reflected in a crucial period of Goran's life and literary character as far as the theme of his poems were considered. In Goran's poems, besides returning to the Kurdish popular melodic traditions and folk poetry and its so-called 'finger metric', there are strong traces of the Kurdish environment and romantic approaches towards love, human existence and liberty.

Goran's poetry and his modern form spread widely in Kurdistan and were followed by many other great Kurdish poets, such as Ibrahim Ahmad, Yunes Dildar, Salih Dilan, Kamuran Mukri, Jamal Sharbazheri and Ahmad Hardi. The apex of the Kurdish national and democratic movement in Iraqi Kurdistan during the early 1970s accelerated the modernisation of Kurdish literature when a group of Kurdish poets and authors issued a declaration, which formulated a new modern orientation in Kurdish literature.⁹ The poetic tradition is still very strong in Kurdistan, and tens of Kurdish poets have been developing this tradition. Among many modern influential poets in Iraqi Kurdistan one can refer to Sehrko Bekas (1940–2013), Latif Halmat, Qubad Jalizadeh, Farhad Shakely, Rafiq Sabir, Zana Khalil, Karim Dashti, Anwar Jaf, Kazhal Ahmad, Mahabad Qaradaghi, Choman Hardi, Nazand Bagikhani, Hnadren and Jalal Barzinji.

Modern Kurdish poetry in Iranian Kurdistan can mainly be seen as a product of modern Kurdish poetry in Iraqi Kurdistan and the obvious effects of modern Persian poetry. A central name in Iranian modern Kurdish poetry is Sware Ilkhanizadeh (1937–1975) whose poetry carries clear signs of being influenced by both Goran's generation of poets in Iraqi Kurdistan and the Iranian modern poets such as Nima Yushij (1895–1960), the father of modern Persian poetry. Among the several other famous modern Kurdish poets in Iranian Kurdistan one can refer to Fateh Sheikh, Ali Hasaniani and Solayman Chireh.

In the 1980s the influence of the Iraqi Kurdish poets on the Kurdish poets in Iranian Kurdistan achieved its highest point. A new young generation of modern Kurdish poets published their works during the 1990s and afterwards. They have shown a deviation from the earlier established forms. This generation, which refers to itself as DAKAR, shows a critical approach towards the past and even the present. Among the representative figures of DAKAR poets one can refer to Azad Rostami and Behzad Kordestani. There have been some studies about the directions of Kurdish poetry in Iranian Kurdistan. Based on various criteria, such as age and style, the Kurdish contemporary poets in Iranian Kurdistan have been polarized into various groups: the fourth generation, the modern and even the 'more modern' poets.¹⁰ Due to the harsh ideological and oppressive conditions in Iranian Kurdistan, there is an obvious escape from politics in the Kurdish poems by the Kurdish poets inside Iran. The increasing numbers of modern Kurdish poets during the recent decades show that poetry is still a popular genre among the Kurdish literary circles. Some of the better-known Kurdish poets of the recent decades are Omid Warzandeh, Raza Alipour, Kambiz Karimi, Jalal Malaksha and Saleh Suzani.

The flourishing of modern Kurdish poetry in Kurdistan of Turkey has been unprecedented during the last three decades. The form and content of the poems by the most famous Kurdish poets in northern Kurdistan show how they have been influenced by the time and space of Kurdistan and Turkey during the recent decades. Despite the fact that the selected works of some Kurdish poets from Iraqi Kurdistan were translated into Kurmanji and published

in Turkey, one hardly sees any effect of these works on the Kurdish poets in Kurdistan of Turkey. Among the famous Kurdish modern poets in northern Kurdistan one can name Rojan Barnas, Arjen Ari, Berken Bereh, Renas Jiyan, Irafan Amida and Selim Temo.¹¹

Modern Kurdish poetry in Syrian Kurdistan in the first place represents itself in Cigerxwin's (1903–1984) poetry. His revolutionary poems have inspired the masses, especially in western and northern Kurdistan. Some other Kurdish poets from Syrian Kurdistan, such as Jan Dost, Ahmad Hosseini and Axin Welat, have published their poems in exile. In their poems there are clear allusions to the Kurdish people's suffering and struggle.

Modern Kurdish narrative literature

The Kurdish narrative discourse in the modern era has its own story, and it does not necessarily follow the same patterns of Kurdish poetry. Modern Western literature influenced Arabic, Turkish, and Persian literature, either through the direct contact of the writers in these languages with the West, or through a rich tradition of translation into these languages. The case of modern Kurdish narrative discourse is different from this pattern. In fact, the early Kurdish writers were not in any direct contact with the West. There were not any translations available into Kurdish either.

The emergence of modern Kurdish narrative discourse was in the first place the result of the polyglot Kurdish writers who, by knowing the official languages of the newly formed nation states, acquainted themselves with the art of fiction.¹² As a matter of fact the narrative discourse in any given language is, in the first place, produced in literary prose. Obviously the history of Kurdish prose writing does not go far back. Thus, it is not accidental that early Kurdish prose emerged with the rise of Kurdish journalism and the artistic story writing in the beginning of the 20th century.¹³ The Kurdish novelistic discourse emerged as the cultural and literary product of the various political, cultural and historical factors, which were going on in the various Kurdish societies.¹⁴ The rise and development of nationalism as a modern ideology in the region were giving birth to the new ethnic and national identities. The new Turkish, Persian and Arabic identities were acting as the 'others' for the Kurds. The dialectic of the 'self' and 'other' accelerated the formation of a new Kurdish identity. The highlighted position of the language in the nationalist discourse of the newly emerging nation states caused a similar and retroactive approach among the Kurdish nationalist elites, who started referring to the Kurdish language as the main indicator of their Kurdish identity. Gradually the importance of the Kurdish language was more highlighted in the numerous Kurdish journals and newspapers.

The Kurdish press became the medium of promoting and spreading the language and the modern narrative discourse. In fact, modern Kurdish literature was a main tendency among the other 'modern tendencies such as the presence of a rising urban nationalist elite, organisation of political parties, and nationalist publications'.¹⁵ While the effect of the regional cultural artefacts was a determinant in the rise of the modern Kurdish narrative discourse, the consistent social changes in the Kurdish societies paved the way for the development of these new literary genres. What Hawthorn states about the rise of the novel in general is very much true about the rise of the Kurdish novel in particular: '[T]he novel is significantly the product of social change on the national level and cultural influence on the international one'.¹⁶ The destiny of the Kurdish characters in the early Kurdish novels shows how their personalities are shaped by being subjected to an increasingly changing social environment.¹⁷

The status of the Kurdish language and literature is a clear example of showing the direct relationship between politics and the development of the national literature. In Iraqi Kurdistan, due to a relatively proper and promoting condition, Kurdish literature and language

had the opportunity to flourish much more than the rest of Kurdistan. The presence of the English colonial forces in the country and their practical support of the usage of the Kurdish language became a good background for the formation of a functioning press in Kurdish. Some of the early Kurdish journals and newspapers such as *Peshkawtin* (Progress) and *Dangi Geyti Taze* (The voice of the New World) were directly published by the English authorities in Iraq and Iraqi Kurdistan. The return of some of the influential Kurdish officers in the Ottoman army from Istanbul to Silemani strengthened the spread of Kurdish nationalism and as a consequence the development of Kurdish journalism and literature. Among these influential officers one can refer to Haji Tofiq (1867–1950), mainly known as Piremerd, the founder of two of the most influential Kurdish journals in Iraqi Kurdistan: *Zhin* (life) and *Zhiyan* (life). Another famous Kurdish officer, Muhammad Amin Zaki (1880–1948), authored the first modern Kurdish historiography, which clearly showed the aims and desires for the formation of a modern Kurdish identity.

The history of the rise and development of the Kurdish novel clearly shows the complicated and fragmented destiny of Kurdish nationalism. While for many decades the number of published Kurdish novels hardly passed ten titles, during the last two decades there have been hundreds. In both Iranian and Iraqi Kurdistan the Kurdish novel has been experiencing a golden period during the last two decades. In Iraqi Kurdistan, due to the flourishing of the publishing houses and the education system in Kurdish, the public readership has increased considerably. The unprecedented qualitative and quantitative development of Kurdish literature in general and the Kurdish novel in particular in Iraqi Kurdistan is a direct result of the Kurdish administration following the liberation of Kurdistan in 1991.

If historically Kurdish literature was associated with the names of some known Kurdish poets there are now some known Kurdish novelists who perform the same function. Among these names in Iraqi Kurdistan one can refer to Bakhtiar Ali, Jabar Jamal Gharib, Karwan Kakesur, Sherzad Hassan, Farhad Pirbal, Karim Kake, Hisen Arif and Hama Fariq Hassan. Likewise the Kurdish novelists from Iranian Kurdistan have played a crucial role in developing the genre. Successful novelists such as Ata Nahayee, Qader Hedayati, Shahram Qawami and Kamran Hamidi have published their novels both in Iraqi and Iranian Kurdistan.

In Turkish Kurdistan the published novels during the last two decades show how Kurdish literature and nationalism go hand in hand. The number of the published Kurdish novels in Turkey has been increasing since the early years of the third millennium. Among the Kurdish novelists who have actively been published in northern Kurdistan one can refer to Ramazan Alan, Shener Ozman, Hasane Mate, Firat Ceweri, Yaqub Tilermen and Mehmed Uzun. Likewise the novels published by Kurdish novelists from Syrian Kurdistan, such as Halim Yusif and Jan Dost, though the novelists live in exile, show how the Kurdish novel has become an established Kurdish genre all over Kurdistan. A significant change during the last two decades has been the arrival of Kurdish women novelists, such as Rewas Ahmad, Mahabad Qaradaghi, Pari Kariminia, Narmin Jafari, Zeinab Yusefi and Galaweji.

The Kurdish diaspora: a crucial factor in developing Kurdish literature

During the last decades of the 20th century, ‘an increasingly well-organised’¹⁸ Kurdish diaspora acted as an effective factor to highlight various aspects of the Kurdish identity and politics. Kurdish literature has been among those aspects that found the diaspora as a fertilised field for its development. The Kurdish writers and poets of the diaspora, as ‘an ethnic group, which has been collectively forced to be dispersed’,¹⁹ have played a decisive role in developing Kurdish literature. The fact that the first Kurdish newspaper was published outside of

Kurdistan in 1898 shows how the development of the Kurdish language in the modern era was conditioned to the diaspora.²⁰ The large numbers of Kurds who have left their homes to live in exile, which is considered 'the nursery of nationality', have tried to compensate their nostalgia and 'national duty' by developing Kurdish culture and literature. Kurdish 'diaspora nationalism' and 'long-distance nationalism' have played a consequential and substantial role in developing Kurdish cultural nationalism.²¹

The Kurdish diaspora has sprung mainly from political sources. In other words, besides the social reasons the bulk of the Kurds who live in diaspora are the politically and culturally active Kurds who care about their identity. In fact, Kurdish political and cultural nationalism, having faced severe obstacles in Kurdistan, found the diaspora a fertile context for developing its aims and objectives. Having a relatively good life standard and the freedom to engage in cultural and political activities, the Kurds in the diaspora have successfully contributed to the development of Kurdish literature.

Among the main achievements of the Kurdish diaspora there has been a vast publication of numerous literary journals and books. In a time where in some parts of Kurdistan, especially in Turkish Kurdistan, there were not any possibilities to publish in the Kurdish language, the Kurds of the diaspora played a significant role in developing Kurdish literature. Those Kurds who live in the Western countries have found their new dwelling lands a proper place to promote Kurdish culture and literature. For many decades of the 20th century 'the most significant Kurdish cultural and political activities' did not 'take place in Kurdistan but elsewhere'.²² The existence of freedom of publication and the facilities for promoting the literature of minorities and migrants in the form of state subventions in countries like Sweden, contributed tremendously to the development of Kurdish literature. The high number of literary works, especially the Kurdish novels that were published in the diaspora, proves the importance of the Kurdish diaspora for Kurdish literature.²³ During the last decades of the 20th century, the number of Kurdish writers in Sweden was more than the number in their own homeland.²⁴

Kurdish literature in the former Soviet Union

During the last decades of the 19th century the pressure against the non-Muslim groups resulted in the migration of thousands Yezidi Kurds from the Ottoman Empire to the territories of Russia. Some of these Kurds were active participants in the October Revolution of 1917. Following the politics of the socialist authorities of the new system, the Kurds, having benefited by their new cultural and linguistic rights, could publish their literary works in Kurdish. The fact that the early Kurdish novels were published in the former Soviet Union is a result of this opportunity. In 1935 the first Kurdish novel, *Shivane Kurd* (the Kurdish Shepherd), written by Arab-e Shamo (1897–1978), was published in Yerevan. Later on he published six more novels in Kurdish. Some of these novels were subsequently translated into Central Kurdish, and were received favourably. This was only the beginning of a trend in the former Soviet Union where Kurdish literature and publication in the Kurdish language found a golden chance to flourish.

There were some other Kurdish authors who enriched this tradition through publishing more works in Kurdish. Among these authors one can name are Eliye Evdirrehman, Heciye Cindi, Seide Ibo, Egide Xodo, Khalil Muradov, Tosine Rashid and so forth. Despite the historical importance of these literary works and their linguistic and literary significance, the political restrictions of the Soviet system and the fact that these works were published in Cyrillic prevented the Soviet Union from becoming a cultural capital for the development of Kurdish literature in general.

Kurdish authors who write in a language other than Kurdish

The rise of modern nation states in the Middle East and the fact that the Kurds became subjected to them resulted in their having to be educated in the official languages of these countries, that is, in Turkish, Arabic and Persian. The rise of the modern public sphere and the new Kurdish middle class who cannot write in their own mother language contributed to the rise of a literature written by the Kurds, but not in Kurdish. A relevant question about this literature is whether it can be classified as Kurdish literature. There was not a single dominant language in the region before the rise of the nation states. There were some languages that had a unique position among the spoken languages in the governing empires. While Arabic mainly functioned as the language of science, Persian and Turkish were used as the language of communication and administration, respectively. Many groups of people, regardless of their mother tongues, wrote in these languages. There were many known classical examples among the Iranian men of letter and science, such as Ibn-e Sina, al-Biruni and al-Ghazzali, who proudly wrote in Arabic. Likewise there were many authors who wrote in Persian without having Persian as their mother tongue. It is in this context that one finds the best-known work about Kurdish history, the *Sharafname*. It was compiled during the late 16th century by the famous Kurdish Emir, Sharafkhan Bidlisi (1543–1604), in the Persian language.

This tradition was popular until the late 19th century. There were many famous classical Kurdish poets, such as Nali, Talebani and Mahvi, who wrote their poems not only in Kurdish but also in Arabic and Persian. However, the question of language and the related politics was radically changed towards the end of the 19th century. Since the rise of the nationalisms in the region during this period and the decades afterwards, language played a crucial role in the constructing of the new national identities. As a result education and writing were only allowed in the official national languages, that is, Turkish, Arabic and Persian. This situation contributed to the rise of a generation of Kurds who wrote and published their works in these official languages. Among the well-known and successful Kurdish authors who published their literary work in the imposed ‘national languages’ one can name Salim Barakat (1951), Yashar Kemal (1923–2015), Mohammad Ghazi (1913–1998), Ibrahim Yunesi (1926–2012), Ali Ashraf Darvishiyan (1941), Ali Mohammad Afghani (1925) Muhaydin Zangana (1940–2010) and so forth.

How do we categorise the works of these Kurdish writers who have not been able to write in their mother language? Should the language used in these works or their content determine their category as far as their national belonging is considered? There are scholars who highlight one of these aspects, and based on that they refer to the produced works as Kurdish literature or literature of another language. If comparing the type of Kurdish literature of the famous Kurdish writer Mehmed Uzun (1953–2007) to the type of literature that is produced by the African writers, such as Chinua Achebe, Leopold Sedar Senghor and Aime Cesaire, who write in English and French, it would be considered a Kurdish national literature.²⁵ Nevertheless, the popular opinion among the various Kurdish circles does not consider the works of those Kurdish authors who do not write in Kurdish as Kurdish literature. Parallel to the development of Kurdish nationalism during the last decades, emphasis on the importance of writing in Kurdish has considerably increased.²⁶

Kurdish literature: a literature of resistance

Despite the imposed restrictions on the Kurds in different parts of Kurdistan by the central totalitarian and authoritarian political systems, there has always been some sort of unofficial

relationship between the different parts of Kurdistan. The modern developed communication systems and facilities during the recent decades have strengthened this trend more than ever. A radio station from Yerevan through its Kurdish broadcasting transcended the official borders for a long period of time, and the arrival of the internet and some ten Kurdish satellite television channels facilitated contacts between the Kurds unprecedentedly.

Alongside the unofficial cooperation between the political elites of the Kurds in different historical periods such as the period of the establishment of the Kurdistan Republic in 1946 in Iranian Kurdistan, there have always been a tight cooperation among the Kurdish cultural and literary elites. This trend has shown itself more than ever by the presence of the Iranian Kurds in Iraqi Kurdistan during the last two decades. Three important Kurdish poets, Abdurrahman Sharafkandi, known as Hazhar (1921–1991); Muhammad Amin Shiekholeslami, known as Hemin (1921–1986); and Khalid Hisami, known as Hedi (1927–2016) from Iranian Kurdistan, moved to Iraqi Kurdistan during the decades following the collapse of the Kurdistan Republic in Mahabad in 1946. These poets played a great role in both Kurdish literature and politics. The active presence of the Iranian Kurds in various cultural and literary centres in Iraqi Kurdistan and their contribution to the flourishing of the Kurdish press and literature are further signs of the cross-borders relations of the Kurds. In the field of literary activities, seeing the published books written or translated by the Kurds from Iran is a rule rather than an exception.

In recent years the obstacles of different orthographies have been targeted by some influential Kurdish publishing houses. The famous Kurdish novels and literary works that once had been published in Cyrillic were republished in the modified Arabic/Aramaic alphabet by the Aras publishing house in Hewler (Irbil). Likewise, the works of the famous Kurdish novelists and short-story writers were translated into the Kurmanji dialect and published in Istanbul by Kurdish publishing houses such as Avesta.²⁷ The literary works of the Kurds who write in Kurmanji have also been translated into Sorani Kurdish and are published in Silemani and Hewler.²⁸

The popularity of the Kurdish literary works among the readers of the main Kurdish dialects shows that the central states governing the Kurds have not been successful in assimilating the Kurds into their own culture and language. While the political struggle of the Kurds for the achievement of democratic rights has been ongoing, Kurdish literature has been functioning as a resistance literature against the politics of elimination and assimilation. Here literature of resistance not only refers to a literature that explicitly supports the Kurdish liberation movement as it has been theorised by Barbara Harlow.²⁹ More generally by resistance literature, I mainly refer to Duncombe's view of culture, including literature, as 'a repository of imagination' for change.³⁰ In fact, the Kurdish political and armed struggles have usually had their own revolutionary literature and authors. During the 1970s and 1980s there was a certain literature that was published in the mountainous areas under the control of the Kurdish armed forces. That literature was referred to as 'edebi shakh', that is, the literature of the mountain.

The question of identity occupies a central place in the world of the Kurdish novel. Literature as a main component of culture and the novel as one of the main branches of literature play a significant role in constructing the national identity. The novelistic discourse contributes to the formation and highlighting of the cultural implications, which, in turn, contribute to the emergence of national consciousness.³¹ At the same time the novelistic discourse and its cultural effect can act as a means of resistance against the imposed culture and politics.³² Constructing the imaginative world of the readers, the novelistic discourse provides the readers with the capacity of change. Duncombe states that '[i]n order to strive

for change you have first to imagine it and culture is the repository of the imagination'.³³ Duncombe's statement regarding culture is significantly true about the world of the Kurdish novels in general.³⁴

The popularity of historical novels among the Kurdish novelists who write in Kurmanji can be seen as a means against the policy of total denial by the Turkish and Syrian authorities for many decades. Mehmed Uzun in his historical novels relives some famous Kurdish personalities such as Jaladat Bedirxan, Mamduh Salim, and the powerful Kurdish princes of the principality of Botan. Likewise Jan Dost (1965) in his famous novels recreates the historical context of the establishment of the Kurdistan Republic in Mahabad in 1946. The life and destiny of the Kurdish president Qazi Muhammad is highlighted in *Mijabad* (the City of Fog). The life of Sheikh Said of Piran, who was executed by the Turkish state in 1925, is the main theme of Jan Dost's other novel, *Sê Gav û Sêdarek* (Three Steps and a Gallows). The life and time of Ahmad Khani (1651–1707) is the theme of *Mirname* (the Book of Mir).³⁵ The dominant theme in the Kurdish novel is still a national one, and the traces of statelessness are easy to be found.³⁶ This is, in fact, against the major trend of recent developments of the novel in the Western context, which is deeply influenced by the consequences of a rapid globalisation, as has been pointed out by Showalter.³⁷

Concluding remarks

The concept of Kurdish literature, due to the fact that it refers to a literature that is written in, at least, two main different dialects and three different orthographies, is rather difficult to define. The political and geographical position of the Kurds both during the Ottoman and Iranian empires and during the formation of the modern nation states did not provide them with the facilities of developing a common language and education. As a result Kurdish classical literature flourished in different dialects and in different Kurdish principalities. Similarly, during the modern era, Kurdish language and literature developed unevenly and in isolation in different parts of Kurdistan.

Despite all these barriers and political obstacles, there is a vast amount of published literary material, in mainly two different dialects, northern and central Kurdish, that is generally referred to as Kurdish literature. Kurdish literature has been playing a determining role in representing the Kurds and at the same time in constructing their identity. During recent decades, parallel to Kurdish modern poetry, the Kurdish novelistic discourse has significantly developed. The development of Kurdish literature in different levels shows that its flourishing is very much related to the political condition. Whenever and wherever the Kurdish language has enjoyed a proper political environment, there has been a developed Kurdish literature.

Notes

- 1 As an example, one can refer to the studies about Arabic literature in different Arab countries. Although the literatures produced in all Arab countries are referred to as Arabic literature, there are obvious differences between them as far as their constructed national belongings are considered. See, Hafez, Sabry, *The Genesis of Arabic Narrative Discourse: A Study in the Sociology of the Modern Arabic Literature*, London: Saqi Books, 1993. In this book Hafez, analysing the Arabic narrative discourse, attributes its different features to its origins in different Arab countries. Likewise Allen Roger (1992) in his study of the Arabic novel shows the differences between different Arab countries as far as their novelistic discourse is considered. See Allen, Roger, 'The Beginning of the Arabic Novel', in M. M. Badawi (ed.), *Modern Arabic Literature*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1987, pp. 180–192. A new study about the novel in the Islamic world shows the

- different backgrounds of the Arabic novel in different Arab countries. See, Ozdalga, Elizabeth and Kuzmanovic, Daniella (eds.), *Novel and Nation in the Muslim World: Literary contributions and national identities*, London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2015.
- 2 Mala, Ahmad, *Mehwi le Newan Zahiriyat u Batiniyat u Sarchawakani Ishq u Wenay Mashuq da* [Mahwi between the appearance and numinous and the sources of love and the image of the beloved], Hawler: Aras, 2001, p. 17.
 - 3 The characteristic features of Khani's epic work and its various interpretations can be found in Vali, Abbas (ed.), *Essays on the Origins of Kurdish Nationalism*, Costa Mesa, CA: Mazda Publishers, 2003.
 - 4 The famous Kurdish poet Haji Qadir Koyi (1817–1897) can be seen as a successor of Khani's tradition of poetic school as far as its affiliation to the Kurdish identity, albeit in a more modern context. See Amir Hassanpour, *Nationalism and Language in Kurdistan, 1918–1985*, San Francisco, CA: Mellen Research University Press, 1992. The Kurdish novelist from Syrian Kurdistan, in his popular novel *Mirname* [the book of the Mir (prince)], reconstructs the historical condition of Khani's time and his life. The traces of Khani's life and epic work can also be seen in Helim Yousif's short story *Mame be Zin* [Mam without Zin], which is an adaption of Khani's life and his *Mam u Zin* in the modern Kurdish context.
 - 5 Vali, Abbas, 'The Kurds and Their "Others": Fragmented Identity and Fragmented Politics', *Comparative Studies of South Asia, Africa and the Middle East*, XVIII (2), 1998, pp. 82–95.
 - 6 Uzun, Mehmed, 'Den Moderna Kurdiska Litteraturen', *Kulturrådet*, No. 2–3, Stockholm, 1996, p. 44.
 - 7 Abrahamian, Ervand (2008), *A History of Modern Iran*, New York: Cambridge University Press, 2008, p. 35.
 - 8 Ahmad, Amr Taher, 'La poesie de Goran, d'Est en Quest', *Études Kurdes: La Littérature Kurde*, No. 11, February, 2012, Paris: Institute Kurde De Paris, pp. 61–80.
 - 9 This declaration, which was referred to as Rwange, that is, viewpoint, was published in April 1970. It was signed by four famous Kurdish authors and poets: Sherko Bekas, Jamal Sharbajeri, Hisen Arif and Kaka Mam Botani. This literary movement played a significant role in developing Kurdish poetry and prose during the 1970s and later on.
 - 10 Masud Binandeh, in a comprehensive interview in Kurdish, sheds light on the different groupings and generations of Kurdish poetry in Iranian Kurdistan. See www.amazhe.com/1087-2/. Accessed on 17/April/2017.
 - 11 For a most representative collection of Kurdish poetry in northern Kurdistan, see: Ari, Arjen, *Bakure Helbeste Antolojiya Helbesta Bakur* [Anthology of the Northern poem], Istanbul: Evrensel Basim Yayin, 2011.
 - 12 The geopolitics of Kurdistan and the multicultural peculiarities of the Kurdish-speaking areas have made the Kurds a polyglot people. Bois rightly points out 'the Kurds have been at all times polyglots as they have been polygraphs'. See, Bois, T., 'Folklore and Literature' in C. E. Bosworth, E. van Donzel et al., (eds.), *The Encyclopaedia of Islam*, New Edition, Volume V, Leiden: E. J. Brill, 1986, pp. 31, 480–486.
 - 13 Arif, Hisen, *Bibliyografîyay Chiroki Kurdi: 1925–1983*, Baghdad: Chapkhanay Roshinbiriyan Lawan, 1987, p. 11.
 - 14 For a detailed review of the rise and development of the Kurdish novel, see Ahmadzadeh, Hashem, *Nation and Novel: A Study of Persian and Kurdish Narrative Discourse*. Uppsala: Acta Universitatis Upsaliensis, 2003.
 - 15 Natali, Denise, *The Kurds and the State: Evolving National Identity in Iraq, Turkey and Iran*, Syracuse, NY: Syracuse University Press, 2005, p. 25.
 - 16 Hawthorn, Jeremy, *Studying the Novel*, sixth ed., London & New York: Bloomsbury Academic, 2010, p. 38.
 - 17 In another article I have analysed the interrelationship of fact and fiction in the early Kurdish narrative discourse. See 'Fact and fiction in modern Kurdish narrative discourse', in Gareth Stansfield and Mohammed Shareef (eds.), *The Kurdish Question Revisited*, London: Hurst, 2017.
 - 18 Bruinessen, Martin van, *The Kurds in Movement: Migrations, Mobilisations, Communications and the Globalisation of the Kurdish Question*, Tokyo: Islamic Area Studies Project, 1999, p. 3.
 - 19 Chaliand Gerard and Rageau, Jan-Pierre, *The Penguin Atlas of Diasporas*, New York: Viking, Penguin Group, 1995, pp. XIV–XVII.
 - 20 The first Kurdish newspaper, *Kurdistan*, was published in 1898 in Cairo by Miqdad Midhat Badirxan, from the Ottoman Empire. Due to the pressures from the Ottoman Sultan, the publication of the newspaper continued in Geneva, London and Folkstone until 1902.

- 21 'Long-distance nationalism' is a term that has been used by Anderson. See Anderson, Benedict, *Long-Distance Nationalism: World Capitalism and the Rise of Identity Politics*, Amsterdam: Centre for Asian Studies Amsterdam, 1992. For Gellner 'diaspora nationalism' is a 'distinctive, very conspicuous and important sub-species of nationalism'. Gellner, Ernest, *Nations and Nationalism*, Oxford: Blackwell, 1994, p. 101.
- 22 Bruinessen, *Kurds in Movement*, p. 20.
- 23 For detailed statistics of Kurdish publications in the diaspora up to the early 21st century, see Ahmadzadeh, Hashem, *Nation and Novel: A Study of Persian and Kurdish Narrative Discourse*, Studia Iranica Upsaliensia, Uppsala: Uppsala University Press, 2003, pp. 161–167.
- 24 Tayfun, M. *Kurdiskt Författarskap och Kurdisk Bokutgivning: Bakgrund, villkor, Betydelse*, [Kurdish authorship and Kurdish publishing: Background, conditions, meaning], Stockholm: Apec, 1998, p. 10.
- 25 Uzun, Mehmed, 'Edebiyata Kurdî' [Kurdish literature], in Mehmed Uzun (ed.), *Antolojiya Edebiyata Kurdî* [Anthology of Kurdish literature], Istanbul: Tuzmanlar Yayıncılık, 1995, pp. 15–82.
- 26 For a more detailed account of the ways that the works of those Kurdish authors who do not write in Kurdish are evaluated, see Ahmadzadeh, Hashem, *Nation and Novel*, pp. 135–139.
- 27 Avesta publishing house has published the Kurmanji version of Bakhtiyar Ali, Ata Nahayee, Sherko Bekas, Farhad Pirbal and Abdulla Pashew's works.
- 28 As an example, one can refer to Jan Dost and Halim Yousif's novels that have been translated into Sorani/central Kurdish and are published by Endeshe publishing house in Silemani.
- 29 Harlow, Barbara, *Resistance Literature*, New York: Methuen Press, 1987. Harlow argues that '[r]esistance literature was written in the context of organized resistance movements and national liberation struggles'. See 'On Literature and Resistance: Betsy Esch and Nancy Coffin Interview Barbara Harlow', in www.solidarity-us.org/node/1835, accessed on 14/April/2017.
- 30 Duncombe, S., *Cultural Resistance Reader*, London: Verso books, 2002, p. 35.
- 31 Anderson, Benedict, *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origins and Spread of Nationalism*, London: Verso, 1991, pp. 26–33.
- 32 In another article I have discussed the contribution of the Kurdish novels to the formation of an imagined Kurdish community. See, 'Four narrations and an Imagined Community', Talajui, Said and Lachir, Karima (eds.), *Contemporary Middle Eastern Cultures: Literature, Cinema and Music*, London: Routledge, 2012, pp. 39–53.
- 33 Duncombe, *Cultural Resistance Reader*.
- 34 For the reflection of the Kurdish reality and fragmented identity in Kurdish novels, see Ahmadzadeh, Hashem, 'The Kurdish Novel and National Identity-Formation across Borders', in Elizabeth Ozdalgı and Daniella Kuzmanovic (eds.), *Novel and Nation in the Muslim World: Literary contributions and national identities*, London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2015, pp. 65–80.
- 35 In a speech that Jan Dost delivered in Hawler on 10/4/17, he emphasised that his main aim of writing these historical novels was to strengthen the historical consciousness of the Kurds through a literary and artistic recreation of the past.
- 36 For a study of the traces of statelessness in the Kurdish novel, see Ahmadzadeh, Hashem, 'Longing for State in the Kurdish Narrative Discourse', in Annika Rabo and Bo Utas (eds.), *The Role of the State in West Asia*, Istanbul: Swedish Institute, 2005, pp. 63–76.
- 37 Showalter, Elaine, *A Literature of Their Own: From Charlotte Bronte to Doris Lessing*, First edition paperback, London: Virago, 1999.

8

CALIBRATING KURMANJI AND SORANI

Proposal for a methodology

Michael L. Chyet

The foundation of every state is the education of its youth

Diogenes of Sinope

The Kurdish language consists of several dialects. The northern dialect cluster is called Kurmanji (spoken in Turkey, Syria, Iraq and Iran; the Iraqi dialects are often known as Behdini); the central dialect cluster is called Sorani (spoken in Iraq and Iran); and the southern dialect is known as Kelhori or Kirmashani (spoken in Iran). In addition, other Kurdistan languages include Zaza (also known as Dimili and Kirmanckî, spoken in Turkey) and Gurani (also known as Hewrami,¹ spoken in Iraq and Iran). These all belong to the Iranian branch of the Indo-European language family and are closely related to Persian (Farsi); their speakers generally identify as Kurds. This chapter will focus primarily on Kurmanji and Sorani.

Although I am not a proponent of combining Kurmanji and Sorani into one hybrid language, there are ways that the two dialects can be brought closer together. This may be considered an important step in nation building as well as a pedagogical tool in teaching Kurdish, both to native speakers and to foreigners. In situations where one dialect presents multiple forms to choose from, the forms that exist in the other dialect should be considered in order to calibrate the dialects, that is, to bring them closer together.

Let us begin with an example from the field of morphology. The indicative mood of the present tense of Kurmanji verbs features a prefix *di-*: for example, *di•bînim* = ‘I see’, *di•froşim* = ‘I sell’.² The Sorani counterpart displays variation: in Mukriyan (Iran) and Arbil (Iraq), the prefix is *de-*, for example, *de•bînim* and *de•froşim*, whereas in Sulaimania and Kirkuk (Iraq) and Sinneh (=Sanandaj, Iran), it is *e-*, for example, *e•bînim* and *e•froşim*. Over the past 20 years, written Sorani has been preferring forms with *de-* to those with *e-*, even among writers from Sulaimania, whose dialect serves as the basis of written Sorani. By preferring Sorani *de-* over *e-*, mutual intelligibility between the two dialects has been enhanced. For example, Kurmanji *di•bînim* and Sorani *de•bînim* for ‘I see’ are readily mutually intelligible.

In the realm of lexicology, let us look at Kurdish words for the **broom**.³ In Sorani, the word *gesik* or *gisik* is quite widespread. In Kurmanji, there is a great deal of regional variation, with borrowings from Arabic (*melkes* < Arabic *miknasah*), Aramaic (*kinoşe*) and Armenian (*avlêk* as well as *siq•avêl* [large broom for sweeping out a barn] < Armenian *avel*), not to

mention *bermalk*, *şicing*, *sivnik*, *sizik*, *cerîvk*, *sirge* and *gêzî*, among others (Zilan 1989: 128 [kvast]; Chyet 2003). The richness of Kurdish history is no doubt reflected in such lexical variety; nevertheless, with such a plethora of words to choose from, the task of choosing one word for the standard language seems daunting. Or does it? Do any of the Kurmanji forms resemble Sorani *gesik*? As a matter of fact, one does: *gêzî*. Kurmanji *gêzî* and Sorani *gesik* are clearly cognate, and I would argue that mutual intelligibility would be achieved by designating *gêzî* as the standard term for ‘broom’ in Kurmanji since it has a close Sorani equivalent. Moreover, the Zaza word is *gezi*, and the Gurani word is *gizî*.

To take another example, let us consider the Kurdish equivalent of ‘to say’. In Kurmanji, the infinitive is *gotin*. In Sorani, there are multiple forms of the infinitive: *wutin/witin* in Sulaimania and Kirkuk, *kutin* in Mukriyan and *gotin* in Erbil. By choosing *gotin* as the standard or preferred form, we are taking one small step toward unifying Kurmanji and Sorani.

Local dialects are the hallmark of a living language. If my suggestion were adopted, I would encourage people in Sulaimania and Kirkuk to continue using *wutin/witin* in their spoken language and those in Mukriyan to keep on saying *kutin*. However, in formal speech and in writing, I would suggest using the form *gotin*. Likewise, with words for ‘broom’, I am not advocating discarding the dialect words *bermalk*, *avlêk*, *melkes* and so forth. I would hope that people would continue using them in their respective regions and pass them on to the next generation as well as knowing the standard word *gêzî*. This would approximate the diglossic situation in Arabic, whereby everyone speaks a local dialect, but the standard written language is largely the same, from the Maghrib to the Fertile Crescent (or from Adiyaman to Akré, in the case of Kurmanji).

In all three examples thus far, one dialect displays little variation, while the other dialect has much variation: by looking at both dialects together, I am proposing a method of identifying which of the many forms will bring the two dialects closer together – a concomitant of standardization. Here is what we have discussed:

	<u>Kurmanji</u>	<u>Sorani</u>
‘I see’	<i>dibînîm</i>	<i>debînîm (ebînîm)</i>
‘broom’	<i>gêzî (avlêk, bermalk, cerîvk, kinoşe, melkes, etc.)</i>	<i>gesik/gisik</i>
‘to say’	<i>gotin</i>	<i>gotin (wutin/witin, kutin)</i>

The next example – once again in the realm of morphology – will show that it is not always as simple as choosing the one form among many which agrees with the single form in the other dialect. Let us consider the past participle. In Kurmanji, we form the past participle from the infinitive (e.g., *dîtin* = ‘to see’, *dan* = ‘to give’) by removing the *-[i]n* ending (*dît-*, *da-*) and replacing it with *-î* for consonant stems (*dîtî* = ‘seen’) and *-yî* (Behdinani *-y*) for vowel stems (*dayî* = ‘given’).

In Sorani, there are three regional variants (MacKenzie 1961–62: v. 1, p. 97, §213). In Arbil and Rewanduz, near the dialect boundary between Kurmanji and Sorani, the past participle is formed as in Kurmanji (*dîtin* → *dîtî*; *dan* → *day*). In Sulaimania, Kerkuk and Mukriyan, the ending is *-û* (or *-uu*) after a consonant and *-u* after a vowel (*dîtû*, *daw*). In Sinneh (Sanandaj) and Warmawa, the ending is *-îğ* after a consonant and *-ğ* after a vowel (*dîtîğ*, *dağ*). The three variants are:

	<u>Arbil</u>	<u>Sul., Mukr.</u>	<u>Sinneh</u>
‘seen’	<i>dîtî</i>	<i>dîtû</i>	<i>dîtîğ</i>
‘given’	<i>day</i>	<i>daw</i>	<i>dağ</i>

The form in *-iğ* is transitional to Southern Kurmanji, also known as Kelhorî or Kirmashani (Fattah 2000: 386), and is not widely known outside of those areas. The form in *-î* is perceived by most cultivated Sorani speakers as backward: imposing it on the robust written tradition represented by the forms *dîtû* and *daw* might cause just the sort of divisive backlash that we are seeking to avoid. The dialect of Arbil and the dialect of Mukriyan agree on many points: both form the present indicative with the prefix *de-* rather than *e-*; both preserve the oblique case and two genders for nouns; both lack the demonstrative *em* ('this'), using only *ew* ('that'). However, when it comes to the past participle, Mukriyan shares with Sulaimania and Kerkuk the forms in *-û* and *-w*. These regions collectively constitute the majority of Sorani speakers, in addition to reflecting the established written standard already in use. Something that is thriving should not be undermined (or as we say in English: If it isn't broken, don't fix it!).

When the root of the present tense verb is of different origin from that of the infinitive, we have what is called a *suppletive* form. To illustrate this, let us look at the verb *dîtin* 'to see'. In both Kurmanji and Sorani, the present tense is from the suppletive root *bîn-*: *dibînim* ('I see' in Kurmanji), *debînim* ('I see' in Sorani). In many Sorani dialects, *bînûn* can be heard alongside *dîtin* as the infinitive. Because *dîtin* exists in both dialects, and because *bînûn* is not in use in Kurmanji, clearly *dîtin* should be favored as the standard form. In addition, both Zaza and Gurani exhibit reflexes of both the *dît-* root and the *bîn-* root: Zaza has the infinitive *dîyayîş* with the present stem *vîn-* (*vînen* = 'he sees'); Gurani has the infinitive *diay* with the present stem *wîn-*. Persian also manifests both roots: infinitive *dîdan* = 'to see' (past stem *dîd-*), present tense *mî-bîn-am* = 'I see' (present stem *-bîn-*).

Another verb with a suppletive form of the present stem is *gotin* 'to say'. In Kurmanji, one finds several variant forms (all are for 'I say'): *dibêjim*, *divêjim*, *diwêjim*, *dibêm*, *divêm*, *diwêm*, *dêjim*. The form *dibêjim* (present stem *-bêj-*) has already been chosen as the standard form, so we need not bother about choosing one.⁴ In Sorani, the form is *delêm* in Sulaimania, Kerkuk and in Mukriyan (present stem *-lê-*); Arbil commonly converts *-l-* into *-r-*, and *derêm* is the predictable reflex of *delêm*. In Sinneh (Sanandaj) and Warmawa, the form is *êjim* (presumably < e-[w]êj-im), and the subjunctive of *êjim* is *bêjim*. This subjunctive form, although limited to regional dialects, enables us to state that *bêj-* *per se* exists in Sorani. There are nouns formed using *-bêj*, both in Kurmanji and Sorani: a 'singer' is *stran•bêj* (*stran* = 'to sing' and 'song') in Kurmanji and *goranî•bêj* (*goranî* = 'song') in Sorani. Furthermore, the reciter of such romances as **Mem û Zîn** and **Xec û Siyabend** is called *deng•bêj* (*deng* = 'voice'). Hence, the standard present tense of *gotin* is *dibêjim* in Kurmanji, but *delêm* in Sorani, although I have recently heard some Sorani-speaking Kurds in Europe using the form *debêjim*. Perhaps it is taking its place beside *delêm* in Sorani. In any case, we can point to the use of *-bêj* in *goranî•bêj* and the subjunctive *bêjim* in Sinneh (Sanandaj) and environs.

Behdini, Behdinani or Badinani, the southern dialect cluster of Kurmanji, can be seen as a bridge between Kurmanji and Sorani. There are many instances in which Behdini uses a word or a grammatical form which is also in use in Sorani (or has a cognate in Sorani), although unknown to northern Kurmanji speakers. As television, radio and the internet enable northern Kurmanji and Behdini speakers to become exposed to each other's sub-dialects – rather like Americans and Englishmen familiarizing themselves with each other's speech through television and internet access – this affords Kurmanji speakers the possibility of an enhanced awareness of Sorani vocabulary. The following are some examples:

Kurmanji	Behdini	Sorani	English
fêm/fehm kirin	têgihîştin	têgeyştin	to understand
fâketin, fâzan	nivistin	nûstin, xewtin	to sleep
sekinîn	rawestan	rawestan	to stand, stop
şandin	hinartin	nardin	to send
xwestin	viyan (min divêt)	wîstin (demewê)	to want

In the realm of morphology, Behdini shares with Sorani the distinctive form of the ending for the first-person plural for verbs in the present tense and in the past tense of intransitive verbs. Whereas northern Kurmanji has one form (*-in*) for all three persons in the plural, both Behdini and Sorani have *-în* for the first-person plural and *-in* for second and third persons. For example:

Kurmanji	Behdini	Sorani	English
(Em) di-bîn-in	di-bîn- în	de-bîn- în	we see
(Hûn) di-bîn-in	di-bîn-in	de-bîn-in	you see (pl.)
(Ew) di-bîn-in	di-bîn-in	de-bîn-in	they see

If the stem ends in a vowel, Behdini and Sorani will have *-yn* instead of *-în*, for example:

Kurmanji	Behdini	Sorani	English
(Em) di-d-in	di-de- yn	de-de- yn	we give
(Hûn) di-d-in	di-de-n	de-de-n	you give (pl.)
(Ew) di-d-in	di-de-n	de-de-n	they give

As with the past participle *-û* vs. *-î* discussed earlier, I do not advocate making any changes to this morphological form. The Kurmanji forms are quite well entrenched and are in use by the majority of the Kurmanji speakers of Syria, Iran, the lands of the former Soviet Union and Turkey (minus Hekkari and parts of Siirt, which agree with Behdini). I am merely illustrating this frequently encountered example of how Behdini is transitional to Sorani. An English language parallel would be the coexistence of American spellings such as ‘color’ and ‘theorize’ alongside British ‘colour’ and ‘theorise’.

In the next set of examples, northern Kurmanji and Sorani share one construction, while Behdini (and some neighboring Kurmanji dialects) uses a variant construction. The morphological construction concerns compound verbs: that is, verbs with a prefix (cf. English *under-* in *understand* or *for-* in *forgive*), and where to place the present continuous marker *di-* (Sorani *[d]e-*). In northern Kurmanji and Sorani, the prefix precedes the marker *di-/d]e-*, whereas in Behdini,⁵ the marker *di-* often precedes the prefix. Here are some examples:

Kurmanji	Behdini	Sorani	English
(Ez) da- di -hêl-im	di -da-hêl-im	da- de -hêl-im	I lower
(Ez) hil- di -bijêr-im	di -hil-bijêr-im	heł- de -bijêr-im	I elect
(Ez) hil- di -gr-im	di -hil-gr-im	heł- de -gr-im	I lift
(Ez) ra- di -x-im	di -ra-xe-m	ra- de -xe-m	I spread
(Ez) rû- di -n-im	di -rû-n-im	da- de -nîş-im	I sit

We could add the Kurmanji prefix *ve-* to the list, but the Sorani equivalent is the suffix *-ewe*, and would not add anything to the discussion. It should, however, be noted in passing that Behdini has, in addition to the prefix *ve-*, a suffix *-ve*, unknown in northern Kurmanji, yet cognate with the Sorani suffix *-ewe*. Both the Behdini suffix *-ve* and the Sorani suffix *-ewe* can connote repetition (like our prefix *re-* in *reconsider*, *reënter*). Hence, whereas in Kurmanji one can say *ve-di-kim* (Behdini *ve-di-kem*) and in Sorani *de-kem-ewe* for ‘I open’, only Behdini can say *ve-di-kem-ve* (with both *ve-* as prefix and *-ve* as suffix) for ‘I re-open’.

In addition to the aforementioned verb suffixes, there are also suffixes or postpositions used with nouns. Traditionally, students of Kurmanji are taught that there are three postpositions, generally used in conjunction with prepositions⁶: *da* [or *de*], indicating position; *ra* [or *re*], indicating motion toward or across; and *ve* [or *va*], indicating togetherness. As can be seen, in Kurmanji, the postpositions display variation: *da* or *de*; *ra* or *re*; *va* or *ve*. Although Kurdish has simple prepositions as well, here, we will focus on constructions that consist of a preposition coupled with a postposition: for example, *di... da/de* = ‘in, inside’. This may be called a sandwich, a circumfix or an ambiposition, where *di* precedes the noun, and *da/de* follows it: for example, *di xwendîgeh-ê da* = ‘in school’. Other examples of such ‘sandwiches’ are *bi... ra/re* = ‘[together] with’ and *ji... ra/re* = ‘to’: *bi min ra* = ‘with me’; *ji te ra* = ‘to you’. Sorani also has such postpositions: *da*, *ra* and *-ewe*,⁷ that is, *le ... -ewe* = ‘from’. The variation in Sorani consists of the following: (a) the postposition *da* often appears as *-a* attached to the previous noun or pronoun (e.g., *leget mina = leget min da* = ‘with me’); (b) the postposition *-ewe* becomes *-we* if the previous word ends in a vowel (e.g., *rojawa = ‘west’*; *le rojawa-we* = ‘from the west’). Since *da* and *ra* exist in both Kurmanji and Sorani, and both Kurmanji *ve* and Sorani *-ewe* share the vowel *-e*, I propose that the standard forms of these postpositions should be:

Kurmanji:	da	ra	ve
Sorani:	da	ra	-[e]we

In these brief examples, I have attempted to give the reader a taste of what is involved in standardizing a language. Several factors must be taken into account: the linguistic data of a wide number of dialects, sociolinguistic information as well as a realistic expectation of what forms would be acceptable to their intended users. It thrills me to see how much of the work is already in progress as of this writing. The Sorani choice of *debînim* rather than *ebînim*, and the Kurmanji choice of *dibêjim* rather than *dibêm*, *divêjim*, and so forth, are sparkling examples of a process already underway.

Trying to sidestep the issue of the multiformity of the Kurdish language would be a tactical error. I most emphatically encourage not going down that path. Rather than creating a hybrid language or imposing one dialect, I recommend teaching both dialects and focusing on standardizing both of them. Seeing Kurmanji and Sorani as equal partners is not merely a linguistic matter: it is also a social matter. During the mandate period in Iraq (1919–1958), the British insisted that Sorani be the only Kurdish dialect taught in Kurdish schools, which engendered a fair amount of resentment among Kurmanji speakers. Choosing one dialect over another – or, to put it differently, imposing one dialect on a population which speaks another – is guaranteed to cause dissent. An awareness of attempts to divide the Kurds is an important motivation for inculcating in Kurdish children everywhere a feeling of national cohesion. The language issue can be a very dangerous weapon – an instrument for divisiveness – in the wrong hands.

I have not forgotten the minority languages of Kurdistan: Zaza, spoken in parts of Kurdistan of Turkey, and Gurani/Hawrami, spoken in parts of Iraqi and Iranian Kurdistan, have been included in arriving at the proposed standard forms. More on them will be said in the future. As of this writing, standardization within Zaza and within Gurani/Hawrami as well as within Kelhori is still in its initial stages.

Notes

- 1 Behrooz Chaman Ara, author of *The Kurdish Šāhnāma and its literary and religious implications* (2015), considers Gurani the language of literary texts, mostly poetry, reserving ‘Hewrami’ for the spoken dialects. This roughly parallels the distinction between Ladino (language of biblical translations) and Judeo-Spanish or Judezhmo for the language of the Sephardic Jews of the Ottoman Empire.
- 2 In the Kurmanji dialect of Elbistan, Maraş, the prefix is *de-* rather than *di-*: for example, *de-bîn-im* = ‘I see’.
- 3 Other words displaying regional variation are Kurmanji words for: mushroom, spider and bat (the animal), to name but a few.
- 4 Zaza *vajenâ* (*vaj-*) is from the same root, which is cognate with Latin *vox*, *vocis* = ‘voice’.
- 5 And *Tori* (from the Tur ‘Abdin region of Mardin province, Kurdistan of Turkey).
- 6 Some dialects elide the preposition, for example, *Min rā dibêje* = *Ji min rā dibêje* = ‘He says to me’ (Serhedan region).
- 7 It should be noted that Zaza and Gurani also have postpositions. Moreover, the Persian definite direct object particle *rā* may be cognate with the postposition *rā*.

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9

KURDISH CINEMA

Bahar Şimşek

Introduction

Central to modern art forms since its birth, cinema has long been inseparable from discussions of nationalism and popular culture. Camera women and men, as witnesses to the rise and fall of nationalisms, have *ipso facto* engaged with the audio-visualization of multiple identities. The concept of national cinema, specifically, has emerged as a response to the need for the domestication of cinema on the basis of national film industries and national audiences. Yet the rise of minorities' awareness and the hybridization of financial sources have led to the birth of transnational cinemas and dynamic film spaces. I suggest that Kurdish cinema, which has developed under the shadow of nationalist discourses in the transnational era, calls for an understanding beyond nationally determined cultural fields of production. In light of the unassimilable artifacts of Kurdish cinema, I explore its promise for the recognition of modern Kurdish culture in audiovisual terms. There emerge three elements of Kurdish cinema to be discussed: language, space, and memory.

I will embrace the perplexities of the national cinema debates to pave the way for the promise that Kurdish cinema provides not only for Kurdish communities but also for the rethinking of the concept of national cinema. Focusing on language, space, and memory in turn, I suggest that the histories of Kurdish cinema developed through the different financial and political national environments into which it was born, namely Turkish, Arabic, and Persian. Kurdish languages have been subjected to denial and suppression, and Kurdish lands lack internationally recognized borders. Kurdish communities of each country have been targets of the respective states' Kurdish policies of assimilation and violence, which form the basis of Kurdish collective memory. The following analysis situates Kurdish cinema within the politically and historically heterogeneous spaces of its emergence across different national contexts and different historical conjunctures. Kurdish cinema's hybridity in terms of language, space, and memory addresses both the everyday situations faced by varied Kurdish communities and the range of claims for recognition. The various Kurdish cinemas articulate each of these components with reference to different traumatic histories, yet nonetheless address themselves to the contemporary subjects of Kurdish culture. Kurdish cinema, with its still limited range of feature-length films, stands on the threshold of the recognition of Kurdish cultures that is jeopardized in so many contexts by state violence.

The histories of Kurdish cinema

In the case of Kurdish culture, the lack of standardized language, fixed territory, and unified collective memory makes difference and hybridity central to any investigation of either the historicity or sociology of this culture. Kurdish culture has not only been deprived of government support but has been jeopardized by governments as a “stateless subculture” because of the alleged lack of a Kurdish nation-state in the era of modern nation-states during the 20th century.¹ In line with this, the development of Kurdish media over the last two decades has taken place in three ways: through Turkey’s EU membership process since 1999; through the Kurdish diaspora, which is both de-territorialized and de-nationalized; and through the establishment of the Kurdistan Regional Government in Iraqi Kurdistan in 2003.² These three foci have determined the existence and development of Kurdish cinema in terms of a variety of Kurdish films by multinational producers in Turkey; the visibility achieved by award-winning exiled Kurdish directors of Iran, Iraq, and Syria as well as at Kurdish film festivals in European centers; and, finally, the KRG’s enterprises for the development of its own Kurdish films. In other words, Kurdish cinema owes its hybrid characteristics to a film culture fed by such forces as globalization; the exiled position of directors of Kurdish movies; the worldwide distribution of Kurdish film festivals³; and, more contemporarily, the KRG’s institutional support for its own film industry.

The Kurdish cinema of Turkey clearly has its roots in Kurdish director Yılmaz Güney’s *Yol* (*The Way*, Şerif Gören & Yılmaz Güney, 1981), which was filmed by Şerif Gören due to Güney’s imprisonment in Turkey and was eventually edited by Güney in Europe. It is generally felt that the emergence of the term “Kurdistan” on the screen in *Yol* pointed the way in terms of cinema’s promise for the Kurdish issue. Yılmaz Güney’s onscreen “Kurdistan opening,” which took place just two years after the September 12, 1980 coup d’état, announced a claim for recognition. Yet *Yol*, which was banned for 17 years by the Turkish government, was categorized as the first Turkish film awarded the Palme d’Or at the Cannes Film Festival in 1982. Not being filmed in Kurdish languages due to Turkey’s ban on Kurdish languages but including the presence of Kurdish languages in the form of an accent or stain on the Turkish language, calling the land east of the Tigris River by its historical name of Kurdistan, and turning its lenses on the oscillation between tradition and modernism along the journeys between the cities and the villages, *Yol* includes a wide range of tensions on which Kurdish cinema is founded. Referring to the land, language, and memory in order to narrate the daily lives of Kurdish people, Yılmaz Güney’s *Yol* thus became the pioneer of Kurdish directors’ social realist interpretation of Kurdishness. Moreover, Turkey’s more developed film industry in comparison to Iraq, Iran, and Syria has led the Kurdish cinema workers of Turkey to engage with the production of films at every level since the beginning of 1990s. That is why we can speak of a wide range of Kurdish films employing distinct film styles and narrative choices in Turkey. Kurdish cinema of Turkey thus stands for its development in terms of production rates and accessibility. The Kurdish cinema of Turkey, moreover, owes its very specific history to the establishment of the Mesopotamia Culture Center (Mezapotamya Kültür Merkezi, or MKM) in İstanbul in 1991. The MKM’s founding principle of promoting cultural and artistic works in Kurdish languages has been the locomotive force for the development of Kurdish cinema in Turkey during the 1990s, largely in the forms of documentaries and short films.⁴ We can only speak of a feature-length film in Kurdish addressing Kurdistan in the wake of 16 years of silence after *Yol* by an exiled Kurdish director in France: *Vive la mariée... et la libération du Kurdistan* (1998, Hineer Saleem).

The de-territorialized and de-nationalized Kurdish diaspora played host to many Kurdish directors during the 2000s, including Hineer Saleem, Hisham Zaman, Nuray Şahin, and Jan

Jonroy. Either forcefully deported from their homeland or migrants who sought to liberate their artistic preferences from state oppression by settling in America or Europe, these Kurdish directors have mainly narrated the modern experience of being Kurdish through the urban experience. These films' formation of the cosmopolitan city life, in which Kurdish languages are audible, posits the cities of Europe as the new homes for Kurdish becoming. Saleem, as one of the most prominent directors in Kurdish cinema with 12 feature-length films, uses Kurdish languages' interactions with other languages, as much as its own dialects, to carry Kurdish longing for their homelands and collective memory. Among the Kurdish directors of the diaspora, Nuray Şahin emerges as the single Kurdish woman director, with her feature-length film narrating a Kurdish Alevi woman's search for love in Germany, in *Perre Dima So (Follow the Feather)*, (2005). The Kurdish diaspora also plays an important role in the evaluation of Kurdish cinema because of the pioneering Kurdish film festivals, which target Kurdish audiences for the imagination of the Kurdish community through a wide range of narratives touching on the Kurdish issue, without it being necessary either for the films to use Kurdish languages or for the directors to be Kurdish. The founding of the London Kurdish Film Festival in 2001, following the rise of Bahman Ghobadi's international reputation through the *Caméra d'Or*-winning film *Zamane baraye masti asbha (A Time for Drunken Horses)*, (2000), addresses the appreciation of film festivals as the driving force for an alternative film environment in diaspora. Ghobadi is the director of the first Kurdish film in Iran. To consider *A Time of Drunken Horses* and *Lakposhtha Parvaz Mikonand (Turtles can Fly)*, Bahman Ghobadi, (2004) as the pioneers of Kurdish cinema,⁵ moreover, posits film festivals as central to the recognition of subaltern film cultures.

While Kurdish communities in Berlin, Paris, and New York organized their own Kurdish film festivals following the London Kurdish Film Festival, the KRG, as the first Kurdish governing body with autonomy over the distribution of financial resources, announced the Duhok International Film Festival in 2011, eight years after the establishment of the KRG. The KRG's Ministry of Culture began to finance the production of Kurdish films targeting a national audience in 2009, summarized in the following table:

Year	Director	Original Title	English Title	Producer	Languages	Space
2009	Shawkat Amin Korki	Kick off Kirkuk	Kick of Kirkuk	KRG, Japan	Kurdish, Arabic	City
2010	Viyan Mayi	Doz	Doz	KRG	Kurdish	Village
2010	Hassan Ali	The Quarter of the Scarecrows	The Quarter of the Scarecrows	KRG	Kurdish, Arabic	Village
2011	Masoud Arif	Shadow of A Bullet	Shadow of a Bullet	KRG	Kurdish	
2012	Hushyar Z. Nerwayi	Ka Waar	Where is the Land	KRG	Kurdish	Village, Border
2012	Fekri Baroshi	Le Heşargey Sêrda	In the Lion's Den	KRG	Kurdish, Arabic	City
2012	Adnan Osman	Sêguşey Merg	Death Tranglee	KRG	Kurdish	City
2012	Jano Rosebiani	Êk Momik Du Momik	One Candle Two Candle	KRG	Kurdish	Village
2012	Ako Aziz	10 Çirke	10 Seconds	KRG	Kurdish	
2012	Hassan Ali	Şîrîn	Shirin	KRG, France	Kurdish	City, Village

Kurdish cinema

<i>Year</i>	<i>Director</i>	<i>Original Title</i>	<i>English Title</i>	<i>Producer</i>	<i>Languages</i>	<i>Space</i>
2013	Awat Osman Ali	Leave to Stay	Leave to Stay	KRG	English, Kurdish, Arabic	City (London)
2013	Mohammed Jano	Semyan	Samyan	KRG	Kurdish	City
2013	Aziz Kerkuky	Frmeski Paykarakan	Sculptures' Tears	KRG	Kurdish	Village (Mountain)
2013	Hussein Sewdin	Mizhoey wen	Lost History	KRG	Kurdish, Arabic	City
2015	Welid M. Taher	Pako	Pako	KRG	Kurdish, Arabic	Village
2015	Sardar Khalil	Semay Aspekan	The Dance of Horses	KRG	Kurdish	City
2015	Kordo Doski	Mikael	Mikael	KRG, USA, UAE	Kurdish, English	City
2017	Fekri Baroshi	Xewna Pêş Merg	A Dream Before Dying	KRG	Kurdish	Village, Border

One of the most obvious characteristics of Kurdish cinema, directly related to a condition of statelessness in the era of modern nation-states, has been the lack of the vital elements of a national film industry meant to fund its development.⁶ The KRG's institutional support for 18 Kurdish films in eight years embodies the centrality of multiple governments' financial prohibitions on Kurdish cinema. More specifically, the lack of financial support by the Turkish and Iranian governments for projects by Kurdish directors in Kurdish languages has led either to Kurdish languages being only partially audible, or to the adaptation or translation of Kurdish narratives into projects that are ideologically harmless (mostly in terms of their linguistic homogeneity) and part of the concerned state's Kurdish policy. Compared to the KRG, other countries' and the diaspora's financial support for the development of Kurdish cinema has been limited, with the 40 feature-length films in Kurdish by Kurdish directors over the last three decades falling behind the KRG's production rate. The boundaries of Kurdishness, something that the epistemic conceptualization of the nation supposes to be the basis of a Kurdish national film language, are neither fixed nor closed. The very existence of Kurdish cinema under such circumstances calls attention in a unique fashion to a broader crisis of naming.⁷ Despite the fact that the KRG's attempt to fund Kurdish films speaks to a new field for Kurdish cinema, here the subject of this threefold analysis is, by necessity, limited to those feature-length films produced in Kurdish languages by Kurdish directors, who have in common their statelessness.

Yet the situation of the stateless Kurdish nation has become not only a barrier but also a possibility of configuration by modern means in terms of the enunciation and performance in Kurdish films. In other words, statelessness determined the nature of Kurdish cinema as transnational and beyond the discursive space of a canonical Kurdish national cinema.⁸ Here, we can recall the writer's (or auteur's) enunciation and the implication of the new subject of cinema: the practices of representation and the place from which Kurdish directors speak are related to positions of enunciation.⁹ Cinema, as a means of presenting enunciative positions for the Kurdish subject, becomes one of the most prominent means of identification and recognition for the Kurdish experience of modernism. From a sociohistorical approach, any investigation of Kurdish culture, in this case of Kurdish cinema, will inevitably encounter the Kurdish subject *beyond the subject*, primarily on the basis of language.

Kurdish languages of cinema

Kurdish languages were denied or suppressed in every sense by Turkish, Arab (Iraqi and Syrian), and Persian (Iranian) nationalist ideologies throughout the 20th century.¹⁰ As a result, borders and the hegemony of modern states have deprived Kurds of their most effective means for articulating and sharing discursive identity constructs.¹¹ Yet, as Hassanpour has stated, even given the oppression of the four states (Turkey, Iraq, Syria, and Iran), cultural production in Kurdish languages has involved a multilayered development from oral traditions to media cultures. Hassanpour especially points to the period after World War I. Hassanpour, noting the social, financial, political, and cultural changes in Kurdistan, emphasizes the fact that central governments tried every method of banning or restricting Kurdish broadcasting, press, and formal education. In addition, the lack of capital and qualified human resources necessary for the complex institutions of mass media also limited access to broadcast media. Accordingly, media culture remained limited until the end of the 20th century. Nevertheless, it is now possible, in the era of the Internet and new media channels, to speak of a Kurdish media presence.¹²

Under the shadow of historical denial and oppression, the belated audibility of Kurdish languages in movie theaters was a possibility only by the beginning of the 1990s. Turkish cinema, with its more developed national film industry in comparison to Iraq, Iran, and Syria, has, since its beginning, translated several components of Kurdish culture into its own artefacts, as an extension of Turkish assimilation policies.¹³ The Turkish history of Kurdish cinema, the richest example available to us, has mostly been a matter of translation—either in the form of a ludicrous accent mostly identified with underdevelopment and peasants in the absence of audible Kurdish languages, or in the form of the interpretation of Kurdish culture as a primitive extension of Turkish culture. More generally, showing a film in Kurdish languages was long banned. This was a feature of each country's homogenizing nationalist projects and led the first Kurdish directors to either leave their homelands or risk their freedom and their lives for the sake of the partial audibility of Kurdish languages and the visibility of the Kurdish issue. Clearly, the main source of the linguistic variability of films on and by Kurdish people is due to this history of encounters based on exile and denial. In this context, it is not possible to speak of standardized Kurdish languages but rather Kurdish languages in relation not only to the dialects of Turkish and the hegemonic print languages of Turkish, Arabic, and Persian but also to the languages of English, French, German, Russian, and Armenian.

Unlike the national cinema's promise of the audibility of official language, both to define a community and to lead a national audience to identify with the films' protagonists, the languages of Kurdish cinema, shaped by the multilingual reality of Kurdish populations, embrace a variety of languages formed through migration patterns and cross-cultural encounters, not by national and/or print Kurdish languages. In other words, while the Kurdish languages, as the primary addressee of aural identification, occupy a limited space in the film universe, the linguistic variability found in these films encapsulates several subject positions determined by the historical, political, economic, and cultural conflicts and encounters of Kurdish society. While *Perre Dima So* embraces narration in Zazakî to address the sectarian tension between Alevi and Sunni identities, *Dengê Bavê Min* uses the Elbistan accent of Kurmanjî as that is shadowed by the Maraş Massacre in 1978. *My Sweet Pepperland* employs varied Kurdish languages diegetic to the narration to address the internal tensions between Kurdish communities, and *Zamani Barayê Masti Asbha* points to the limited free zones for Soranî in Iran through encounters with officials. In line with these examples, the reactions of Kurdish languages to the surrounding official languages have become one of the distinguishing features of Kurdish cinema, from Yılmaz Güney, whose Kurdish identity and

engagement with the Kurdish issue have largely been disregarded within Turkish cinema, to the latest Kurdish directors in exile. The following list of 40 feature-length films in Kurdish languages by Kurdish directors addresses this distinct market space:

<i>Year</i>	<i>Director</i>	<i>Original Title</i>	<i>English Title</i>	<i>Producer</i>	<i>Languages</i>
1982	Şerif Gören, Yılmaz Güney	Yol	The Way	Turkey- Switzerland- France	Turkish, Kurdish
1983	Yılmaz Güney	Duvar	The Wall	Turkey-France	Turkish, Kurdish
1998	Hineer Saleem	Vive la mariée... et la libération du Kurdistan	Kebab Connection	France	French, Kurdish
2000	Bahman Ghobadi	Zamani Barayé Masti Asbha	A time for Drunken Horses	Iran	Kurdish, Persian
2002	Bahman Ghobadi	Gomgashtei dar Aragh	Marooned in Iraq	Iran	Persian, Kurdish
2002	Jano Rosebiani	Jiyan	Jiyan	Iraq-USA	Kurdish
2003	Hineer Saleem	Vodka Lemon	Votka Lemon	France-Italy- Switzerland- Armenia	Armenian, Kurdish, Russian, French
2004	Nuray Şahin	Perre Dima So	Follow the Feather	Germany	German, Kurdish
2004	Bahman Ghobadi	Lakposhtha Parvaz Mikonand	Turtles Can Fly	Iran-France-Iraq	Kurdish, Arabic, English
2005	Hineer Saleem	Kilomtere Zéro	Kilometre Zero	France-Iraq- Finland	Kurdish, Arabic, French
2005	Jamil Rostami	Marsiye Barf	Requiem of Snow	Iran-Iraq	Kurdish
2006	Bahman Ghobadi	Niwemang	Half Moon	Austria-Iran-Iraq- France	Kurdish, Persian
2007	Hineer Saleem	Dol	Dol	Germany-Iraq- France	Kurdish, Turkish
2007	Hisham Zaman	Vinterland	Winterland	Norway	Kurdish, Norwegian
2008	Kazım Öz	Bahoz	The Storm	Turkey	Turkish, Kurdish
2008	Rahim Zabihi	Welatê Efsane	Land of Legend	Iran, Germany	Kurdish
2009	Hineer Saleem	Après la chute	After the Downfall	Germany-France	German, Kurdish
2009	Miraz Bezar	Min Dît	Before Your Eyes	Germany-Turkey	Kurdish, Turkish
2011	Hineer Saleem	Si tu meurs, je te tue	If You Die, I Will Kill You	France	French, Kurdish
2011	Umur Hozatlı	Azadiya Wenda	Lost Freedom	Turkey	Turkish, Kurdish
2011	Shiar Abdi	Meş	Walking	Turkey	Kurdish

(Continued)

Year	Director	Original Title	English Title	Producer	Languages
2011	M. Tayfur Aydın	Rêç	The Trace	Turkey	Turkish, Kurdish
2012	Shahram Maslakhi	Helana Sotawakan	Burning Nestes	Iran	Kurdish, Persian
2012	Bahman Ghobadi	Fasle Kargadan	Rhio Season	Iraq, Turkey	Persian, Turkish, English
2012	Orhan Eskiköy & Zeynel Doğan	Dengê Bavê Min	Voice of My Father	Turkey	Turkish, Kurdish
2013	Jalal Nasiry	Kani Pari	Fairy Spring	Iran	Kurdish
2013	Salem Salavati	Zemestane Akhar	The Last Winter	Iran	Kurdish
2013	Hineer Saleem	My Sweet Pepper Land	My Sweet Pepper Land	Iraq-France-Germany	Kurdish, Arabic, Turkish
2013	Hisham Zaman	Before Snowfall	Before Snowfall	Norway-Germany-Iraq	Kurdish
2014	Shawkat Amin Korki	Bîranînên li ser Kevîrî	Memories on the Stone	Germany, KRG	Kurdish
2014	Hisham Zaman	Brev til Kongen	Letter to the King	Norway, United Arab Emirates	Kurdish, Norwegian, German, English
2014	Kazım Öz	Hebû Tunê Bû	Once Upon A Time	Turkey	Turkish, Kurdish
2014	Erol Mintaş	Klama Dayîka Min	Annemin Şarkısı	Turkey-France-Germany	Turkish, Kurdish
2014	Hüseyin Karabey	Were Dengê Min	Come to My Voice	Turkey-France-Germany	Turkish, Kurdish
2014	Ferit Kahraman	Derbûyîna Ji Binustê	The Fall from Heaven	Turkey-Italy	Turkish, Kurdish
2015	Hiwa Aminnejad	Malawa Analog	Farewell Analog	Iran	Kurdish
2015	Ali Kemal Çınar	Veşartî	Hidden	Turkey	Turkish, Kurdish
2017	Bülent Öztürk	Mavi Sessizlik	Blue Silence	Belgium, Turkey	Turkish, Kurdish
2017	Kazım Öz	Zer	Zer	Germany-Turkey-USA	Turkish, Kurdish, English
2017	Ali Kemal Çınar	Gêncî	Gêncî	Turkey	Kurdish

Deprived of national print languages, Kurdish culture has traditionally been shaped by orality, especially in the form of *dengbêj* culture (Kurdish traditional oral poetry, half sung and half spoken in Kurdish by traditional singers). The voices of *dengbêj*, only audible on Radio Yerevan, was one of few means for the imagination of Kurdishness up until the 1990s.¹⁴ By the end of the 1990s, Kurdish directors borrowed the voices of *dengbêj* in the form of audiovisual narrations that were neither as local as *strans*, nor performed solely in Kurdish languages. In other words,

Kurdish cinema emerges as the very means of a hybrid and dynamic Kurdishness, with traces of forced migration, exile, and the spaces of newly reformulated international relations for oppressed identities. The impossibility of a linguistically homogenous imagination leads Kurdish cinema and Kurdish communities to a multilingual audiovisual space for identification. The positions of enunciation in Kurdish cinema thus lie beyond the national subject of Kurdish identity, somewhere in an imaginative landscape of fractured and fragmented subjectivities.

In-between Kurdish spaces

As Kurdish director Bahman Ghobadi notes, “Their [Kurds’] history is a history of exodus. It is a history of people always on the move. In this they have something in common with the cinema, which is the art of movement.”¹⁵ The historical background of this analogy explains the spatial foci of Kurdish cinema, which tend to center on forced migration and exile. At the same time, such a focus exposes the violence and deprivation that Kurdish people have had to deal with for more than a century. In Kurdish lives, it has been the norm to be subjected to various forms of social and political exclusion and marginalization; poverty and impoverishment; conflict (both in the forms of armed violence and structural violence); and migration in various forms (for economic reasons and at the hands of various militaries). In the absence of territorial recognition, and with the abundance of politics of displacement, dispossession, denial, and misrecognition by the four nation-states, Kurdish geography is often imagined and portrayed in films as an in-between space, reconfiguring the spatial realities of Kurdish histories and cultures.

<i>Year</i>	<i>Director</i>	<i>Original Title</i>	<i>English Title</i>	<i>Producer</i>	<i>Spaces</i>
1982	Şerif Gören, Yılmaz Güney	Yol	The Way	Turkey-Switzerland- France	Road
1983	Yılmaz Güney	Duvar	The Wall	Turkey-France	City (Prison)
1998	Hineer Saleem	Vive la mariée... et la libération du Kurdistan	Kebab Connection	France	City
2000	Bahman Ghobadi	Zamani Barayé Masti Asbha	A time for Drunken Horses	Iran	Border
2002	Bahman Ghobadi	Gomgashtei dar Aragh	Marooned in Iraq	Iran	Border, Village
2002	Jano Rosebiani	Jiyan	Jiyan	Iraq-USA	City
2003	Hineer Saleem	Vodka Lemon	Votka Lemon	France-Italy- Switzerland- Armenia	Village
2004	Nuray Şahin	Perre Dima So	Follow the Feather	Germany	City
2004	Bahman Ghobadi	Lakposhtha Parvaz Mikonand	Turtles Can Fly	Iran-France-Iraq	Border
2005	Hineer Saleem	Kilomtere Zéro	Kilometre Zero	France-Iraq-Finland	Border
2005	Jamil Rostami	Marsiyeħ Barf	Requiem of Snow	Iran-Iraq	Border, Village
2006	Bahman Ghobadi	Niwemang	Half Moon	Austria-Iran-Iraq- France	Road, Border

(Continued)

<i>Year</i>	<i>Director</i>	<i>Original Title</i>	<i>English Title</i>	<i>Producer</i>	<i>Spaces</i>
2007	Hineer Saleem	Dol	Dol	Germany-Iraq-France	Border, Village
2007	Hisham Zaman	Vinterland	Winterland	Norway	City
2008	Kazım Öz	Bahoz	The Storm	Turkey	City
2008	Rahim Zabihi	Welatê Efsane	Land of Legend	Iran, Germany	Village
2009	Hineer Saleem	Après la chute	After the Downfall	Germany-France	City
2009	Miraz Bezar	Min Dît	Before Your Eyes	Germany-Turkey	City
2011	Hineer Saleem	Si tu meurs, je te tue	If You Die, I Will Kill You	France	City
2011	Umur Hozatlı	Azadiya Wenda	Lost Freedom	Turkey	City
2011	Shiar Abdi	Meş	Walking	Turkey	City, Village
2011	M. Tayfur Aydın	Rêç	The Trace	Turkey	Village
2012	Shahram Maslakhi	Helana Sotawakan	Burning Nestes	Iran	City
2012	Bahman Ghobadi	Fasle Kargadan	Rhio Season	Iraq, Turkey	City
2012	Orhan Eskiköy & Zeynel Doğan	Dengê Bavê Min	Voice of My Father	Turkey	City, Village
2013	Jalal Nasiry	Kani Pari	Fairy Spring	Iran	Village
2013	Salem Salavati	Zemestane Akhar	The Last Winter	Iran	Village
2013	Hineer Saleem	My Sweet Pepper Land	My Sweet Pepper Land	Iraq-France-Germany	Village, Border
2013	Hisham Zaman	Before Snowfall	Before Snowfall	Norway-Germany-Iraq	Road
2014	Shawkat Amin Korki	Bîranînên li ser Kevirî	Memories on the Stone	Germany, KRG	Village, Border
2014	Hisham Zaman	Brev til Kongen	Letter to the King	Norway, United Arab Emirates	City
2014	Kazım Öz	Hebû Tunê Bû	Once Upon A Time	Turkey	Road
2014	Erol Mintaş	Klama Dayîka Min	Annemin Şarkısı	Turkey-France-Germany	City, Village
2014	Hüseyin Karabey	Were Dengê Min	Come to My Voice	Turkey-France-Germany	Village, Border
2014	Ferit Kahraman	Derbûyîna Ji Binustê	The Fall from Heaven	Turkey-Italy	City
2015	Hiwa Aminnejad	Malawa Analog	Farewell Analog	Iran	Village
2015	Ali Kemal Çınar	Veşartî	Hidden	Turkey	City
2017	Bülent Öztürk	Mavi Sessizlik	Blue Silence	Belgium, Turkey	City
2017	Kazım Öz	Zer	Zer	Germany-Turkey-USA	City, Village
2017	Ali Kemal Çınar	Gêncio	Gêncio	Turkey	City

The city, the most impressive visual object of the modern nation-state's desire for the creation of homogeneous national space,¹⁶ has also been the most powerful threat to the ideals of national ideologies.¹⁷ Migration, in particular, has been the primary agent of this threat.¹⁸ As the *de facto* capitals of Kurdish lands, Erbil, Diyarbakir, and Istanbul have a particular importance as the primary sites of *in-between* space for Kurdish cinematic subjects. These three unofficial capital cities have become key stages for Kurdish subjects' experiences with modernism within the borders of commanding nation-states. The audibility of Kurdish languages against the silhouette of these cities presents an assemblage capable of disrupting the visual hegemony of regnant discourses toward a kind of semi-recognition. Unlike in Erbil, the officially recognized capital of the Kurdistan Regional Government, the free zones of Kurdish languages are based on the public-private distinction in narratives based in Diyarbakir and Istanbul. In other words, the official borders of Kurdish geographies are demarcated by the flow of narratives in Kurdish languages. Kurdish languages push back against the homogenous imagination of capital cities, in the name of audibility, such that the tension between modern anxiety and tradition is crystallized through Kurdish films' hybrid assemblages of audio and visual means.

Kurdish directors' use of audiovisual screen space draws on Kurdish realities to revalue the Kurdish nation through linguistic encounters. At least four patterns emerge that Kurdish cinema embraces in a spatial sense: (1) positing cities as transit places between the village and a more cosmopolitan city, either in the form of a search for economically and politically better conditions (*Min Dît, Bahoz*), or of a return to the village (to one's ostensible roots) after a traumatic encounter (mostly in terms of a person's death) that calls for collective memory (*Klama Dayîka Min, Zer, Dengê Bavê Min, Rêç*); (2) positing the metropolitan city as the new home of Kurdishness (*Perre Dima So, Vive la mariée... et la libération du Kurdistan, Derbîyîna ji Bihûştê*); (3) positing the village as the ultimate home of Kurdishness (*Werê Dengê Min, My Sweet Pepper Land*); and (4) positing the border as the spatial carrier of denial and violence through narratives of the road (*Lakposhta Parvaz Mikonand, Jiyan, Before Snowfall*). The crucial point is that none of these patterns is based on an isolated and stable Kurdishness but instead on Kurdishnesses that encounter and interact with the Other(ness) in the streets, in mountains, or along borders.

The tension between modern city life on the one hand, and the call for tradition by collective memory on the other, is shaped through indoor shots and close-ups during the narration of city life. Being a Kurdish subject under the conditions of modernism becomes a domestic issue, based on shots concerning the rebuilding of a patched-together family, previously dissolved due to the loss of the father or son but reconstructed through a new imagination of masculinity (*Klama Dayîka Min, Dengê Bavê Min*). However, a vision liberated from claustrophobic indoor shots, focusing instead on the dynamism of geography and nature through village narratives, addresses both a spatial continuity engaging with linear time and the women who are agents of the future (*Werê Dengê Min, My Sweet Pepper Land*). Border narratives develop through the memory of trauma and historical victimization, with a gray scale and wide-angle shots employed to express trauma (*Zamani Barayê Masti Asbha, Lakposhta Parvaz Mikonand*). Space, more specifically, is organized through audiovisual assemblages embracing past experiences in the name of here-and-now Kurdishness. The reconceptualization of space in Kurdish film is thus shaped by the tension between anxieties of modernism and the reinterpretation of tradition. While space is articulated on a global scale to reflect and reconsider the shifting borders of community in city narratives, in the case of village and border narratives, space emerges as an in-between phenomenon, addressing inner society as much as it demands attention to the historical victimization of Kurdish people.

Impossible memory

The imagination of homogeneous time has helped nation-states to spread a sense of territorial and linguistic sameness, with broadcasting serving as an investment in collective memory. Yet the democratization of media channels with the rise of globalization and technological development has led oppressed communities to engage with broadcasting for their identity, long denied and targeted for assimilation. Some discussions of national cinema call attention to the limits of conceptualizing cinema through strictly territorial terms; such discussions expose the nature of this situation for oppressed communities under the rule of a single nation-state.¹⁹ Yet in the Kurdish case, because Kurds have been subjected to the assimilation policies of four separate nation-states, more than four structures of time and collective memory have evolved, depending on the corresponding nation-state's homogenous imagination of time for Kurdishness.

Born into a transnational context as a stateless culture, Kurdish cinema's temporal formations mostly embrace hybridity, discontinuity and unsynchronized fluxes. This is not only because of Kurdish directors' exiled status but also because of the historical impossibility of a unified collective memory. Another characteristic of Kurdish cinema, with its multilingual perspective on fluid spaces, is its employment of unsynchronized time as a means for processing collective memories that both carry and project the fractured, traumatic pasts of nation-making projects. While the Kurdish directors of Turkey engage with the aftermath of the September 12 coup and the political environment characterized for Kurdish society by forced migration, disappearance, and torture in the 1990s, the Kurdish directors of Iran engage with life on the border, mostly focusing on a narrative of smuggling and a desire to exceed the border, which is the real condition for Kurdish society within the borders of Iran. The Kurdish directors of Iraq, meanwhile, focus either on the internal conflicts of Kurdish communities after independence, or the trauma of the Anfal Genocide in 1988. Each Kurdish community, whether in Turkey, Iraq, or Iran, thus has its own political and historical agenda addressing its own common experience of time. The fluxes of time are independent of each other, but all depend on denial and violence, albeit from different sources.

With all of these differences, women's bodies, bodies that carry all the traces of past experiences and traumas, are a very common feature of Kurdish films. The gendered articulation of subjectivity emerges in the form of individual time that transcends histories fractured by the nation-states. Although there are only a couple of Kurdish women directors with feature-length films in Kurdish, Nuray Şahin and Hiwa Aminnejad, Kurdish women themselves, "as the symbols and gatekeepers of uncontaminated Kurdishness,"²⁰ enunciate either the impossible homecoming, or the home itself, through the strength of their memory (in contrast with their older and weaker bodies). The temporal construction of narratives cuts through the multilingual and floating in-between spaces by way of the nostalgia-laden narratives of women's bodies. The tension between the traumatic there-and-past and the fractured here-and-now in such narratives addresses the Kurdish subjects in terms of either a restorative nostalgia or a reflexive nostalgia for identification. While "restorative nostalgia" focuses on rebuilding the symbols and rituals of the lost home, "reflexive nostalgia" inhabits *algia* the longing itself.²¹ The truth of Kurdish cinema exposes itself in the tension between *algia* and the embodied pleasure of subject positions articulated with linguistic preferences, the most concrete tie with the impossible *home*—Kurdistan. Thus, Kurdish cinema—in the sense both of the "cinema of the Kurds" and "cinema in Kurdish"—articulates its cinematographic subject via the oscillation between gendered past and processing present due to rupture and becoming, rather than any imagined homogenous time or unified collective memory as a stabilizing icon of the nation.

Another common feature fed by collective memory and identity emerges in the performances of the figure of the *dengbêj*, either through recordings or in protagonists' developing characters. Recalling that, at every level (recording, listening, or even sharing), recordings let us experience the body, time, and sociability of imagined cultural narratives,²² recordings in Kurdish languages cover the linguistic and spatial heterogeneity on the behalf of the once-there community freed from the determinacy of territory. Oral tradition, as embodied in the everyday in the form of knowledge, is the main carrier of the struggle against official languages and histories.²³ Kurdish directors' reinterpretation of the figure of *dengbêj* either as representatives of endangered memory (*Klame Dayîka Min, Zer*) or as the forerunners of social problems (*Nivemang, Vodka Lemon, Were Dengê Min*) serves as attempts to reevaluate Kurds' collective memory while paving the way for the recognition of the unstable and fluid here-and-now reality of Kurdish culture. Encountering and engaging not only with hegemonic nation-states but also with the cultures and everyday experiences of the countries to which Kurds have migrated, Kurdish cinema's demand for recognition is crystallized in its conceptualization of modern experience embodied in urban life. Narratives on the basis of cultural and financial encounters point to the gap that Kurdish communities are trying to fill, as they are subjected to violence and impoverishment in hegemonic discourse. The encounter of Kurdish subjects with modern times is, in other words, narrated through the conflicting images and sounds of contemporary and traditional becoming in the Kurdish mode of urban experience.

Conclusion

Throughout debates on the reconceptualization of the nation due to the modern nation-state's purported loss of sovereignty and the rise of globalization, the definition of a national cinema has emerged as a discursive tool in the hands of both hegemonic (nation-state) politics and counter-hegemonic (anti-colonial) politics.²⁴ The perplexities of national cinemas go hand in hand with the perplexities of the concept of the nation, such that any claim for a national cinema contains a demand in the name of the hegemony of nation-states. The stateless Kurdish cinema, with its limited financial resources and distribution networks, is marginalized in comparison to the reputation of international film festivals, so that the represented agency of the Kurdish director meets a kind of semi-recognition of related Kurdishnesses. Thus, the stateless Kurdish demand for the public and the popular is abolished by international agents with regard to the determinacy of territorial recognition. Incapable of targeting either the imperial market of Hollywood or an internal imagined national community, Kurdish cinema asks for recognition by international film festivals, in a context in which any attempt to identify Kurdish cinema as a national cinema can only arrive at "something like a national cinema."²⁵ The ambiguity involved in this phrase points to the need for a decentralized and horizontal conceptualization of Kurdish identity beyond its comprehension in national terms, so as to expose its very specific cinematic subject. Kurdish cinema, as a challenge to the national cinematic canon, represents that conceptualization.

Kurdish cinema is, in the words of the well-known director Hineer Saleem, "trying to progress on the path of the sun and spring."²⁶ Even as some Kurdish directors prefer to identify their productions as "political films by a Kurdish director"²⁷ or their own situation as "a Kurdish director with Turkish citizenship"²⁸ so as to escape from the ambiguities around Kurdish cinema debates, these directors' thematic and stylistic cinematic choices point to a common experience of fractured subjectivities and fragmented hegemony in space and time, which marks the genre of Kurdish cinema. Kurdish cinema embraces linguistic, spatial, and

temporal fluidity in its film space. It oscillates between the current experience of becoming Kurdish and past experiences of trauma, with common narrative forms meditating on matters of recognition. As the carriers of collective memory and Kurdish languages, the enunciation of women either as the impossible homecoming or the home itself through their memory, as well as through silence or musical performance, constitutes important sites for a minor film language liberated from the determinacy of macro-politics. Kurdish cinema's claim for recognition is crystallized through its claim for agency in terms of these minor lines of flight in the grand narratives of becoming Kurdish. In either case, truth exposes itself in the tension between *algia* and the embodied pleasure of subject positions articulated through linguistic variability, spatial fluidity, and several collective memories.

Notes

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- 5 Candan, "Kurdish Documentaries in Turkey", 72.
- 6 Devrim Kılıç, "Kürt Sinemasının Yükselişi", in *Kürt Sineması: Yurtsuzluk, Sınır ve Ölüm*, ed. M. Müjde Arslan (İstanbul: Agora, 2009), 56–68; Özgür Çiçek, "The Fictive Archive: Kurdish Filmmaking in Turkey", *Alphaville: Journal of Film and Screen Media*, 1 (2015), www.alphavillejournal.com/Issue%201/ArticleCicek.html; Şengül, "Kürt Sineması Üzerine", 2013.
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PART IV

Economic dimensions



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10

THE OIL IMPERATIVE IN THE KRG

David Romano

The oil imperative and the budget

The Kurdistan Regional Government of Iraq (KRG) relies upon oil and gas revenues to secure its autonomy and possible future independence from Iraq. The region, like the state of Iraq that it presently forms a part of, functions as a *rentier* economy – meaning that the large majority of government (including regional government) revenues come from an outside source (oil or budget transfers from Baghdad, the funds for which are also earned from oil) and flow directly to government coffers rather than coming from taxation or other forms of levies upon the population and its activities.

Very significant hydrocarbon resources exist in the Kurdistan Region of Iraq (KRI). Although no consensus exists regarding the exact quantity of oil reserves present in the KRI, most estimates of proven and unproven reserves are in the range of 40 billion barrels of oil, with gas reserves in the range of at least 100,000 billion cubic feet.¹ Proved reserves of oil are at around 10 billion barrels, with more proven reserves available if recovery methods improve. If the KRG were to raise its oil exports from the current average of around 500,000 barrels per day (bpd) to 2 million bpd (an export level that would put the KRG at par with countries like the UAE and Nigeria), it could maintain this level of crude oil exports for 60–70 years.² Gas exports could have met the total demand of the now aborted Nabucco Pipeline project (which was supposed to provide Turkey and Europe with natural gas to relieve dependency on Russia) for some 100 years.³ These estimates do not even include disputed territories in Iraq such as the very oil- and gas-rich Kirkuk, which the armed forces of the KRG took control of in 2014.

Like the rest of Iraq, the political and economic system of the KRG remains heavily dependent on revenues from these hydrocarbon resources. Although once the bread basket of Iraq, the KRI saw much of its agricultural sector devastated during the Kurdish insurgencies of the 1960s and 1970s (or perhaps more accurately, Baghdad's counterinsurgency campaigns), the Iran–Iraq War from 1980 to 1988, the Gulf War of 1990–1991, and then the subsequent double sanctions regime of 1991–2003 (international sanctions on Iraq and the Saddam Hussein regime's embargo of the newly autonomous KRI during this time). Although the 1995–2003 United Nations “Oil for Food” program alleviated the most dire needs of the KRI at the time, the program relied upon imported rather than local food items

to distribute free of charge to the population, further hurting the KRI's domestic agricultural sector. The sanctions and isolation of the 1990s likewise crippled any manufacturing or industrial endeavors in the KRI. Oil revenues thus became, over time, more and more indispensable for both the KRG and the government of Baghdad. In 2006, oil exports accounted for 97 percent of the Iraqi government's revenue, of which the KRG received 17 percent (after deductions for "sovereign expenses," such as the Baghdad government's operations costs, Iraqi military expenditures, and reparation to Kuwait for the 1990–1991 war).⁴ Oil remains the ultimate source of around 90 percent of the KRG's revenues today.⁵

During the 2003–2013 period, the KRG's share of considerable Iraqi oil revenues was managed poorly in some respects. Although it rebuilt much of the region's infrastructure, got electricity running reasonably reliably, provided increasing services to the population, and avoided the more egregious levels of corruption occurring in Baghdad (where some \$361 billion of the Iraqi budget went missing between 2004 and 2014),⁶ it also engaged in some classic *rentier state* mistakes during this time period. The KRG during this time largely failed to invest revenues in other potentially productive sectors of the economy, such as agriculture or manufacturing (in order to develop and diversify the KRI's economic base), nor did it create a sovereign wealth fund akin to Norway's or sufficient reserves to prepare for rainier days. Instead, the KRG imported increasing amounts of foreign labor from places like Bangladesh and Indonesia (for menial jobs that even unemployed locals increasingly refused), built an ever-increasing number of fancy new hotels and shopping malls in the region (in an apparent attempt to make the KRI the "new Dubai" of the area⁷), greatly expanded its civil service, and provided more and more free services or income support to the population.

Whether one views the growing civil service and public sector in the KRI as well-intentioned efforts to care for the population or patron-client networks designed to shore up political support for the KRG's ruling parties, the effect of such policies differs little. A recent report found that "60 percent of the employed population of Kurdistan works for the State and most of the private sector is dependent on direct public expense, such as contractors."⁸ A region with a population of around 4.5 million (excluding recent refugees and internally displaced persons from the war with the Islamic State) hardly needs some 720,000 public employees and 20,000 government contractors at the same time that it provides monthly benefits to some 640,000 pensioners, persons with disabilities, unemployed, and poor – for a total of 1,380,000 people directly dependent on monthly government disbursements.⁹ As is typical in *rentier* economies, analysts describe a system rife with problems such as

the absence of actual job descriptions for ministerial human resources needs, a salary calculation system based on additional allowances completely detached from productivity, the presence of ghost employees, and a pervasive clientelist system that generates and rewards political loyalty with public employment or safety nets.¹⁰

Such a *rentier* political and economic system could, as long as oil revenues and expenses remained in sync, have gone on indefinitely. The KRI's population appeared reasonably happy with the arrangement as spending habits grew, and quality of life in the region improved. Kurdistan from 2003 until 2014 looked like a much better place to live than the rest of Iraq. Whatever the shortcomings or misdeeds of the ruling parties, the provision of increasing patronage to the people assured political support. People in the region sought government employment more than private sector jobs, given the greater security and benefits that the former provided. Little to no taxation of the population, in classic *rentier* fashion, also seemed to limit how much more the populace might demand of its leadership. Indeed, such was

the system in Iraq in general (which also had some 50 percent of the population on the government payroll) until the Iran–Iraq War, and then the first Gulf War placed too much strain on even oil-rich government resources.

Events after 2013 threw the *rentier* system in Iraqi Kurdistan into crisis. An almost perfect storm of several factors combined to place severe challenges before the KRG: (1) a dispute between the KRG and the federal government in Baghdad, which led in early 2014 to Baghdad cutting the KRG off from its share of the Iraqi budget (more on this later); (2) the June 2014 takeover by the Islamic State (ISIS) of Mosul, followed by the August 2014 ISIS assault on the Kurdistan Region, which caused a sharp increase in military expenditures for the KRG; (3) an influx of refugees from Syria (beginning in 2011), Mosul, and other parts of Iraq under ISIS control, which strained the KRG's resources and led to a situation in which approximately one in four residents of the KR are now refugees or internally displaced persons from elsewhere in Iraq; and (4) the precipitous collapse of international oil and gas prices in late 2014, which caused severe problems for both Iraqi and KRG revenues (KRG revenues from *ad hoc* independent oil exports after the 2014 Baghdad budget cutoff).

This confluence of events, combined with the KRG's inability to secure international loans through regular means (given its non-state status), led to a severe financial crisis in the region. Remuneration in the public sector saw significant cuts by a cash-strapped KRG, and civil servant, teacher, and Peshmerga salaries went unpaid for many months at a time (sometimes up to six months in arrears). Contractors in the private sector saw their contracts suddenly frozen or canceled, with only the most indispensable work continuing during the crisis. As public sector incomes in the region plummeted, shops, restaurants, and other private spheres of the economy suffered as well since people had little money to spend there. As the KRG's budget fell from over 14 trillion Iraqi dinars in 2013 to under 2 trillion in 2014, the poverty rate in the region soared from just 3 percent in 2013 to over 12 percent by 2016.¹¹

With the post-2013 economic crisis and the concurrent austerity measures of the KRG came political questions as a frustrated population increasingly questioned both the economic and political management of their leaders. The implicit social contract of *rentier* states in general (people refrain from demanding too much of their political leaders in return for material goodies from government) came under severe strain. As the KRG continued to struggle to meet a now unsustainable public payroll of around \$800 million dollars a month, protests erupted in the region in 2015 and 2016.¹² The silver lining to the crisis came in the form of the first serious efforts at economic reform by the KRG, increased international support, and steps to diversify the economy away from its dependence on oil (all discussed in the following section).

The oil imperative and the Iraqi constitution

The origins of the dispute between Baghdad and the KRG, which led to Maliki's government in Baghdad cutting the KRG off from its share of the Iraqi budget and to Kurdish moves to export their oil and gas independently from the rest of the country, lie in differing interpretations of Iraq's 2005 constitution. Following the overthrow of Saddam Hussein's regime in 2003, Iraqi Kurdish and Shiite political parties and the American-led Coalition Provisional Authority made great efforts to design a new, decentralized, and democratic political system for Iraq. Sunni Arab parties at the time, perhaps in the mistaken belief that they would rule Iraq again, opposed a decentralized federal system. The Kurds and Arab Shiites, whose communities comprised some 80 percent of Iraq's population, overrode Sunni Arab opposition in drawing up the 2005 federal constitution. When put to voters in a referendum in late 2005, the new law of the land was ratified by 78 percent of the electorate.¹³

Unfortunately, the difficult process of drawing up the constitutional text¹⁴ forced its drafters to adopt somewhat vague language on some issues and leave clarification for future negotiations between the country's stakeholders. First and foremost among the issues which were to be dealt with later were (1) the creation of a "Federation Council" (Articles 48 and 65 of the constitution), which would be composed of Iraq's governorates and regions, and act as second house in the parliament to ensure that their interests would not be overridden by a simple majority in the regular parliament; (2) a hydrocarbons law, which would further clarify how the central government in Baghdad and the governorates and regions of Iraq would collaborate in managing and sharing the country's oil and gas resources (Articles 110, 111, 112, and 115 of the constitution); and (3) a return process,¹⁵ census, and referendum to determine the status of territories (including very oil-rich Kirkuk) disputed between the Kurdistan Region and the Baghdad government (Article 140). None of these articles (48, 65, or 140) were implemented, and none of these issues (a hydrocarbons law and clarification of the division of powers regarding oil between Baghdad and the governorates and regions) were resolved in the next decade. This led to increasing tensions in Iraq, even as its oil revenues (until late 2014) soared.

The most important constitutional articles dealing with federal vs. provincial powers, especially in regard to oil but also in regard to other matters, include Articles 110, 111, 112, and 115. Article 110 spells out the relatively small number of issue areas over which the central federal government in Baghdad is to enjoy exclusive authority, such as customs policy; issuing currency; regulating commerce across regional and governorate boundaries; drawing up the national budget; formulating monetary policy; running the central bank; managing antiquities; drawing up the general and investment budget bill; and regulating weights, standards, measures, citizenship, naturalization, residency, asylum, broadcast frequencies, mail, population statistics, and a census. Article 110 also states that the federal government enjoys the exclusive rights of

Formulating foreign policy and diplomatic representation; negotiating, signing, and ratifying international treaties and agreements; negotiating, signing, and ratifying debt policies and formulating foreign sovereign economic and trade policy

as well as

Formulating and executing national security policy, including establishing and managing armed forces to secure the protection and guarantee the security of Iraq's borders and to defend Iraq.

Article 111 of the constitution then goes on to state that "Oil and gas are owned by all the people of Iraq in all the regions and governorates." Both the Maliki government from 2006 to 2014 and the Abadi government after that interpreted Article 111 to mean that Baghdad should control all oil and gas operations throughout the country as well as all hydrocarbon exports, revenue collection, and the distribution of proceeds from these. This is because only the central government in Baghdad represents "all the people of Iraq in all the regions and governorates."

The following article in the constitution, Article 112, seems to directly contradict such an interpretation, however. Article 112 states that

First: The federal government, with the producing governorates and regional governments, shall undertake the management of oil and gas extracted from present fields, provided

that it distributes its revenues in a fair manner in proportion to the population distribution in all parts of the country, specifying an allotment for a specified period for the damaged regions which were unjustly deprived of them by the former regime, and the regions that were damaged afterwards in a way that ensures balanced development in different areas of the country, and this shall be regulated by law.

Second: The federal government, with the producing regional and governorate governments, shall together formulate the necessary strategic policies to develop the oil and gas wealth in a way that achieves the highest benefit to the Iraqi people using the most advanced techniques of the market principles and encouraging investment.

As the language in this article makes clear, however, federal authority over oil and gas is not exclusive but rather collaborative with the “producing governorates and regional governments.”¹⁶ Without a more explicit and detailed national hydrocarbons law to detail exactly how this collaboration should occur, leaders in Baghdad simply ignored this provision and tried to monopolize control over management of the country’s hydrocarbons.

KRG leaders, meanwhile, accepted that Article 111 meant that the proceeds of all oil and gas exports had to be shared proportionally among all of Iraq’s governorates, regions, and people but vehemently challenged any suggestion that Baghdad had the right to monopolize exploration, contracts with multinational oil companies, production, and export. Additionally, Kurdish leaders argued that the following language in the First part of Article 112 exempted the obligation to collaborate with Baghdad in managing oil and gas fields discovered after the 2005 Constitution was ratified: “The federal government, with the producing governorates and regional governments, shall undertake the management of oil and gas extracted from *present fields* [emphasis added].” Kurdish leaders involved in the 2004–2005 constitutional drafting process told the author, informally, that the addition of the phrase “present fields” came to them almost by accident, as an afterthought, during these negotiations.¹⁷ In 2004–2005, few people thought the Kurdistan Region (at least within its recognized boundaries rather than Kirkuk and other areas) contained much in the way of oil and gas resources, so Iraqi Arab political parties negotiating the draft constitution accepted this language without much fuss.

The subsequent discovery of the very substantial aforementioned oil and gas resources in Kurdistan changed things considerably, but Kurdish leaders in Erbil (the KR’s capital) insisted on their right to exclusively manage these resources provided they still shared the resulting revenues with the rest of the country (just like southern governorates like Basra, the most oil-rich in the country, must share their oil revenues with Kurdistan and oil-starved governorates like Anbar). This argument held substantial merit because of Article 115 of the constitution, which states that

All powers not stipulated in the exclusive powers of the federal government belong to the authorities of the regions and governorates that are not organized in a region. With regard to other powers shared between the federal government and the regional government, priority shall be given to the law of the regions and governorates not organized in a region in case of dispute.

This article, seen by many as the most decentralizing element of the 2005 constitution, cedes power to the regions and governorates in all cases of ambiguity. Some might wonder if control over hydrocarbon exploration, contracts, production, and exports constitutes a moot point, given that all revenues must be shared among all Iraqis (according to Article 111).

In political systems lacking trust, however, control is everything. Whoever gets to sign contracts with multinational oil companies enjoys the possibility of receiving hefty side payments and incentives from the companies (including commitments to build local infrastructure and schools for the population). Additionally, if Baghdad controlled all these things, the government there could cut off autonomous Kurdistan's budget in order to force the Kurds to submit to its will on any number of issues. This is precisely what the Maliki government did in early 2014 when the dispute over control of oil and gas worsened.

When KRG leaders said they would rather export their oil themselves to Turkey or turn off their oil wells altogether rather than turn them over to Baghdad's sole control, Prime Minister Maliki simply stopped giving the KR its 17 percent share of the Iraqi budget – saying they would receive their share only when they turned over their oil production to SOMO (the central government's oil marketing organization).¹⁸ The Maliki government had no legal authority to do this, given that nothing in the constitution (including Article 111) says that only governorates and regions providing oil for export can receive their share of the national budget.¹⁹ Lack of financial autonomy thus threatened Iraqi Kurdish autonomy in general. Given the Kurds' difficult and painful history within the Iraqi state, including the genocidal *Anfal* campaigns and chemical weapon bombardments of the late 1980s, it seemed imperative to the KRG to protect its control of hydrocarbons in the region.

Finally, Article 140 of the constitution stipulated that (1) people expelled from Kirkuk and other regions during previous governments' Arabization campaigns be allowed to return and be compensated for their losses, and settlers brought in under previous regimes return to their places of origin in the south – a process called “normalization”; (2) a census be conducted in the disputed territories, and (3) a referendum be held by December 2007 to determine if the people of these areas wished to remain under Baghdad's federal authority or become part of the Kurdistan Autonomous Region. This article was meant to address the accidental but now official boundaries of the Kurdistan Region, which were determined according to where Saddam's military forces retreated to after the creation of the Northern No-Fly Zone in 1991. When the 2005 Constitution recognized the Kurdistan Region, it did so within the boundaries of Kurdish autonomy from 1991 to 2003. Kurdish-majority districts such as Kirkuk ended up just south of the constitutionally recognized borders of the KRG, which wanted to incorporate the majority Kurdish-inhabited areas (and presumably much of the oil there as well) into their administration. Leaders in Baghdad (despite having conceded the issue in the form of Article 140 in 2005) and many Arab and Turkmen residents of these “disputed territories” rejected such an inclusion, however. Successive governments in Baghdad promised Kurdish leaders that they would carry out Article 140's provisions, but the issue remained politically toxic within the Arab Iraqi electorate, and they never did so.

Baghdad and the KRG's tension over the disputed territories and the failure to implement Article 140 increased over the years, with Kurdish Peshmerga and the Iraqi army almost going to war with each other on a number of occasions, especially in 2013.²⁰ While KRG leaders claimed they only wanted to unite the majority-Kurdish disputed territories with the Kurdistan Region, others accused them of coveting the considerable oil and gas resources in these areas. Authorities in Baghdad suspected that with the resources of the disputed territories in addition to the KR's resources, the Kurds would have the economic basis to secede from Iraq. From the Kurdish point of view, such resources would be nice, but, more importantly, the KR could not secede from Iraq while leaving behind all their brethren in the disputed territories.

When ISIS *Jihadis* suddenly swept in from Syria in June 2014 to capture Mosul and surrounding areas, however, the disputed territories fell into the Kurds' lap. As the Iraqi army

abandoned its northern positions and fled from ISIS, the KRG's Peshmerga advanced into nearly all the majority-Kurdish areas the Iraqi army had claimed and took control of them. KRG President Barzani then promptly announced that "Article 140 has been implemented" and that the KRG "will not talk about it anymore."²¹ Although Baghdad hardly seems likely to accept such an outcome, at the time of this writing, there was still little that the authorities there could do about it.

The oil imperative and geography

Whatever the KRG's aspirations for the future, Kurdistan cannot escape its geography. The Kurdistan Region is landlocked. With no outlet to the sea, the Kurds must enjoy good relations with at least one of their neighbors in order to export their considerable oil and gas resources. As discussed earlier, the KRG's efforts to prevent Baghdad from controlling all aspects of their hydrocarbons cannot help the Kurds much if they fail to secure cooperation with their oil and gas exports from either the Turkish, Iranian, or Syrian states. Given their own considerable Kurdish minorities, all three of these states have traditionally been hostile to even Kurdish autonomy, much less independence. Historically, the only matter that Turkey, Iran, Syria, and Iraq consistently agreed upon involved blocking Kurdish aspirations for independence. During the period of *de facto*, unrecognized Kurdish autonomy between 1991 and 2003, Turkey, Syria, and Iran heavily constrained access and egress from the KR. This serves as a possible warning about neighboring states' response to an Iraqi Kurdish bid at secession – rather than military invasion, embargo and strangulation of the nascent state's economy seem much more likely possibilities.

The KRG's efforts to break this impasse focused on Turkey from 2007 onward. With little of its own domestic hydrocarbon sources, Turkey remains a big and growing importer of oil and gas. The Turkish economy especially needs natural gas, which it uses to power most of its electric grid. While most of Turkey's gas imports come from Russia, at times difficult relations with Moscow and high prices for Russian gas encouraged Turkish policy makers to look for alternative sources. The Kurdistan Region of Iraq, with plentiful gas reserves, stood out as a viable and much cheaper alternative for Turkey. KRG leaders (especially those from the Kurdistan Democratic Party of Iraq) very much encouraged Turkish interest in their natural gas, and were careful to avoid antagonizing Turkey on other matters (such as its own "Kurdish problem"). This KRG policy toward Turkey is described in an October 30, 2009, WikiLeaks cable from the U.S. ambassador to Iraq's "Senior Advisor for Northern Iraq" (Alan Misenheimer), wherein he describes private meetings he had with KRG prime minister Nechirvan Barzani and other KRG leaders:

Nechirvan Barzani said that the KRG has been careful to maintain a low profile in ongoing discussions with Turkey which has resulted in much improved relations. He added that they have worked hard to build confidence and that the KRG has bent over backwards to encourage Turkish firms to come to the KRG.... Further, he said that in the past the Iranians have actively fed misinformation about the Kurds to Turkey, but Turkey has now stopped listening to them. The improved relationship between the KRG and Turkey has made Iran unhappy. Shaikh Jafar [the KRG Minister of Peshmerga at the time] requested U.S. assistance in putting pressure on the Iranians to cease shelling the border areas. Falah Mustafa [the KRG Minister of Foreign Relations] said that the KRG would like U.S. help to bring them closer to Turkey.²²

At the same time, developments in Turkey after 2007 allowed for a change in previous Turkish policies toward the Iraqi Kurds. Recep Tayyip Erdogan's Justice and Development Party (AKP) government in Turkey, first elected in 2002, began in 2007 to actively challenge and successfully dismantle the Turkish military's grip on the country. As part of the Kemalist (guardians of founder Mustafa Kemal Atatürk's vision for Turkey) establishment, the Turkish military had since the beginnings of the Turkish Republic prevented any policies that might facilitate Kurdish autonomy or independence not just in Turkey, but in neighboring states as well. The Muslim identity-based AKP lacked the same level of paranoia regarding Kurdish advances outside of Turkey, however. Instead, the AKP sought to appeal to Kurds in Turkey as fellow Muslims, and believed that Turkey could work with Kurds in Iraq to pursue its interests – including securing access to cheap oil and gas. Given often contentious and competitive Turkish relations with Iran, which after 2003 became the Baghdad government's main patron, the new AKP government in Ankara soon perceived an opportunity to work with Iraqi Kurds anxious to secure oil and gas export alternatives independent of Baghdad's control.

Turkish oil companies, including state-owned ones, thus began signing exploration and production contracts with the KRG – against Baghdad's wishes – in 2007 and 2008. In 2009, the KRG finished laying down its own independent pipeline (which mostly consisted of an appropriated section of the Iraqi-owned part of the Kirkuk-Ceyhan pipeline) to Turkey and began exports to the Turkish port of Ceyhan.²³ The much more difficult and long-term process of setting up natural gas export facilities from Iraqi Kurdistan to Turkey also began around this time.²⁴ While the Kurds maintained that they would share the proceeds of these oil ventures with the rest of the country, they also increasingly used their newfound alternative to pressure Baghdad on various stratagems it was using to reduce the KRG's effective 17 percent share of the Iraqi budget.²⁵

In 2009, U.S. Ambassador Jeffrey sent home the following appraisal of the situation following confidential meetings with Turkish officials:

GOT [Government of Turkey] officials recognize what they describe as a special cultural affinity between Turks and Kurds and see Turkey as the most natural outlet to bring the Kurdish region's hydrocarbon resources to world markets as well as the primary source for investment, consumer goods, and technology. In part to help satisfy its own growing energy requirements and in part to make viable plans to bring gas from both Middle East and Caspian Basin sources to European markets, Turkey has begun to sound out possibilities for Turkish companies to help develop oil and gas fields in the KRG-administered region as well as to link those fields to the existing Kirkuk-Yamurtuluk oil pipeline and a proposed northern route gas pipeline into Turkey. The Turks argue that they do not want to undermine efforts to achieve agreement on national hydrocarbons legislation in Iraq, but similarly do not want to be penalized for “doing the right thing” by discovering that contracts signed with the KRG end up being grandfathered under a final deal between Erbil and Baghdad, with Turkish companies sidelined as a result. ...Turkey is particularly sensitive about proposals to send Iraqi gas to Syria and into the Arab Pipeline, which it sees as the major competitor to its proposed northern route pipeline. It fears Iraqi gas will end up supplying Egypt instead of Turkey, and/or that it will supply LNG facilities outside Turkey. Recently, the GOT has argued that it could supply Iraqi gas to Syria from a northern route pipeline and still connect Iraq to European markets.²⁶

The ambassador's reference to “undermining efforts to achieve agreement on national hydrocarbons legislation in Iraq” referred to an American belief at the time that the Iraqi Kurds should

allow the central government in Baghdad to control the hydrocarbons industry and all oil and gas exports from Iraq. By pursuing deals with the Iraqi Kurds against Baghdad's wishes, Turkey effectively lessened the pressure on Erbil to cede control of these issues to the Maliki government.

As the hydrocarbons relationship between Turkey and KRG continued to develop, efforts to reach a compromise between Baghdad (with its demand to control all aspects related to oil and gas in Iraq) and the KRG (with their demand to manage their resources independently of Baghdad) continued to fail. It was in this context that Iraqi Prime Minister Nuri al Maliki completely cut off the KRG from its share of the Iraqi budget in 2014. The KRG responded to the embargo by saying it would raise its own revenues via oil and gas exports to Turkey, which were expected to soon grow larger than the budget transfers it was receiving from Baghdad.²⁷ The aforementioned collapse in oil prices of that same year, the war with ISIS which began in the summer of 2014, and the influx of refugees and internally displaced persons (IDPs) into Kurdistan all made the KRG's efforts to "go it alone" much more difficult, however.

After ISIS began its campaign in Iraq in the summer of 2014 and Prime Minister Maliki was removed from power in August of that same year, the KRG did manage to arrive at a series of *ad hoc*, temporary, and fragile agreements on oil with the new Abadi government. In return for pumping much of Kirkuk's oil to the Turkish port of Ceyhan (where the Iraqi government's SOMO board would sell it), the KRG received limited portions of its budget from Baghdad at various times. The arrangement was frequently abrogated by one side or the other, however, and at the time of this writing, the general trend on oil and gas between the two still appeared more uncooperative than cooperative.²⁸

Attempts to turn the oil imperative into a blessing rather than a curse

If the severe economic and political crisis in the Kurdistan Region after 2014 has an upside, it comes from the pressure these created for substantive reforms. While political reforms may take more time to materialize and cannot be assessed here, economic reforms have already begun to take effect. The KRG took a number of actions to address the economic crisis. These included trimming its public sector significantly (via early retirements, some layoffs, and a freeze on new hiring outside the security forces), initiatives to increase transparency, reduced spending on various projects, and efforts to diversify the region's economy.²⁹ The transparency initiatives included a new biometric system already implemented in 2017, which requires employees and other recipients of government funds (pensioners, orphans, veterans, etc.) to collect their payments via fingerprint and iris scanning. The program uncovered thousands of ghost employees and ghost welfare recipients.³⁰ A decrease in buying power among the population and efforts to reduce the amount of imported goods also led to a substantial increase in Kurdistan's agricultural sector in 2016, with expectations that the region will in the very near term become food independent.³¹ As a result of these efforts and independent exports of oil to Turkey at around 500,000 bpd³², as of May 2017, the KRG had already managed to pay back \$1 billion of the \$4 billion in loans it took from international oil companies between 2014 and 2016 (despite the KRG still being cut off from the Iraqi budget).³³

The war against ISIS and the Iraqi Kurds' prominent role in it also attracted high amounts of international sympathy and support for the KRG. With both financial support and new weapons systems provided by the West, the KRG enjoyed renewed confidence in its ability to sustain and defend itself. Cooperation with Baghdad in the campaign to liberate Mosul and other ISIS-held areas also created the potential for a rapprochement between the KRG and the Iraqi central government, which could with any luck be used to finally hammer out a hydrocarbons law acceptable to both, or failing that a peaceful divorce and Kurdistan independence from Iraq.

Conclusion

Despite some positive developments resulting from the 2014 to 2017 economic crisis, unless the KRG enjoys an amazingly quick and successful diversification of its economy, the Kurdistan Region will continue to remain dependent on oil and gas revenues for some time to come. This is true whether the region remains part of Iraq or seeks full independence (talk of which increased substantially in the KR after 2014). While the aforementioned efforts not only to diversify the economy but also streamline government and limit public expenditures may help reduce the “oil curse” aspect of a *rentier* economy, they will not eliminate the KRG’s oil imperative in the short or medium term. If international oil prices suddenly rise significantly, the impetus for reform may even subside.

Replacing the KRG’s dependence on Baghdad with a new dependence on Turkey hardly seems an ideal solution either. One can safely assume that Ankara does not have the Kurds’ best interests at heart, and the Turks could abruptly close the Kurdistan Region’s economic lifeline and outlet to the world at any time they wish. Such a closure could occur as part of Turkish efforts to pressure KRG authorities to cooperate more actively in Ankara’s fight against the Kurdistan Workers Party (PKK), for instance. Closures of the pipeline could also occur due to sabotage or fighting between Ankara and the PKK, as already occurred on a number of occasions.³⁴

The best strategy for the KRG would thus seem to be avoiding burning all bridges with Baghdad, and instead trying to maintain as many open options for Kurdish oil and gas exports as possible. Even if the KRG manages to hold on to the disputed territories it took control of in August 2014, adding their considerable oil resources to those of the recognized Kurdistan Region, unstable relations with Baghdad could threaten any development of or exports from these fields. If Baghdad could be assured of a share of the revenues from Kurdish-controlled fields, this might go a long way toward fostering a new compromise deal between the two.

At the same time, KRG leaders appear keen to keep an eye open for potential outlets to the world via even Iran and Syria. A recent (2016) agreement between the KRG and Iran to open a pipeline between the two seems to offer some promise for the future, especially since the agreement seemed to occur with Baghdad’s acquiescence.³⁵ Iran and Baghdad in all likelihood decided to try and wean the KRG away from too close a relationship with Turkey, which is just the kind of competitive bidding a successful Kurdish foreign policy should try to foster. In Syria, finally, the end of the civil war there – when that end finally comes – may one day offer other alternative possibilities for the KRG to address its oil imperative. This would seem particularly true if Syrian Kurds come to enjoy longer-term autonomy with an outlet to the sea, or at least a more substantive role in the Syrian government.

In any case, the KRG will, for the foreseeable future, require an astute foreign policy to address its oil imperative. In an unstable region, even the best-laid pipelines can come undone.

Notes

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- 3 “Kurdistan Says its Gas Can Quench Nabucco Pipeline for 100 Years,” *Rudaw*, October 19, 2012 (article is no longer retrievable on line, but still available via *Heritage Oil’s* website at www.iii.co.uk/investment/detail?code=cotn:HOIL.L&display=discussion&id=10111615&action=detail).

- 4 James D. Savage, "Reconstructing Iraq's Budgetary Institutions: Coalition State Building after Saddam," (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2013), p. 224.
- 5 "In Best of Times and Worst of Times: Addressing Structural Weaknesses of the Kurdistan Region's Economy," Middle East Research Institute, January 2016, p. 24.
- 6 Wassim Bassem, "Iraq wrangling with \$26.6 billion budget deficit," *Al Monitor*, November 30, 2016 (accessed May 9, 2017 from www.al-monitor.com/pulse/originals/2016/11/iraq-budget-financial-deficit-corruption.html). Although not as severe as what was occurring in Baghdad, corruption also took its toll on revenues in the KRI.
- 7 Nicky Wolf, "Is Kurdistan the Next Dubai?" *The Guardian*, May 5, 2010 (accessed on May 9, 2017 at www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2010/may/05/kurdistan-next-dubai-iraq).
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- 9 Ibid.
- 10 Ibid.
- 11 Mark DeWeaver, "Kurdistan's Great Recession: From Boom to Bust in the Rentier Economy," Institute of Regional and International Studies Report, American University of Iraq in Suleimani, undated, (accessed May 11, 2017 from http://auis.edu.krd/iris/sites/default/files/Kurdistan%27s%20Great%20Recession_2.pdf).
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- 13 "Q&A: Iraq's Constitution," *The Guardian*, October 25, 2005.
- 14 For more on this, see Ashley S. Deeks and Matthew D. Burton. "Iraq's Constitution: A Drafting History," *Cornell International Law Journal* 40 (2007), pp. 2–87.
- 15 For Kurds, Turkmen and Christians expelled from territories such as Kirkuk during previous regimes' "Arabization" policies in these areas.
- 16 Article 114 lists the other shared powers between the federal government and regional/governorate authorities as "managing customs, regulating electricity, formulating environmental policy, development and general planning policies and health policy."
- 17 Author's interviews with several Iraqi Kurdish leaders, Erbil and Suleimani, Iraq, September–December, 2017.
- 18 "Kurdistan Government Blasts Baghdad Over Budget Freeze," *Rudaw*, March 3, 2014 (accessed May 12, 2017, from www.rudaw.net/english/kurdistan/030320141). Baghdad refused to give the KRG the option to sell its oil independently and then turn over 83% of the proceeds to Baghdad, to be distributed to the rest of the country.
- 19 Governorates such as Anbar produce no oil or gas, yet continued to receive their share of budget and civil servant salaries even while under ISIS rule.
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11

DE-DEVELOPMENT IN EASTERN AND SOUTHEASTERN ANATOLIA

Veli Yadirgi

Introduction

A central tenet of this work is that the question of development¹ in Eastern Southeastern Anatolia (ESA) and the Kurdish question of Turkey are inseparable and can be aptly comprehended only in relation to the political, social and economic history of the polities of which it has formed a part, namely, the Ottoman Empire and the Turkish Republic. Hence, this study will examine the economic, political and social features of these regions within the context of the larger geographical area and political entity it has comprised. In doing so, this chapter has relied heavily on a historical, structural and political-economic approach.

As universally agreed in the development literature² on ESA, there has been relatively late and little contact with capitalist development in these predominantly Kurdish regions, compared to other regions of Turkey. This section will argue that this is on account of the de-development process initiated by the dominant forces in these regions in order to prevent the formation of an economic base for the autonomous existence of the non-Turkish autochthonic societies in ESA that could jeopardise the political-national imperative of maintaining Turkey's national unity and territorial integrity.

De-development, as Sara Roy outlined in *The Gaza Strip: The Political Economy of De-development*, is an economic process generated and designed by a hegemonic power 'to ensure that there will be no economic base, even one that is malformed, to support an independent indigenous existence' (1995: 4). This process consists of policies that not only hinder but also 'deliberately block internal economic development and the structural reform upon which it is based' (ibid.: 6). It is qualitatively different from underdevelopment, which allows for some, albeit distorted, indigenous development and thereby does not rescind the prospect of autonomous indigenous existence.

Relatedly, contra to the scholarly wisdom apparent in the development literature reviewed previously, this research hypothesises that continual inadequate development has not been a characteristic feature of ESA's economy. Ever since the early sixteenth century, these regions have witnessed economic prosperity, followed by underdevelopment and de-development. De-development in ESA commenced as a product of the state policies implemented in these regions after the Unionist seizure of power in the 1913 *coup d'état*, which differed greatly from those of the previous regimes. The Committee of Union and

Progress (CUP) rulers, and their political and ideological heirs, the Kemalists, pursued ideological, political and economic programmes – that is, the construction and preservation of a Turkish national economy and state as well as population homogeneity based on Turkist ideals – that were qualitatively different from those of their predecessors. These objectives spurred policies of mass murder, deportations, expropriation and dispossession of economic resources, and the suppression of all forms of non-Turkish identities and cultures in the ethnically heterogeneous provinces in ESA. In addition to laying the foundations for the Kurdish question of Turkey, these unusual features of state policy have engendered de-development in these lands by not only distorting but also forestalling economic development, which deprived the ESA economy of its capacity and potential for structural transformation.

Underlying ESA's de-development as well as the Kurdish question of Turkey is the incessant political-national objective of constructing a strong Turkish nation state and maintaining Turkey's national unity and territorial integrity. Turkish governments throughout the history of the Turkish Republic have incessantly adopted these objectives. As a result, the identity and the collective rights of the Kurds have been negated. In order to foil the capacity of autonomous existence of the Kurds, de-development policies – albeit with varying methods – have been pursued by successive Turkish administrations in the years following the transition to multiparty politics in Turkey.

The deformation of Ottoman Kurdistan and bordering regions: de-development in ESA from the First World War until the 1980 coup (1914–1980)

The ideological shifts among the late Ottoman political elite to pan-Turkism or Turkish nationalism at around the same time as the outbreak of the First World War had entailed a dialectical process, involving not only destructive social engineering and economic policies targeting the non-Turkish citizens of the Empire but the nationalist reorganisation of the Ottoman lands.³ In other words, during and immediately after the war, the CUP's nationalist demographic policies aimed at homogenising the multi-ethnic landscape of the Empire, which mainly targeted the Armenians and the Kurds in the ethnically heterogeneous eastern provinces, and concurred with the radical reforms that laid the groundwork for Turkish capitalism and the unitary Turkish nation state that ascended from the ashes of the Ottoman Empire.

After 1913, more importantly, the CUP abandoned the English liberal model of economic development modelled on *laissez-faire* liberalism and began to embrace the economic model of 'national economy' centred on the ideas of the German economist Friedrich List. This shift in policy enabled the Unionists to combine the principle of state control over the economy with preferential treatment towards the Turkish/Muslim bourgeoisie.

List, in brief, contended that the liberal theories of the British economists Adam Smith and David Ricardo suited the national interest of England because of its industrialised economy and imperialist policies, but the model of development these economists advocated could not be universalised. According to List, if *laissez-faire* liberal ideas are adopted by countries that do not have large-scale industries akin to those of England, they would end up reliant on England (List, 1856).

One of the prominent theoreticians of the CUP, Ziya Gökalp, paraphrased these concerns in the early 1920s. Gökalp maintained that the

Manchester economics is not at all a cosmopolitan doctrine, it is nothing but the national economics of England which stands for big industry and, thus, derives only benefit from the freedom of exchange abroad and suffers no loss from it.

(1959: 307)

Deriving from this premise, Gökalp argued that if countries that do not have the industrial base and scale of England implement the ideas of the Manchester school, they would inevitably become 'economic slaves to industrialized nations like England' (1968: 123).

Relatedly, the CUP, with the purpose of nurturing the indigenous industry, undertook fundamental economic measures (Toprak, 1982: 25–33). One of the core aims of these policies was the creation of the Turkish/Muslim bourgeoisie to supplant the existing non-Muslim/Turkish commercial class, which was content to play the role of commercial intermediary in an empire that served as a market for Europe's industry.

However, the repercussions of the First World War and the project of building a 'national economy', which concealed a Turkist agenda that was entirely a novel feature in Ottoman history, were double-edged. Ethnocide, forced migration and the demolition of movable and immovable property had become the destructive components of the policies implemented in the Ottoman Empire during the war.

The Armenian genocide of 1915 and the forced deportation of Ottoman Kurds in 1916: a social and economic catastrophe

Based on an archival study of the deportation orders issued by the CUP government, Fuat Dündar discerns that the deportation of the Ottoman Armenians commenced in February 1915. The 'fifth and final stage of the deportations' is said to have begun after the leader of the CUP, Talat Pasha, on 21 June 1915, ordered the deportation of 'all Armenians without exception' who lived in ten provinces of the eastern and south-eastern regions of the Empire, including Diyarbakır, Sivas and Mamuretülaziz (Dündar, 2012: 281–3). Within a year or so of the initiation of the forced deportation of the Armenians from their ancestral homelands, according to a report of a United Nations human rights subcommission, 'at least one million' Armenians perished (Hovannisian, 1999: 15).

The removal and the subsequent destruction of the Ottoman Armenians had severe social and economic consequences.⁴ Prior to 1916, the CUP's 'national economy' targeted mainly the Armenian and the Greek communities in the Empire, and after 1916, it targeted the Kurds. The Ottoman Interior Ministry, in a circular on 2 November 1915, confessed to the occurrence of 'an economic vacuum arising from the transportation of Armenian craftsmen'.⁵

After the forced expulsion and massacre of the Armenians, the CUP had designed and implemented a range of forced deportation policies targeting the Kurds. The settlement policies of the CUP entailed, on the one hand, the deportation of Kurds from their homelands for resettlement in central and western Anatolia in accordance with the '5 per cent rule', ensuring that the Kurds constituted no more than 5 per cent of the total population in their new places of settlement. On the other hand, Muslim immigrants, or *muhacir*, from lost territories, such as Albanian Muslims, Bosnian Muslims and Bulgarian Turks, settled in eastern Anatolia, where they were not allowed to constitute more than 10 per cent of the local population (Jongerden, 2007: 178–9; Akçam, 2012: 43–50).

The statistical data prepared by the Ministry of the Economy indicate that there were 'well over a million' Kurdish refugees and deportees during this period (Üngör, 2011: 117).

Figures pertaining to the actual number of Kurdish deportations are non-existent, however. The common consensus in the scholarly studies on this issue is that approximately 700,000 Kurds were forced to flee their homelands, around half of whom are reported to have perished before reaching their various destinations (Safrastian, 1948: 76; Jwaideh, 1961: 369).

Overall, by the end of the war, the Ottoman economy shrank by around 50 per cent, and its gross domestic product (GDP) fell by 40 per cent. The destruction the war caused in the different sectors of the Ottoman economy is succinctly summarised by the following figures pertaining to the declines experienced during the war. Mineral production fell by 80 per cent, coal production fell by 75 per cent, cotton textiles fell by 50 per cent, wheat production fell by 40 per cent and sheep and goat raising fell by 40 per cent (Üngör and Polatel, 2011: 94). Life for the population in Ottoman Kurdistan who had survived the war had been reduced to abject misery and destitution as famine and bacterial diseases like typhus and typhoid took their toll. Due to the destruction of the eastern economy over the course of the First World War, the famine that began at the end of 1917 struck the eastern and south-eastern provinces more acutely than elsewhere in the Empire (McDowall, 2000: 108–9).

Society, economics and politics in the Republican people's party era (1923–1950); consolidation of the 'national economy'; and the 'Reform' of the East (1923–1929)

With the proclamation of the Turkish Republic (29 October 1923), the short-lived Kemalist-Kurdish alliance collapsed. After the armistice in October 1923, Turkish nationalism had become Turkey's official and hegemonic ideology. The predominantly Kurdish ESA comprised the only domains in Turkey not to be Turkified at the inception of the Turkish Republic; therefore, in the eyes of the Kemalist rulers, these territories were areas wherein potential secessionist threats could originate. The perceived risk of Kurdish self-rule by the Republican rulers informed the discriminatory Kurdish policies during the single-party period, which led to the neglect and further peripheralisation of these primarily Kurdish regions of the new Turkish nation state, a theme explored later. This perhaps explains why the alteration in the Kemalist attitude towards the Kurds had overlapped with the Lausanne Conference, which was held in two sessions, from 20 November 1922 to 4 February 1923, and then from 23 April until 24 July 1923.

The major change of policy *vis-à-vis* the Kurds took place at the Izmir Economic Congress (17 February–4 March 1923). This Congress convened during the interval in the deliberations of the Lausanne Conference, with the attendance of 1,135 delegates (İnan, 1972: 12), mostly from the dominant classes, that is, big landowners and the merchant bourgeoisie, as well as from the labouring classes (Boratav, 1982: 14–18). When Mustafa Kemal's speech⁶ to this Congress was published, all references to the Kurds had been excised (McDowall, 2000: 191), which implied a fundamental shift in the policies of Ankara towards the Kurds in Turkey.

Such an alteration was not adversative to the purpose and principles of the 1923 Congress of Economics as this Congress espoused to consolidate the foundations of the Turkish 'national economy' envisioned and set out by the CUP during the First World War as the basic strategy of the new Turkish nation state. The principles adopted in the Izmir Economic Congress pertained to the preparation of a property regime, an institutional structure required for the operation of a modern market economy and special incentives designed for the enrichment and development of the indigenous bourgeoisie (Boratav, 1982; Toprak, 1982; Yalman, 2009).

After this Congress, and throughout the Republican era, one of the central objectives of the Kemalists was, in the words of an official report of the ruling Republican People's Party's

General Secretariat in 1939–40, to ‘dismantle the territorial unity of Kurds’ and to ‘Turkify the Eastern population’ (Bulut, 1998: 185–9). The Kemalists sought to procure the densification and power of the dominant ethnic group, the Turks, at the expense of the Kurds in ESA, with the anticipation that the latter would gradually be extinguished or become a powerless ethnic entity. The cornerstones of this strategy were threefold: a) the forced deportation of the Kurds from their native lands, b) the assimilation of the Kurds into the Turkish identity and c) the underdevelopment of the areas predominantly inhabited by the Kurds.

The Republican rulers’ aim of ‘Turkifying’ the heterogeneous eastern provinces and, in turn, extinguishing the Kurdish identity or rendering the Kurds a feeble entity had played a determinate role in the creation of a chaotic atmosphere in the predominantly Kurdish south-east of Turkey in the early years of the Turkish Republic. During the first two decades of the Republic, there were 27 Kurdish revolts, and only one out of the 18 Turkish military expeditions during the years 1924–38 transpired outside of Kurdistan. Three of these revolts, namely, the Şeyh Said Revolt (1925), the Ararat Revolt (1930) and the Dersim Revolt (1936–38), had a distinctive influence on the evolution of the CHP regime and its Kurdish policy.

Subsequent to the Şeyh Said Revolt, Atatürk, on 8 September 1925, authorised the creation of the Reform Council for the East (Şark İslahat Encümanı) in order to devise concrete policy prescriptions to deal once and for all with any potential separatist threat from Kurdish society. Pursuant to this, on 24 September 1925, a special report titled the *Report for Reform in the East* (Şark İslahat Raporu) was prepared and presented to the Turkish Assembly. This secret report, which saw daylight as the result of a series of official reports published by Mehmet Bayrak (1993, 1994) in the 1990s, made the following critical recommendations:

- i Preventing the Kurdish political and social elite from reviving as a ruling class;
- ii Clearing persons, families and their relatives whose residence ‘in the east the government deems inappropriate’;
- iii Reuniting and governing all of the provinces located on the east bank of the Euphrates River via the military administrative unit of ‘Inspectorates-General’ by martial law for an unspecified period of time;
- iv Emphatically prohibiting the use ‘of all non-Turkish languages’ and the ‘employment of the Kurds in even secondary offices’;
- v Allocation of 7 million Turkish Lira (TL) in order to finance the settlement and the livelihoods of the Turkish refugees and transportation of the Kurds (Bayrak, 1993: 481–9).

Consequently, a series of deportation laws was implemented between 1925 and 1927, actuating the recommendations in this report. These laws were akin to the expulsion orders of 1915–16. In the words of British Ambassador Sir George Clerk, it empowered the government to ‘transport from the Eastern Vilayets an indefinite number of Kurds or other elements ... the Government has already begun to apply to the Kurdish elements ... the policy which so successfully disposed of the Armenian Minority in 1915’.⁷ Despite the lack of factual data, according to the figures cited by contemporary Kurdish authors, from 1925 to 1928 more than 500,000 people were deported, of whom some 200,000 were estimated to have perished in the aforementioned provinces (Bedirkhan, 1958: 52–3).

The 1925 revolt was a catalyst for more than the suppression of the Kurdish national movement as it led to the implementation, on 4 March 1925, of an extraordinary law titled ‘The Law on the Maintenance of Order’ (Takrir-i Sükün Kanunu), which remained in force until March 1929. The Law on the Maintenance of Order marked the end of political pluralism and free press in Turkey.

The Law on the Maintenance of Order empowered the government to enact a wide range of legislations in order to attain a top-down transformation of society according to the Western model, which the Kemalist perceived as the universal model of civilisation and progress as well as a precondition for economic progress. The direct and indirect effects of these new acts are commonly posited in the literature on the initial years of the Turkish Republic to have stimulated modernisation and capitalist development in Turkey (Hershlag, 1968; Issawi, 1980; Z. Aydın, 1986; Ahmad, 1993; Yadirgi, 2017).

Between 1923 and 1929, the Turkish economy recovered, and by 1929, it appeared to have regained its prewar level. For instance, per capita GDP in 1923 was 40 per cent below its 1914 level, but by the end of the 1920s, it had attained the levels prevailing prior to the First World War (Pamuk, 2008: 276–7). Besides, when compared to the prewar Ottoman levels, considerable developments had taken place in the sphere of education and in transport: the number of railroads had increased from 3.6 thousand kilometres in 1913 to 4.8 thousand in 1928, and the number of students in education had risen from 359,000 in 1923 to 517,000 in 1928 (Issawi, 1980: 368).

However, the predominantly Kurdish provinces⁸ in ESA (Beyazıt, Bitlis, Diyarbakir, Elaziz [Elazığ], Erzincan, Hakkari, Kars, Malatya, Mardin, Siirt, Urfa and Van), which in 1927 were home to around a quarter (14.6 per cent) of the general population of Turkey (13,660,275⁹), did not develop in parallel with the rest of the country. These regions had been the least affected by the postwar recovery witnessed in the Turkish Republic between the years of 1923 and 1929. Despite the aforementioned transport infrastructure projects, by 1930 no railroads were constructed in these provinces.¹⁰ In 1927, only 900 of the 14,000 schools in Turkey were located in these domains.¹¹ In the whole of ESA, furthermore, by 1930 there was only one bank, namely, the Elaziz İktisat Bankası, established in 1929, which had a nominal capital of 50,000 TL.¹² Thus, obtaining loans was virtually impossible.

According to the official data from 1927, when compared with the nine designated agricultural districts in Turkey, each of which was composed of five to nine provinces, the districts comprising the predominantly Kurdish provinces in ESA, that is, districts five and six, contained the least amount of agricultural tools and machinery. Only 119,665 out of 1,413,509 of the necessary agricultural tools and machinery were to be found in the provinces located in these regions.¹³

Although there are no official regional trade statistics to cite, the following report from the British consul in Trabzon in June 1926 indicates that the trade in the mid-1920s in the Kurdish provinces was a shadow of what it had been during the First World War:

Travellers report having seen great numbers of Kurds with their families and cattle being driven along [the] Erzurum–Erzinjan [Erzincan] road presumably bound for Angora [Ankara] and Western Anatolia. Whole villages are deserted, and trade is at a standstill over a large area.¹⁴

The policy of deporting the Kurdish political and economic elites, moreover, adversely affected trade and wealth creation in this region of Turkey, as revealed by the following observation of a British traveler in the summer of 1929:

One of the main weapons employed was the deportation of the rich and powerful Kurdish families ... in the process they have lost all their belongings, and there is not, so I was told, a single wealthy or powerful Kurd in Turkish Kurdistan to-day.¹⁵

The Great Depression, the Second World War and the end of the Republican era (1929–1950)

Despite the two world wars and the Great Depression (1929), per capita levels of production and income in Turkey were 30–40 per cent higher at the end of the Republican era in 1950 than on the eve of the First World War (Pamuk, 2008: 280). Per capita income in Turkey in 1950 was at US\$ 1,620 constant or inflation adjusted, which was equal to 24 per cent of the per capita income capita of the high-income countries and 188 per cent of developing countries of Asia, Africa and Latin America (ibid.: 270). In addition, Turkey's GDP growth rate between 1929 and 1950 was 83 per cent – high when compared, for example, with other developing countries such as India, Egypt, Yugoslavia and Greece for the same period: 21, 59, 30 and –12 per cent, respectively (Tezel, 1982: 450).

However, when the focus of development economics is shifted from GDP per capita to a more comprehensive measure in the form of human development index (HDI),¹⁶ a less remarkable picture emerges. That is to say, when the HDI of Turkey in 1913 and 1950 is compared with those of other developing countries with similar levels of GDP in Eastern Europe, Latin America and East Asia, it becomes apparent that Turkey's human development measures had been lagging behind developing countries with similar levels of income (see Table 11.1).

Table 11.1 Changes in the Human Development Index, 1913–1950^a

<i>Country</i>	<i>1913</i>	<i>1950</i>
Western Europe	0.580	0.707
North America	0.643	0.774
Japan	0.466	0.676
China	n.a.	0.225
India	0.143	0.247
Africa	n.a.	0.271
Greece		0.625
Russia	0.345	0.694
Bulgaria	0.403	0.607
Argentina	0.511	0.526
Mexico	0.270	0.484
Brazil	0.249	0.448
South Korea	n.a.	0.459
Malaysia	n.a.	0.407
Thailand	0.388	0.603
Indonesia	n.a.	0.337
Tunisia	n.a.	0.303
Iran	n.a.	0.331
Egypt	n.a.	0.291
Nigeria	n.a.	0.194
Turkey	0.190	0.382

Source: Pamuk, (2008: 272).

Note

- a Regional or continental averages are measured by the population of the individual countries.
The maximum possible improvement in HDI is 1 – (HDI in 1950).

The feeble performance of Turkey in the HDI is considered a by-product of two central issues that have haunted its development since 1923. The first is the large regional disparities between the predominantly Kurdish ESA and the rest of the country. The second is the gender inequalities – that is, Turkey falling behind developing countries with analogous levels of income in indices aiming to measure gender equality and the socioeconomic development of women (Pamuk, 2008: 272–3).

The policies implemented during these 27 years did not narrow but deepened the gulf between ESA and the rest of Turkey. In concrete terms, the difference in the literacy rates between the western provinces (excluding Istanbul, Ankara, Izmir, Bursa and Adana) and the eastern provinces (to the east of Hatay, Zonguldak, Bolu, Eskişehir and Konya) went up from 4 per cent in 1927 to 15 per cent in by 1950 (Tezel, 1982: 460–1). Similarly, regional disparities in industrial development had further widened in the Republican period. It is worth remembering here that changes in the regional distribution of industry reflect both the character and the results of the development programmes conducted under the Republicans. Industrialisation, throughout the Republican era, was not only considered the dominant technological economic force with the potential of reshaping the socioeconomic and political structures in the country, but also was conceived as the precondition for regional and national development.

In 1927, 17.8 per cent of the industrial enterprises in Turkey were located in ESA. In 1939, this figure dropped sharply to 8 per cent. By 1955, only 7.7 per cent of the industrial enterprises in the country were based in these regions. In contrast, the percentage of the industrial enterprises situated in the western Aegean Region augmented from 17.9 per cent in 1939 to 19.8 per cent in 1955. Likewise, the proportion of industrial firms sited in the north-western Marmara Region increased from 29.6 per cent in 1939 to 47.8 per cent in 1955 (Serin, 1963: 147). The low level of industrialisation witnessed in ESA provinces made agriculture virtually the sole source of income.

The findings of a study in 1949 by the director general of the Central Statistical Office, Şefik Bilkur, indicate that disparities between the ESA regions and the rest of Turkey also widened in the agricultural sector. Irrespective of the estimated 30 per cent increase in national per capita agricultural income between 1935 and 1943, the agricultural income of the rural populace in ESA was found to be less than half of the national average agricultural income in 1943. More specifically, 34 TL per hectare was verified by the aforementioned research as Turkey's average agricultural income per capita in 1943; the agricultural income per head was at its lowest level in ESA, where the income per hectare was 16 TL and reached its highest point in the western Aegean Region, where it rose to 51 TL (Bilkur, 1949: 11).

Transition to a turbulent democracy and 'Incorporation' of ESA (1950–1980)

On 14 May 1950, the first democratic elections in the history of the Turkish Republic took place. The electorate inflicted a humiliating defeat on the CHP, giving it only 39.5 per cent of the overall votes, whilst its rival, the Democrat Party (Demokrat Parti, DP) – which was officially established on 7 January 1946 – received 52.7 per cent of the votes. In the new Assembly, the DP had 408 seats against the CHP's 69. The 1950 elections had taken place five years after 'National Chief' President İsmet İnönü's famous speech of 19 May 1945, in which he indicated that the time was ripe to move in the direction of democracy.

The transition to multiparty rule, however, did not lead to a qualitative shift in the Kurdish policies of the Turkish state, principally because the DP government (1950–60) did not sufficiently detach itself from the hegemonic Kemalist ideology and failed to deal with

the legacy of CHP rule in the ESA provinces. During the decade in which the DP was in power, not a single implementation and/or crime from the Republican era was debated, let alone punished. This is unsurprising considering that the four defecting CHP deputies who launched the DP when the government pushed for the Land Distribution Law in 1945, in spite of their steadfast opposition, were long-standing Kemalists.¹⁷

Their loyalty to Kemalism was reaffirmed when establishing the DP with the adoption of the ‘six arrows’ of Kemalism, albeit declaring that they would not intransigently practise them but would interpret them according to the needs of the Republic. Indeed, they did not dogmatically pursue the ‘six arrows’. In harmony with the advice of ERP, from its inception, the DP government, headed by Adnan Menderes, replaced étatism with liberal free-market economics and substituted the industry-oriented model of development for the agriculture-led model at a time when agriculture continued to be the dominant sector. In 1950, agriculture accounted for 54 per cent of the GDP, and its share of total employment was 80 per cent (Pamuk, 2008: 268–9). The DP also brought an end to the dichotomy of state versus the traditional institutions, which had been a major source of the frustration amongst those who opposed the top-down Western-centric modernisation policies implemented during the Republican era. In other words, the DP pragmatically accommodated traditional institutions, structures and ways of life.

Incorporation of the Kurdish elite

The DP government allowed the bulk of the Kurdish deportees, including the tribal chieftains and religious figures, to return, and, in turn, akin to the policies of Sultan Abdülhamid II, it incorporated the traditional Kurdish elite into the Turkish political system. Despite the suppressive measures during the single-party period, the old landowning elite (be it *ağas*, large landed families or *sheiks*) still held title to the lands in their ancestral provinces, as the new civil code in 1926 confirmed private land from the Ottoman period. The most notable example of the DP co-opting the traditional elite was the promotion of Abdülmelik Fırat (1934–2009), the grandson of Şeyh Said, to the prestigious position of deputy of the National Assembly. Thus, the agriculture-led development strategy during the Democrat decade marked the beginning of two interrelated processes: the economic incorporation of the Kurdish region into the Turkish economy, and the co-opting of the old Kurdish elite into Turkish political life. As an offshoot of these changes, a new breed of Kurdish propertied elites developed. Unlike their predecessors, the new elites repudiated their Kurdish origin and exploited their relationship with the peasants not as a means to semi-independence from the centre as in Ottoman times, but in order to become more closely integrated members of the Turkish ruling class.

Agriculture-led growth

The strong emphasis placed on agriculture enabled the agricultural output to more than double from 1947, at the time when prewar levels of production were already attained, through 1953 (Pamuk, 2008: 281). This increase was largely due to the drastic enlargement of the acreage under cultivation – from 14.5 million hectares in 1948 to 22.5 million in 1956, far exceeding the population growth (Zürcher, 1994: 235) – and the rapid commercialisation of agriculture.¹⁸ These developments in agriculture were engendered by the following three complementary government policies: (a) the provision of cheap credit to large landowners, (b) distribution of state-owned lands and open communal pastures to peasants with scarce or

no land and (c) the maintenance of high prices for agricultural products through TMO, the government-buying agency.

The distribution of land and the extensive use of agricultural machinery, however, did not lead to improvements in the living condition of the peasants, because, as the Kurdish novelist Yaşar Kemal recounted, 'the peasant was again share-cropping on the lands distributed by the government; he provided the land, the ağa provided the tractor'.¹⁹ A significant number of peasants who acquired land were forced to sell off their lands to the tractor-owning ağas or large landowners because of not being able to fund the hiring costs. This process increased the number of landless peasants and triggered migration to local towns and/or large metropolises in western Turkey. The proportion of landless peasant families in Turkey increased from 5.9 per cent to 30.7 per cent between 1950 and 1960, and the annual rate of urban population growth during 1950–55 stood at 55.6 per cent in Turkey (Sönmez, [1990] 1992: 144–5). As a result, the gradual mechanisation of agriculture that commenced in the 1950s further intensified social differentiation in the countryside and accelerated rural migration into towns (Karpas, 1973: 58).

The rise in the number of landless peasant families between 1950 and 1960 in the predominantly Kurdish provinces far exceeded the national average (Sönmez, [1990] 1992: 144). This was largely predicated on the more extensive use of agricultural machinery in ESA, to the extent that small and tenant farmers with plots that could not afford tractors would hire them from the large landowners in return for a proportion of their crop (Beşikçi, [1969] 1992: 195–8; McDowall, 2000: 398–9).

The increase in seizures and purchases of land by the landowning class concurred with the raising of the upper limit of landownership from 500 *dönüms*, as specified by the 1945 Land Distribution Act, to 5,000 *dönüms* by the National Assembly in 1950. These developments resulted in the Kurdish ağas or prominent landowning families accumulating more land as well as reducing the lands available for distribution. Consequently, the overwhelmingly Kurdish provinces in ESA constituted one of the important exclusions to the owner-cultivated small-holdings, which had been the predominant unit of agrarian production in Turkey during the Democrat period, as Herslag observed in the 1960s:

The present land tenure system can be roughly classified into four major categories: 1) old feudal land ownership devoid of modernisation – in the south-east; 2) the modern management type of large absentee ownership, under wage-relations – in the west and north-east; 3) small and medium ownership, with a growing tendency towards large ownership – in central Anatolia and in the Adana region; and, 4) small, fractioned and poor villages, the chief reservoir of rural wage-earners.

(1968: 209)

These predominantly Kurdish villages in the ESA provinces operated as political fiefdoms of one of the rival mainstream parties, depending on the partisan affiliations of the landowning class. The incorporation and aggrandisement of the landed elite during the 1950s fostered an axis of mutual reliance between the political parties in Ankara and the Kurdish landed elites that yielded a bloc of votes. The much-sought-after communal votes were exchanged for top positions in the regional parties. When the DP came to power in 1950, a significant share of its votes in the ESA provinces were from the wealthy landowning families or large tribes, as a result of which the following leading members of these tribes and families attained seats in the National Assembly: Edip Altınakar (Sürgücüzâde tribe – Diyarbakır), Mustafa Ekinci (Seydan tribe – Lice) and Mehmet Tevfik Bucak (Bucak tribe – Siverek).

Crisis of agriculture-led growth

With the end of the Korean War, international demand decreased, and prices of export commodities began to decline. Economic growth fell from the average rate of 13 per cent per annum in the 'golden years' (1950–53) of the Democrat decade to 9.5 per cent in 1954, and as a result the trade deficit in 1955 was eight times that of 1950 (Ahmad, 1977: 135). These years were followed by years of spiralling inflation (1956–59). During these years, prices rose around 18 per cent a year (Ahmad, 1993: 116) because, regardless of slackening international demand and decline in prices of export commodities, the DP government continued with investment programmes and initiated a large price support programme for wheat, financed by increases in the money supply (Hershlag, 1968: 146; Pamuk, 2008: 282).

The deteriorating economic situation combined with Menderes's increasingly authoritarian style of government, to the extent that in his 21 September 1958 Izmir speech, he openly threatened 'an end to democracy' and brought the country to the brink of chaos. The trend towards totalitarianism by the government representatives was based on the fear of being toppled, which was instilled by the January 1958 rumours of a military conspiracy and aggravated because of the July 1958 revolution in neighbouring Iraq as well as the rising popular unrest at home. The robust anti-government demonstrations – some of which the CHP encouraged – towards the end of the 1950s severely undermined government authority. The most resilient popular movements were the student rallies and large street demonstration on 28 April 1960 – first in Istanbul and then in Ankara – which continued virtually uninterrupted until the military takeover by the 38 officers of the self-proclaimed National Unity Committee (Milli Birlik Komitesi, MBK) on 27 May 1960.²⁰

Long period of import substituted industrialisation (1963–1979)

The economic policies of the military rule and the civilian rule that followed in the 1960s and 1970s aimed, primarily, at the protection of the domestic market and industrialisation through import substitution (ISI). In order to achieve the ISI objectives, governments made abundant use of a restrictive trade regime, investments by state economic enterprises (SEEs) and subsidised credit.

In order to safeguard the enlargement of the domestic market for the sustainability of the ISI, large segments of the society were incorporated into the internal market by means of the fundamental rights and freedoms granted under the 1961 constitution. The new liberal constitution vowed freedoms of thought, expression, association and publication, and promised social and economic rights and the freedom to work.

Systematic denial of the Kurds

The interim government led by the MBK, in juxtaposition to the liberal dispensations granted by the 1961 constitution, gave an end to the political overtures of the 1950s and adopted the suppressive Kurdish policies reminiscent of the Republican era. Turkey's Kurdish policy of the 1960 coup was philistinely expressed in the following words of the new national chief, General Gürsel, which he uttered standing on an American tank in the overwhelmingly Kurdish city of Diyarbakir: 'There are no Kurds in this country. Whoever says he is a Kurd, I will spit in his face' (Muller, 1996: 177).

On the other hand, the Forced Settlement Law No. 105 appended to the Settlement Law No. 2510 on 19 October 1960²¹ by the interim government in order to deport 55 of the 485

most prominent Kurds detained immediately after the coup was annulled on 18 October 1962²² by the second coalition government, which comprised the CHP, New Turkey Party (Yeni Türkiye Partisi, YTP) and Republican Peasants' Nation Party (Cumhuriyetçi Köylü Millet Partisi, CKMP). With the implementation of the First Five-Year Plan in 1963, the Turkish state prioritised the policy of 'absorbing' the region over that of 'dismembering' it, espoused by the former Republican rulers.

Restoration of the *status quo ante* and the failed promise of land reform

The annulment of the Forced Settlement Law of No. 105, moreover, permitted the deported *ağas* to return to their old places of residence and reinstated all their land and property (Ahmad, 1977: 216–17). Accordingly, the state restored the order existing before the coup in the eastern and south-eastern provinces. Despite the recurrent theme in the official rhetoric of the successive governments in the 1960s and 1970s of the need to 'break up the backward structure' in ESA (Yeğen, 2011: 71), the 'feudal land ownership devoid of modernisation in the south-east' – alluded to by Hershlag – existent at the beginning of the 1960s remained intact in the ensuing two decades. The failure to implement the much-needed root-and-branch land reform implicated the endurance of the traditional land tenure patterns and agrarian relations.

The junta's promise of land reform in 1960, like the promises of the various elected governments of 1961–69 succeeding it, failed to materialise (Ahmad, 1977: 276–8). It was not until June 1973, during the period of semi-military rule, that a new land reform was passed, which in May 1977 the Constitutional Court nullified. In the lifetime of this law, as little as 23,000 hectares of land were distributed to 1,200 peasant families (Hale, 1981: 185–6). Thus, the landed property of the large landowning families remained virtually untouched. In 1980, 8 per cent of the families in ESA owned more than 50 per cent of the cultivable land, while 80 per cent of the families were evenly matched between those holding up to five hectares and those who were landless (McDowall, 1997: 243).

The continuity in the concentration of land in the hands of wealthy landlords during the 1960s and 1970s was, furthermore, an indication of the preservation of the alliance built in the 1950s between the co-opted traditional (tribal/religious) landed Kurdish elites and the Turkish state. The collaboration between these two parties had openly manifested itself with the harsh measures the state authorised to suppress the occasional peasant revolts that took place in the 1970s. When the peasants occupied the land belonging to the *ağa* and demanded that it be redistributed, they were on each occasion confronted by the military who would not shy away from using heavy-handed tactics to remove them and give the land back to the owners (Nezan, 1993: 91). Consequently, from the 1960s onwards, the conservation of the state-landed Kurdish elite's alliance was grounded on the shared objective of maintaining the prevailing economic and political order increasingly opposed by large segments of the Kurdish society in Turkey.

Intensification of regional inequalities and massive underdevelopment of the Kurdish region

One of the factors fuelling the disillusionment and dissent of the Kurds in this period was the immense underdevelopment of the largely Kurdish ESA. Relatedly, the programmes of the 1965, the 1969 and the 1970 administrations contained pledges to undertake 'special measures' in an attempt to overcome the socioeconomic disparities between regions and encourage the development of the 'Eastern regions' (Yeğen, 1999: 163–7). Yet, as outlined

in the programme of the 1969 administration, the aim of the 'special measures' was not to 'initiate the formation of privileged regions, but to *forge integration*' (Yeğen, 1999: 164). Put differently, the overarching aim of the 'special measures' was to incorporate the ESA provinces in accord with the requirements and necessities of the domestic market, and not to privilege or prioritise the exigent needs of these lagging and long-neglected provinces. Hence, in the 1960s and the 1970s, despite the main economic development strategy centred on ISI successfully bringing about significant economic growth, the underdevelopment of the predominantly Kurdish eastern and south-eastern provinces deepened.

When the period of planned import substitution of 1961–63 to 1977–79 is compared to that of the Democrat decade of 1951–53 to 1961–63, the GDP growth rate increased from 4.9 per cent to 6.4 per cent, with an equally robust increase in the gross national income (GNI) growth rate from 4.4 per cent to 6.3 per cent. In addition, GDP growth per capita increased from 2.1 per cent to 3.9 per cent, with GNI growth per capita income increasing from 1.6 per cent to 3.8 per cent. Thus, the growth of per capita income more than doubled, which compared well with that of the industrialised and developing countries. The average growth of GNP per capita for the period 1960–77, as set by the World Bank, for middle-income countries was 3.6 per cent, for industrialised countries 3.4 per cent and for low-income countries 1.4 per cent (Hansen, 1991: 354).

Even with this impressive economic performance, the socioeconomic disparities between different geographic zones inherited from previous decades intensified during 1960–80, to the detriment of ESA, as the SPO conceded in 1979:

Ever since the 1st Plan [First Five-Year Plan] the issue of regional imbalances has been addressed and within all three of the [Five-Year] Plans a range of policies have been designated to overcome this issue. Despite all efforts and policies, regional imbalances have exacerbated. ... With the exclusion of the Eastern and Southeastern Anatolia regions in all of the other regions the share of national income has been similar to the share of total population. (SPO, 1979: 75)

Throughout the long period of planned import substitution, the national income share of the 17 eastern and south-eastern provinces continually decreased: in 1965, it was 10.39 per cent, in 1975, it reduced to 9.56 per cent and by 1979, it further dropped to 8.17 per cent (USARM, 2009: 18). This persistent decline in the national income share of these provinces was in spite of the constant increase in their proportion of the total population during the 1960s (17.0 per cent) and 1970s (17.3 per cent) (Sönmez, [1990] 1992: 259).

Thus, income disparities between the ESA provinces and the rest of the country did not reduce in the heyday of the period of planned import substitution, that is, the years before the first oil shock of 1973–74,²³ and persisted until the end of this period because of the incessant decrease in the national income share of the former provinces.

Derisory public and private investment

A significant causal factor for the perseverance of the regional income disparities between the ESA and the rest of the country was the low and inadequate level of public and private investment in the latter domains during the long period of planned import substitution, which was nowhere near enough to counterbalance the past years of neglect and massive underdevelopment. It is worth noting that state investment during 1960–80 is estimated to have constituted more than 50 per cent of the overall investment in Turkey (Aydın, 2005: 35). Despite the SPO

designating the whole ESA as 'Priority Development Regions' (PDRs) as of 1968, between the First Five-Year Plan and the Fourth Five-Year Plan, public investment in the provinces situated in this part of country decreased by 40 per cent. In total, 40 provinces were classified as PDRs, that is, provinces in need of extra investment and incentives: all 18 of the provinces in ESA, plus 22 other provinces located in the Black Sea littoral and central Anatolia. The share of public investment for ESA provinces in the four consecutive Five-Year Plans was as follows, respectively: 11.85, 11.90, 7.11 and 7.20 (Sönmez, [1990] 1992: 158). The share of public investment in the western Marmara region, on the other hand, increased from 11.70 per cent in the First Five-Year Plan to 15.70 per cent in the Fourth Five-Year Plan (*ibid.*).

From 1962–63 to 1974–78, private investment in Turkey increased from 8.8 per cent to 11.2 per cent (Hansen, 1991: 369), but private-sector investment in ESA provinces remained nominal, owing in part to the little effort the state put in to encourage private investment in this area. From 1968, in order to encourage private investment in the PDRs, the SPO introduced state-sanctioned incentive schemes, which involved exemption from financial tax and stamp duties. Albeit the provinces in ESA accounted for almost half of all the PDRs in Turkey, only 5.8 per cent of the total 5,918 incentives the state approved during 1968–80 were for these provinces (Sönmez, [1990] 1992: 188).

Unbalanced sectoral distribution of public investment

The other factors fuelling the disparities between ESA and the rest of Turkey during the long period of planned import substitution emanated from the following two perennial features of public investment in these regions: a) unbalanced sectoral distribution and b) prioritisation of the needs of the industrialised Western economic centres over that of the primary and immediate requirements of ESA. The heavy investments in the energy and mining sectors, which constituted around one-third of the public investment in the four quinquennial plans in east and south-east Turkey, exemplify both of these aspects (*ibid.*: 158).

The petroleum sector had been the other main beneficiary of public investment during the period of planned import substitution (Aytar, 1991: 62–8). Petroleum in Turkey was discovered in 1950 in ESA, and all successive discoveries have been in these domains (Europa, 2002: 1130). Thus, provinces located in ESA were the sole producers of petroleum during the 1960s and the 1970s. From the mid-1950s to the early 1970s, owing in part to state investment, there was a noticeable increase in petroleum production: from 178,000 tons in 1955 to 3,500,000 tons in 1973 (*ibid.*). Between 1955 and 1972, production of petroleum is estimated to be worth \$27 million (Jafar, 1976: 68). Up until 1980, it maintained the same level of production as in 1973 (Europa, 2002: 1130). The great majority of the petroleum production was exported, since only 6 per cent of the total petrol refining capacity was located in ESA in the 1970s, and the proceeds attained from the petroleum exports were 'seldom re-cycled into the Region's [ESA] economy' (Jafar, 1976: 68).

In juxtaposition to the sizable state investment in the energy and mining sectors in ESA, there was little and insufficient investment in the manufacturing industry, especially in the first two Five-Year Plans, considering the exceptionally low level of industrial development witnessed in this area during the Republican and the Democrat era. As a result, the stunted industrialisation of ESA deepened in the Planned Period.

Stunted industrial and agricultural development

Even in the face of the value added by the manufacturing industry precipitously increasing from 6,636 million TL in 1963 to 148,014 million TL in 1977 (Hale, 1981: 197), eastern

and south-eastern provinces' share of the value added in manufacturing decreased from 7.8 per cent in 1968 to 4.0 per cent in 1974 (SPO, 1979: 75). It is worth noting that the SPO's calculations of the share of value added in manufacturing for these provinces take into account the crude oil output in the Batman Refinery.²⁴ In 1968, 34.3 per cent, and in 1974, 42.3 per cent of the total share of value added in manufacturing in ESA was generated by the Batman Refinery (*ibid.*). The Batman Refinery accounting for the bulk of the value added in manufacturing generated by these provinces is indicative of the dismal state of the manufacturing industry in ESA.

According to the 1978 data, the share of the manufacturing industry in the GDP of ESA regions was 10.5 per cent, while agriculture accounted for nearly half of the regions' GDP (Sönmez, 2012: 351). In the western Marmara region, manufacturing industry accounted for 33.7 per cent of this region's GDP, and agriculture's contribution to the region's GDP was a mere 7.9 per cent (*ibid.*). Therefore, ESA continued to be a predominantly agrarian region in the 1960s and 1970s.

During the period of planned import substitution, agricultural productivity rates in ESA witnessed a downward slide. In 1960–62, the ESA provinces accounted for 17.01 per cent of the total cultivated area and 17.10 per cent of the total crops produced in Turkey. In 1978–80, despite the share of these provinces in the total cultivated land rising to 19.89 per cent, the share of these provinces in the total crops produced decreased to 14.61 per cent (Sönmez, [1990] 1992: 164). The decrease in output is believed to be inextricably linked to two region-wide issues: (i) the inefficient irrigation system deprived of modernisation and (ii) the limited availability and use of chemical fertilisers (*ibid.*: 162–3).

During 1965–79, because of the stunted growth of agriculture and industry, with the exception of Diyarbakir and Bingöl, the GDP share of all the ESA provinces descended. Out of the overall 67 provinces, the 17 eastern and south-eastern provinces were the lowest-ranked provinces in the national GDP rankings (Sönmez, [1990] 1992: 90).

In summary, the preconditions for socioeconomic development in ESA, that is, adequate public investment oriented towards the exigent needs of these long-neglected regions, land reform and the resultant removal of the *ağa* class could not be implemented because all of these measures were antithetical to the Turkish state's policy of controlling the overwhelmingly Kurdish regions. Thus, the transition from a one-party autocracy to a multiparty political system, which was temporarily suspended by military intervention in 1960–61 and 1971–73, did not lead to a qualitative alteration in the Turkish state's perception of and preoccupation with the Kurdish question, largely because none of the regimes post-1950 sufficiently de-Kemalised or dealt with the legacy of the Young Turk rule. As a result, by the end of the 1970s, Turkey remained locked in contradictions created by the Kemalist shibboleths on the Kurdish issue and the predominantly Kurdish provinces in de-development born of state negligence and paranoia.

Conclusion

De-development in ESA commenced as a product of the state policies implemented in these regions after the Unionist seizure of power in the 1913 *coup d'état* that differed greatly from those of the previous regimes. The CUP rulers, and their political and ideological heirs, the Kemalists, pursued ideological, political and economic programmes – that is, the construction and preservation of a Turkish national economy and state as well as the pursuit of population homogeneity based on Turkist ideals – that were qualitatively different from those of their predecessors. These objectives spurred policies of mass murder, deportations, expropriation and dispossession of economic resources, and the suppression of all forms of

non-Turkish identities and cultures in the ethnically heterogeneous provinces in ESA. In addition to laying the foundations for the Kurdish question of Turkey, these unusual features of state policy have engendered de-development in these lands by not only distorting, but also forestalling economic development, which deprived the ESA economy of its capacity and potential for structural transformation.

Notes

- 1 Development denotes a qualitative process of widespread structural transformation at all levels of society: economic, social, cultural and political. Development, therefore, necessitates augmenting the productive performance of the economy to meet essential human needs just as much as it requires enhancing political liberties and the range of human choices via the abolition of suppression and dependence.
- 2 Mehmet Emin Bozarslan ([1966] 2002); Beşikçi ([1969] 1992); Jafar (1976); Aydın (1986); Sönmez ([1990] 1992).
- 3 For detailed analyses of the nature and implications of the nationalist spatial policies in the late-Ottoman era and the Republican era of the Turkish Republic in eastern Anatolia, see Öktem (2004), Ülker (2005), Jongerden (2007) and Yadirgi (2017).
- 4 For a detailed examination of the social and economic repercussions of the Armenian Genocide of 1915, see Üngör and Polatel (2011).
- 5 Başbakanlık Odası Arşivi (BOA), Dahiliye Nezareti Şifre Kalemî (DH.ŞFR) 57/261, Interior Ministry to all provinces, 2 November 1915 in Üngör and Polatel (2011: 93).
- 6 For the speech by Mustafa Kemal Atatürk to the İzmir Economic Congress, see İnan (1972: 57–69).
- 7 FO 371/12255, Clerk to Chamberlain, Istanbul, 22 June 1927.
- 8 Mustafa Abdülhalik Renda, one of the co-authors of the aforementioned *Report for the Reform of the East*, in September 1925 traversed the eastern provinces/districts of Gaziantep, Urfa, Siverek, Diyarbakir, Siirt, Bitlis, Van, Muş, Genç, Elaziz, Dersim, Ergani, Mardin, Malatya and Maraş in order to identify ‘where the Kurds live and how many they are’. As a result of this field research, Renda discerned that out of the 1,360,000-registered population east of the Euphrates in 1925, 993,000 were Kurds, 251,000 were Turkish and 117,600 were Arabs. Moreover, Renda, subsequent to an elaborate socioeconomic analysis of the eastern provinces, concluded that the Kurds had been in a ‘dominant economic position’ in this region of Turkey (Bayrak, 1993: 452–67).
- 9 TCBIUM, *Annuaire Statistique*, 1928: 24–5.
- 10 Ibid.: 1932: 359.
- 11 Ibid.: 1928: 28–9.
- 12 Ibid.: 1934: 305.
- 13 Ibid.: 1933: 188–9.
- 14 FO 371/11528, Knight to Lindsay, Trebizond, 16 June 1926.
- 15 FO 371/13828, Clerk (Istanbul) to Henderson (London), 15 July 1929.
- 16 Human Development Index, first used by the United Nations in 1990, is a broader measure of development based on three components: education as measured by a weighted average of adult literacy and schooling, health as measured by life expectancy at birth and income as measured by GDP per capita.
- 17 The four seasoned ex-Republican politicians who founded the DP were Celal Bayar (1883–1986), the banker and confidante of Mustafa Kemal; Adnan Menderes (1899–1961), a prominent landowner from the Aegean Region; Fuad Köprülü (1890–1966), a historian and a professor of Turcology; and Refik Koraltan (1889–1974), a veteran bureaucrat.
- 18 For a detailed analysis of the commercialisation of agriculture during this period, see Margulies and Yıldızoğlu (1987: 269–92).
- 19 *Cumhuriyet*, 23 June 1955 (Yaşar Kemal’s italics).
- 20 For a detailed analysis of the Democrat Party era, see Eroğlu (1998), Ahmad (1977) and Yadirgi (2017).
- 21 *Resmî Gazete*, Issue No. 10638, 25 November 1960.
- 22 *Resmî Gazete*, Issue No. 11239, 23 November 1962.
- 23 The first oil shock quadrupled the price of oil in the international market and further deteriorated the balance of trade and balance of payments deficit of an oil-dependent Turkish economy, a

natural predicament for a rapidly industrialising economy that was not export-orientated (Hale, 1981: 203–6; Zürcher, 1994: 280–1).

- 24 The Batman Refinery was the first refinery built in Turkey in 1955 with a capacity of 330.000 tons/year. Due to increasing demand, the capacity of the refinery was increased by the Debottlenecking Project to 580.000 tons/year in 1960. The crude oil-processing capacity of the Batman Refinery, which was continuously being upgraded with the modernisation studies, reached 1.1 million tons/year with commissioning of a new crude unit in 1972.

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PART V

Religion



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12

ISLAM AND THE KURDS

Mehmet Gurses

In late January 2016, a member of Turkish Special Forces assigned to expunge the pro-PKK armed youth from the Sur district of Diyarbakir made an unusual announcement from the city's historic mosque, Ulu Cami. PKK is the Kurdish abbreviation for the Partiya Karkeren Kurdistan, an insurgent organization in Turkey that has been fighting the government on and off since 1984. The commander began his announcement with "I am reaching out to you from the holy mosque" and ended it with a call to the armed militias that had dug in for over a month to "surrender for a peaceful and brotherly co-existence."¹ A few days later in Cizre, also in the Kurdish south-east and under military lockdown for the same reason, a message apparently written by the Turkish army on the wall of a house proclaimed "Allah [God] is with us" and asked locals to cooperate with the army.² On February 5, 2016, during a Friday mass prayer held at one of the biggest mosques in the Kurdish-majority city of Batman, many attendants walked out in protest of the cleric's sermon, in which he praised the fallen members of the Turkish army and asked the congregation to keep them in their prayers.³ On March 18, 2016, in Van, another major Kurdish province in the east, Muslim Kurds walked out of the mosque during the weekly Friday prayer in protest of the cleric's sermon, in which he referred to the spirit of the Canakkale (Dardanelles) battle of World War I, which resulted in the Ottomans repulsing a British invasion attempt in 1915, as the unifying spirit between Muslim Kurds and Turks, and invited the congregation to pray for the fallen. Some shouted in protest "why don't you invite us to pray for those [Kurds] fallen in Sur and Cizre? Aren't they too martyrs?"⁴ The location from which the announcement was made, a mosque; the content of the message written on the wall (God is with us); and finally the reaction of pious Muslim Kurds to Islamic sermons raise important questions on the role Islam plays in the conflict between the Turkish Republic and its Kurdish minority.

Confrontations between the PKK and Turkish military since the middle of 2015 have added a new wrinkle to three decades of strife. Intensification of the armed conflict coupled with the Turkish army laying siege to several Kurdish cities and towns has so far produced thousands of casualties, widespread destruction of buildings and property, and alleged Turkish military abuses.⁵ This is arguably the bloodiest and most destructive phase of the 30-year-old conflict and has come after the governing Justice and Development Party (AKP) engaged in discussions with the PKK's jailed leader, Abdullah Ocalan, to put an end to the violent conflict and address the restive Kurdish minority's grievances.

The AKP and its Islamist supporters have long stressed an Islamic brotherhood that emphasizes religious identity over ethnic identity as a cure to the conflict between Turks and Kurds. Toward this end, Turkish President Tayyip Erdogan, who served as prime minister between 2003 and 2014, and hails from an Islamist background, has repeatedly stated that whenever someone asks about one's identity, they should simply reply, "*Elhamdulillah* (Thank God) I am a Muslim. That is enough."⁶ Mehmet Gormez, Director of Religious Affairs (Diyanet), the highest religious authority in the Turkish government, has visited the conflict-torn Kurdish south-east and has urged for "unity and brotherhood" as adherents of the same faith.⁷

As the fourth-largest ethnic group in the Middle East, the Kurds were also one of the first peoples that converted to Islam in the mid-seventh century. This conversion, similar to that of Persian Sassanids, was gradual and began after Muslim Arab conquests of Kurdish geography. Islamization of Kurds was mostly completed during the Umayyad and Abbasid periods. In the early 16th century, most of Kurdistan came under the Turkish Ottoman Empire's control, a situation that continued until the disintegration of the Empire after World War I.⁸

Although Islam is an essential element of Kurdish identity, the role it has played in the development of Kurdish identity has been that of prioritizing dominant Turkish, Arab, or Persian identities at the expense of Kurdish ethnicity. The hegemony of Arabic as the language of Islam in the early phases of conversion under the Umayyad and Abbasid Empires and the dominance of Turkish or Persian languages in subsequent Muslim empires relegated Kurdishness to a secondary status.⁹ This, with varying degrees of success, has continued through the modern age.

Since World War I, the Kurds in Turkey, Iran, Iraq, and Syria have faced serious oppression by the state nationalism of the ruling Turks, Iranians, and Arabs, three politically dominant Muslim-majority groups in the region. In fact, this general picture of oppression points to "a striking continuity between Kemalist and post-Kemalist Turkey; between Syria under the National Bloc and Syria under the Ba'th; between Reza Shah's, Mohammed Reza Shah's, and Khomeini's Iran; and between Iraq under Faysal, Qasim, and Saddam Husayn."¹⁰

While religion has often been an instrument of domination and assimilation, armed conflict between Kurdish groups and their respective states has fundamentally transformed traditional Kurdish society. This chapter, with a focus on the Kurdish armed conflict in Turkey led by the PKK, demonstrates that conflict dynamics have facilitated a cultural transformation. Three decades of armed conflict between two groups that hail from the same faith, Turks and Kurds, and the utilization of religion by the dominant group to undermine Kurdish demands for equal rights have resulted in a decline in the role that Islam plays in Kurdish identity. The prolonged conflict and the refusal of the Turkish state to recognize Kurdish identity have led to the rise of a national identity in which religion plays a subordinate role. This secularizing aspect of the conflict has brought pious Muslim Kurds and the PKK (whose Marxist origins previously conflicted with pious Muslim sensibilities) closer, creating an Islamic identity that is by and large consistent with the Kurdish nationalist demands.

Islam as an instrument of assimilation

Despite modern Turkish, Iranian, Iraqi, and Syrian political elites' avowed commitment to the creation of secular national identities, these elites used Islam to justify their nationalist interests at the expense of their Kurdish minorities. Ziya Gokalp, who is credited with greatly influencing the nationalist sentiments of Kemal Ataturk, modern Turkey's founding father, underlines the significance of upbringing, language, and religion over other aspects

of nationalism.¹¹ Thus, the state encouragement of Islamization of the Kurds cannot be considered independently from its anti-Kurdish policies in forging a mono-nationalist Turkish identity. Multifaceted assimilation policies included such measures as the outright denial of Kurds as a distinct ethnic group, criminalizing the Kurdish language, and a migration policy aimed at diluting the Kurdish-populated provinces.¹² At the same time, despite the ruling Kemalist elites' disdain for anything religious, the Turkish state was not only reluctant to suppress Sufi religious orders (*tarikats*) in the Kurdish region but also encouraged religious revival by providing the Kurdish shaykhs with both material and moral support.¹³ The state also gave wide latitude to Islamic communities and groups (*Islami cemaatler*) to operate in the Kurdish-dominated east, especially in the post-1980s military coup.

In the 1990s, a time period during which the staunchly secular Kemalist army orchestrated the overthrow of the Islamic Welfare party-dominated coalition government on the grounds of becoming a center for anti-secular activities, the Turkish state either ignored or encouraged the violent Islamist Kurdish Hizballah (no relation to the Lebanese Shi'a militia) to engage in a brutal feud with the PKK. Partially thanks to the Turkish authorities' implicit consent to its bloody campaign against the PKK as the more serious threat to the state, Hizballah managed to establish itself in Kurdish majority provinces (e.g., Diyarbakir, Batman, and Mardin) known for their strong support for the PKK. When hostilities ceased between the two groups and the government captured the PKK's Abdullah Ocalan in 1999, Turkish police raided a house in Istanbul and killed Hizballah's leader. The Kurdish Islamists then came under constant state pressure, resulting in the arrest of more than 5,000 suspected members in less than two years.¹⁴ Hizballah was absent from the public eye in the early 2000s but resurfaced later under a legal association, the Association for the Oppressed (*Mustazaflar Derneği*), later forming the Free Cause Party (*Hur Dava Partisi*, Huda-Par) in 2012 to challenge the pro-Kurdish Peace and Democracy Party (BDP) in the east.¹⁵ Similar to previous Kemalist center-right or center-left governments turning a blind eye to the group in order to weaken the PKK in the 1990s, the Islamist AKP administration has tolerated such resurfacing to undermine Kurdish nationalist parties' influence.

Religious education as a tool of assimilation

Despite a striking continuity in repressive and assimilationist policies toward the Kurds since the 1920s, the change in government from Kemalist elite to the Islamist AKP has also changed tactics in Kurdish assimilation. From the Kemalist elites' point of view, Islam was to be tamed and used in creating a new identity. The goal was to control Islam, ascribing a secondary role to it in forging a modern Turkish identity. Notwithstanding Kemalist elites' contempt for Islam, religion was nonetheless used as a weapon to control, curtail, and prevent the rise of Kurdish separatism in the east. The AKP, with its emphasis on Islamic brotherhood as an all-inclusive platform that bonds Muslim Kurds and Turks, has attempted a more subtle approach. While this approach might appear less violent, the goal is the same: assimilation of the Kurdish identity to the Turkish majority. This section sheds light on how religious education, particularly under the AKP, has served the very same purpose of assimilation of the Kurds.

In line with the AKP's goal of "raising pious generations,"¹⁶ the number of religious high schools (Imam Hatip) and students enrolled in these schools has increased significantly in recent years. A limited number of Imam Hatip schools were first established to train Islamic clerics and preachers in the late 1940s. Over the years, their numbers increased, and they transformed into schools specializing in religious education combined with a modern

curriculum. Following the February 28, 1997 military intervention that forced the Islamic Welfare party-dominated government from power, the newly formed centrist government enforced age restrictions for pupils to attend these schools and prevented their graduates from studying subjects other than theology at university.¹⁷ These measures significantly reduced their numbers, down from 612 schools in the 1998–1999 school year to 450 by the 2002–2003 school year.¹⁸

Since the rise of the AKP to power in November 2002, successive AKP majority-governments have not only scrapped the ban on Imam Hatip schools but also pushed thousands to enroll at these schools by providing scholarships, converting regular schools into Imam Hatip schools, and assigning students who scored low marks to these schools. The number of students with scholarships enrolled at these schools went up from 1,762 in 2005 to 19,309 in 2015. This percentage increase of 996% is greater than the percentage increases in Basic Education (26.5%), Secondary Education (182%), Vocational and Technical Education (150%), and Teacher Training and Education (269.5%) combined for the same time period. The end result of these formal and informal policies has been a significant increase in both the number of religious high schools and the number of students enrolled. As of the 2015–2016 academic year, 677,205 students were enrolled at 1,149 Imam Hatip schools across the country.¹⁹

The Kurdish regions of Turkey are predominantly agrarian and among the poorest in the country. According to a nationwide survey, the Kurds have an average education of six years, compared to 8.1 years for the Turks in 2010.²⁰ Data from the Ministry of Education show that Kurdish provinces have significantly lower levels of education when compared to the rest of the country. As displayed in Figure 12.1, schooling ratio is negatively correlated with Kurdish population.

These numbers are consistent with overall low levels of investment in education by the state from the early years of the Republic. According to one account, in 1925, “only 215

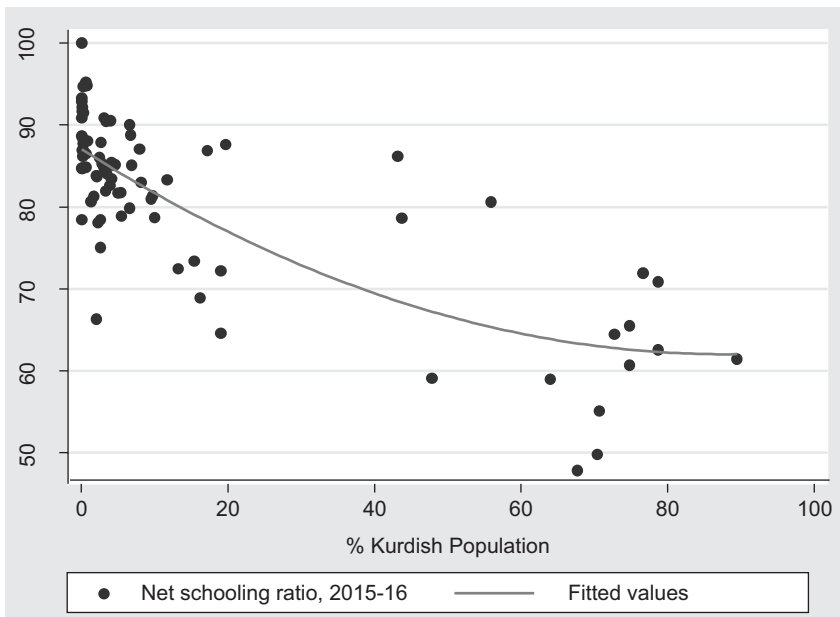


Figure 12.1 Education in the Kurdish Provinces of Turkey.

Source: Generated by the author using data from Turkey's Ministry of Education.

of 4875 schools in Turkey were located in Kurdistan, providing education for 8,400 pupils out of Turkey's total of 382,000 enrolled."²¹ An argument could be made that this low level of education is simply a function of levels of development and that it is not necessarily a result of state policies toward the Kurds. By this logic, one should also find a proportionally lower rate of religious high schools.

Despite overall low levels of development, provinces with a significant Kurdish population rank higher in number of religious high schools (Imam Hatip).²² In other words, Kurdish provinces have received a higher rate of Islamization through Imam Hatip schools. Despite significantly lower levels of schooling ratio (66.16% vs. 85.01%) and number of regular high schools per 100,000 (13.01 vs. 14.60), Kurdish provinces have significantly higher rate of Imam Hatip schools (2.17 vs. 1.85) as well as a significantly higher ratio of population enrolled in these schools (.012% vs. .008%).²³

The AKP under the leadership of Tayyip Erdogan, who hails from an Islamist background and is credited for pulling the country toward a more religious orientation, has not changed the policy of denial and assimilation toward the Kurds. Although state policies toward the Kurds have acquired a religious tone, the overall objective to subjugate and assimilate the Kurds has remained the same. The infusion of Islam in modern Turkish identity has not changed the fundamentals of the Turko-Kurdish relations. Rather, the use of Islam as an instrument of assimilation has gained momentum under a government that strives for a devout Muslim population.

Despite such a disproportionate rate of Islamization in the Kurdish regions of Turkey and despite the AKP's emphasis on raising a new generation of pious Muslims, the calls for allowing Friday prayers to be held in Kurdish in the Kurdish majority areas have fallen on deaf ears. Thus, the evidence shows a "striking continuity" in state policies of assimilation toward the Kurds. Ideological and religious differences between Turkish right- and left-wing groups as well as between secularists and Islamists are immaterial; the call for equal rights of any sort from the Kurds invariably ends up striking a sensitive nerve among majority Turks and reinforces ethnic antipathy.

Armed conflict and the declining role of religion among the Kurds

Kurdish demands for equal rights within states dominated by Turks, Persians, or Arabs have historically been dismissed, suppressed, or depicted as a foreign plot to destroy Muslim unity. In the 1960s, the chief of the Syrian security police in the Kurdish province of Haseke (Jazira) describes the Kurdish question as "a malignant tumor" that needs to be removed.²⁴ In 1987, the Turkish interior minister stated that the only people prepared to call themselves Kurds are "militants, tool of foreign ideologies."²⁵ Some unspecified "foreign powers," the Turkish official discourse maintains, is behind the so-called Kurdish question.²⁶ Nearly three decades later, in 2014, an official of the Islamic Republic of Iran warned the Kurds of the danger of an independent Kurdish state and accused them of playing into the "enemy's" hands.²⁷

The AKP's and President Tayyip Erdogan's references to Islam as a common bond and the glue that ties Kurds to their Turkish brethren are strikingly similar to Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini's approach to Iran's ethnic minority issues, including a population of Kurds in the area bordering Turkey and Iraq. When confronted about dropping mention of ethnic minorities from the draft Islamic constitution of 1979, Khomeini asserted that in Islam there is no place for the word minorities as all Muslims are equal regardless of the language they speak.²⁸

The brutality of the Islamic State (IS), also known as ISIS or ISIL, against Yezidi and Muslim Kurds, coupled with Turkey's stance toward an outnumbered Kurdish militia trying

to defend the border city of Kobani from the IS forces in late 2014, has forced many Kurds to question their Islamic faith. There has been an increasing interest in Zoroastrianism, a considerably more secular pre-Islamic religion, among the Kurds in Iraq.²⁹ The Turkish government's reaction toward Kurds in Syria, particularly its reaction to the Battle of Kobani during which the Turkish army prevented many Kurds in Turkey from crossing the border to help defend the city, resulted in anger, frustration, and dismay among many Kurds. While the onslaught of the IS was taking place right across Turkey's southern border, Turkish President Tayyip Erdogan visited a refugee camp on Turkey-Syria border and stated that "Kobani is about to fall" in a speech to Arab refugees. The words and tone President Erdogan used strengthened the widespread perception among the Kurds that Turkey is colluding with the IS to deny them any sort of autonomy. This led to what the mayor of the Kurdish town of Agri in eastern Turkey calls "a revolt of consciousness." This is probably a factor behind many conservative Kurds who had long backed Erdogan abandoning the AKP in the June 2015 elections.³⁰ According to one account, what Hizballah's actions started in the 1990s seems to have been completed by the atrocities committed by the IS, resulting in many Kurds having negative feelings toward Islam due to its use as a weapon against them.³¹

An analysis of survey data collected before IS turned on the Kurds in Iraq and Syria shows that this process of secularization, "a systemic erosion of religious practices, values, and beliefs,"³² among the Kurds is not limited to a few. Rather it is widespread and likely to have far reaching consequences in the future. This survey was administered by Roni Research, a public-opinion research company based in Istanbul, between June and September 2014, and includes responses from 2,100 randomly selected individuals from three Kurdish provinces: Diyarbakir, Van, and Sanliurfa. Subjects were asked to answer questions relating to their experiences with arrest, torture, or the death of a family member, as well as displacement because of the armed conflict.

The "exposure to violence index," as a cumulative measure of victimization, was constructed by taking the average of responses to the conflict-related questions. This overall measure of exposure to violence ranges from "0" to "1," with a mean of .18 and a standard deviation of .25. Religious decline was gauged using responses to "Whenever science and religion conflict, religion is always right," which can take values ranging from "strongly disagree" (1) and "disagree" (2) to "agree" (3) and "strongly agree" (4).

To tease out the relationship between war experiences and religiosity, I generated a variable which takes a value of "1" if respondents' victimization level exceeded the mean of exposure to violence index. In other words, this variable is coded "1" if a respondent had a score greater than .18 (high exposure) and "0" if the victimization index has a value smaller than or equal to .18 (low exposure). About one-third of respondents experienced a "high exposure."

As shown in Table 12.1, responses to the question used to assess the declining role of religion among the Kurds show that those who have experienced high exposure during the

Table 12.1 "Whenever science and religion conflict, religion is always right"

Exposure to Conflict	<i>Strongly Disagree</i>	<i>Disagree</i>	<i>Agree</i>	<i>Strongly Agree</i>	<i>Total</i>
Low	47	361	850	208	1,466
High	57	256	242	79	634
Total	104	617	1,092	287	2100

Pearson chi² (3) = 101.66; Pr = .000.

Source: Based on an Original Dataset Compiled by the Author.

armed conflict are significantly less religious than those who have not. More specifically, high exposure is associated with significantly more “disagreement” with the statement that “Whenever science and religion conflict, religion is always right.” Using alternative measures of religiosity such as responses given to “How important is religion in your life?” “How often do you pray at mosque?” or “Do you regularly pray, five times a day?” confirmed this finding. Taken together, the results indicate that war experiences are related to a reduced role of religion in participants’ lives.

To be sure, religion is a part of the Kurdish identity and culture. More than half, 55%, of respondents said that they pray regularly, and nearly 60% of the total of 2,100 respondents stated that religion is “very important” in their lives. This salient role Islam plays in Kurdish society has pressured the PKK to adopt a conciliatory tone with regard to Islam.³³ Nonetheless, secularization as a complex process refers to a transformation, a process which engenders a world in which religion matters less. As Taylor summarizes, it is “a move from a society where belief in God is unchallenged, and indeed, unproblematic, to one in which it is understood to be one option among others.”³⁴ As such, religious piety does not refute the secularization thesis. Rather, it points to an important aspect of secularization, the waning ability of religious authorities to shape mass views on what constitutes religiosity.³⁵

Decades of armed conflict against a repressive and discriminatory state dominated by its Muslim Turkish brethren coupled with increasingly Turkified Islam have led many Kurds to question the role Islam plays in their lives. The conflict dynamics have transformed traditional Islamic values predominant among the Kurds and resulted in redefining Islam’s role in Kurdishness. Similar to the role Islam played in forging a new Turkish identity in the hands of Turkish political elite, Islam is no longer a substitute for Kurdishness but rather has been reduced to a supplementary role that is by and large in line with secular ethno-nationalist demands.³⁶

Conclusion

In this chapter I have tried to shed light on the complicated nature of the role Islam plays in Kurdish identity. Three general observations are in place. First, Islam as a potent force has forced the secular Kurdish national movement to soften its stance toward religion as demonstrated by leading members of the pro-Kurdish political parties attending Friday prayers.³⁷ The Kurdish movement has long accused state-appointed imams (prayer leaders) of propagating official views and ideas. In 2011, it went further and urged Muslim Kurds to boycott Friday mass prayers at the government-controlled mosques. Instead the pro-Kurdish political party of the time, Peace and Democracy Party, or BDP, asked its followers to attend alternative Friday prayers led by Kurdish imams as a part of civil disobedience campaign against government policies toward the Kurds.³⁸

Second, there seems to be an important continuity in state policies of denial and repression of the Kurdish identity. The rise of the AKP to power, its resort to Islamic brotherhood as a common denominator that ties Muslim Kurds to the rest of the country, has not changed the fundamentals of the Turkish-Kurdish relations. Recent modest cultural reforms in Turkey under the Islamist AKP that can potentially be reversed are more the consequences of a decades-long struggle for equal rights and pressure from the EU on Turkey to democratize, not a result of Islamic brotherhood discourse used by the AKP government. In fact, the renewal of the armed conflict in July 2015 between the PKK and Turkish government has resulted in the most intense and destructive phase in the three-decades-long conflict. The failure of the fragile peace process that started in the early 2013 and the heavy fighting that ensued in several Kurdish cities and towns have not only shattered hopes for a sustainable

peace between Turks and Kurds, but also served as a stark reminder of yet another broken promise, this time by a government that preaches Islamic brotherhood, to address Kurdish grievances.

Third, conflict dynamics have fundamentally transformed the traditional nature of Kurdishness and resulted in the rise of a new national identity in which religion plays a secondary role. Just as Turkish policies against Kurdish demands for autonomy have begun to generate a sense of genuine separatism, the use of Islam as a tool to deny Kurdish rights has led to disaffection from religion and by and large resulted in a significant secularization among Kurds.

As the Middle East is undergoing monumental changes, the Kurds have emerged as a key player in an increasingly unstable region. In Iraq and Syria, the Kurds have served as a key to stability, a bulwark against the rise of Islamic radicalism, and the most efficient and reliable ground force in the fight against IS. It has now become clear that the securitization or Islamization of the Kurdish issue is far from addressing Kurdish demands for equality. The failure of these policies, coupled with the changes taking place in the region, calls for a fresh approach to the century-long Kurdish question. Failure to reach a democratic compromise between the Kurds and the states in which they live is likely to strengthen the desire for independence.

Notes

- 1 www.milliyet.com.tr/komutan-ulu-cami-den-seslendi--gundem-2182292/ 21 January, 2016, accessed April 14, 2016.
- 2 www.yeniakit.com.tr/foto-galeri/mehmetcik-duvara-oyle-bir-ayet-yazdi-ki-4859-5
- 3 www.cumhuriyet.com.tr/haber/turkiye/476181/imama_tepki_gosteren_cemaat__cuma_namazini_terk_etti.html February 5, 2016, accessed April 14, 2016.
- 4 www.hurriyet.com.tr/pkk-yandaslari-cuma-namazinda-camide-cylem-yapti-40071762?noMobile=true March 19, 2016, accessed on May 13, 2016.
- 5 The UN High Commissioner for Human Rights Zeid Ra'ad Al Hussein voiced concern about alleged Turkish military abuses, such as allowing more than 100 people to burn to death while sheltering in basements in the town of Cizre and deliberate targeting of unarmed civilians, including women and children. <http://tribune.com.pk/story/1100523/alleged-turkish-military-abuses-extremely-alarming-un/> May 10, 2016, accessed May 13, 2016.
- 6 www.hurriyet.com.tr/erdogan-babama-laz-miyiz-turk-muyuz-diye-sordum-40089936 April 17, 2016, accessed April 18, 2016.
- 7 www.yenisafak.com/video-galeri/haber/cuma-hutbesinde-kurtce-birlik-mesaji-2088786 March 25, 2016, accessed May 13, 2016.
- 8 Martin van Bruinessen, *The Kurds and Islam* (Islamic Area Studies Project, Tokyo, Japan, 1999); Wadie Jwaideh, *The Kurdish National Movement: Its Origins and Development* (Syracuse, NY: Syracuse University Press, 2006); and Michael Eppel, "Historical Setting: The Roots of Modern Kurdish Nationalism," in Ofra Bengio (ed.), *Kurdish Awakening* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 2014).
- 9 Eppel, "Historical Setting," p. 41.
- 10 Benjamin Neuberger, "Kurdish Nationalism in Comparative Perspective," in Ofra Bengio (ed.), *Kurdish Awakening* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 2014), p. 27.
- 11 See, for instance, Hay Eytan Cohen Yanarocak, "A Tale of Political Consciousness: The Rise of a Nonviolent Kurdish Political Movement in Turkey," in Ofra Bengio (ed.), *Kurdish Awakening* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 2014), p. 138.
- 12 Robert W. Olson, *The Emergence of Kurdish Nationalism and the Sheikh Said Rebellion, 1880–1925* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1989); Michael M. Gunter, "The Kurdish Question in Perspective," *World Affairs* 166 (Spring 2004), pp. 197–205; David McDowall, *A Modern History of the Kurds* (London and New York: I.B. Tauris, 2004); and David Romano, *The Kurdish Nationalist Movement: Opportunity, Mobilization and Identity* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006).
- 13 McDowall, *Modern History of the Kurds*, p. 399; also see van Bruinessen, *Kurds and Islam*, p. 19.

- 14 Rusen Cakir, "The Emergence of Hizballah in Turkey," September 2007, www.washingtoninstitute.org/uploads/Documents/pubs/PolicyFocus74initial.pdf, accessed May 15, 2016.
- 15 Huda-Par'in rakibi BDP mi, AK Parti mi? [Who is Huda-Par's Opponent? Is it the BDP or the AKP?] www.timeturk.com/tr/2012/12/06/partilesen-hizbullah-cemaatinin-yapisi-degil.html, June 12, 2012, accessed May 15, 2016.
- 16 Orhan Kemal Cengiz, "Erdogan's reforms meant to educate 'pious generation,'" www.al-monitor.com/pulse/originals/2014/06/cengiz-produce-religious-generations-erdogan-akp-islamist.html, June 26, 2014, accessed May 17, 2016.
- 17 Dilay Gundogan and Emmabuelle Baillon, "Rise of Islamic schools causes alarm in secular Turkey," www.thenational.ae/world/europe/rise-of-islamic-schools-causes-alarm-in-secular-turkey, September 21, 2014, accessed May 16, 2016. These numbers do not include students enrolled at junior and open/online Imam Hatip schools.
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- 19 These data were obtained from the Ministry of National Education of the Republic of Turkey. http://sgb.meb.gov.tr/istatistik/meb_istatistikleri_orgun_egitim_2012_2013.pdf.
http://sgb.meb.gov.tr/meb_iys_dosyalar/2016_03/30044345_meb_istatistikleri_orgun_egitim_2015_2016.pdf, accessed May 16, 2016. The data on the number of scholarship students in the Directorate of Teacher Training and Education are available for the 2005–2010 period.
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13

THE INADEQUATE ISLAMIC GRAPPLING WITH THE KURDISH ISSUE

Christopher Houston

Introduction

In late 1994, I came to Istanbul as an inexperienced fieldworker to investigate the policies and practices of the Istanbul Greater Municipality and a number of other local councils for my doctoral thesis, all of which had been won in elections that year for the first time by the Muslim-friendly Refah (Welfare) Party. The new mayor of the city was Tayyip Erdoğan, now President of the Turkish Republic. Then, as now, councils were “secondary” political institutions in a Republic disinclined to consider any federal system of regional or state parliaments that might require distribution of centralized administrative responsibilities and powers. Indeed, despite intermittent discussion both in Parliament and amongst civil society organizations concerning modification or even annulment of the 1982 junta-designed constitution, any proposal (then as now) to decentralize rather than concentrate political power through constitutional reform received short shrift.

Nevertheless, reforms to municipal governance in the early 1990s had allowed councils to borrow capital from abroad for major infrastructure and development projects.¹ This institutional initiative turned the Istanbul Greater Municipality into an interventionist and entrepreneurial force in the urban environment, creating parks, clearing slums, facilitating transport mobility, and restoring selected sites of the Ottoman-built environment. In the process, hyper-development through urban reconstruction facilitated its patronage of a new class of businesses, once euphemistically named “green capital”² but now simply known as pillars of the business establishment. In brief, within their delimited sphere of influence, municipalities played a major role in determining residents’ quality of life, and in the aggravated climate of Refah Party’s post-electoral victory, I began research into their new style and policies. Istanbul was changing.

Somewhat by chance, in early 1995, I found myself living in Kuzguncuk in the council area of Üsküdar, also under the control of the Refah Party. Over the course of more than two years of fieldwork, I realized that Refah was part of a much larger and very diverse Islamic social movement, and my focus broadened to include its variegated dimensions and endeavors. One particular tension emerging amongst and between Islam-sympathetic Muslims caught my attention. The issue was the “Kurdish question,” serially debated and pronounced upon by both the broader Islamic movement and the Refah Party, even as it carved out

an electoral space for itself in the face of fierce opposition from the Republic's powerful secularist institutions and Istanbul's established middle and upper classes. Istanbul, of course, then, as now, was also the most populous Kurdish city in Turkey. Over the course of fieldwork undertaken all over the city, and very occasionally in the south-east of the country, it slowly became clear that Muslim talk and action directed to solving the Kurdish issue could usefully be cataloged into three different perspectives, which I named *State Islamist*, *Islamist*, and *Kurdish Islamist* discourse.

This chapter revisits the findings of my fieldwork from those years. It explores whether in the two decades since then, and in the context of 15 years in the government of the Muslim-friendly Justice and Development Party (AK Party), the still influential Islamist movement in Turkey has changed its understanding of and approach to the Kurdish problem. Given the huge number of political developments since the late 1990s, it concludes that there have been some corresponding changes in Islam-centered discourse. Nevertheless, these changes have been minor, and, most surprisingly, the chapter traces how the contending understandings of and solutions to the issue in the mid-1990s continue to structure what diminished discussion there is.

Islamist and Kurdish historiographies in the 1990s

In 2001, the results of my research in Turkey were published in the book *Islam, Kurds and the Turkish Nation State*.³ In it, I identified three contrasting positions produced by "Islamists" (both Turkish and Kurdish) on the Kurdish question, each related to their diagnosis of the problem. To the extent that all three approaches maintained that the primary drama of modern Turkish history consisted in the Republic's project to *Westernize* the cultural practices⁴ of the population, each was recognizably "Islamist," elevating the Muslim subject into both the chief target of Kemalism and its chief hope in alleviating the social problems identified by the movement (for example, identity crisis, immorality, religious ignorance, and economic inequality). In the rhetoric of Islamic populism, Westernization of the population as elite action (*batılaştırmak*) meant the abolition of divine Islamic law and its replacement by state laicism (*laiklik* in Turkish). But in public life in Istanbul, and in its intersubjective realm of clashing bodies, lifestyles, and moods, Westernization and laicism were also perceived by upwardly mobile activists of the Islamic movement as a politics of cultural contempt, organized to favor Kemalists through stark modernist dichotomies such as backwardness/progress, parochiality/universality, ignorance/science, and Islam/West. Islamist narrative deconstructed the self-uplifting subject-position of Kemalist actors, presenting them as suffering from an inferiority complex and, in imposing an alien ideology upon society, imitating the West in an act of cultural conspiracy against the people. "Behind" the Republic, Islamism discerned the malignant force of the West, variously described as imperialist, colonialist, crusader, or atheistic. In brief, one core feature of 1990s Islamism was its broadcasting of the return of the authentic Muslim subject and identity, excluded from modern performances of civility and culture.⁵

My research was not alone in those years in its focus on *historiography*, in its investigation of the way that representations and visions of the past became central to political discourse and practice in the present. Navaro-Yashin, for example, argued during fieldwork into Islamic politics in Istanbul conducted in the same years that the key question was not "what is/was culturally local to Turkey given its history of state enforced westernization ... [but] what is being reformulated as 'local' in a history that has been *construed* (my emphasis) as a process of westernization."⁶ Less convinced that Westernization was the Rosetta stone unlocking

the political essence of Kemalism, in his book *A Nation of Empire: The Ottoman Legacy of Turkish Modernity*, Meeker examined the influence of the Ottoman regime in constituting an “Ottoman State society,” certain of whose features continued on under the aegis of the Republic in “contemporary attributes of the population.”⁷

But not everyone considered Islamism’s definition of Kemalism as civilizational transformation (or Westernization) to be its most apposite or comprehensive designation. Indeed, for many Kurds in Istanbul, religious or otherwise, what that shorthand description downplayed was Kemalism’s equally significant *nationalizing* project, characterized not only by nationalist developmentalism in the economic sphere but by its privileging of, in the midst of a once multicultural (Ottoman) population, a master ethnic identity. For the large Kurdish population in Turkey, the outcome of *Turkist* nationalist policies was denial of their self-description as different from Turks. Indeed, according to Yeğen,⁸ official state discourse on the Kurds since the founding of the Republic has been characterized by an “ethnocidal” logic in its determination to Turkify those “who think themselves Kurdish.”⁹ Moreover, in the underhanded ways that Kurdish identity was enunciated, it was stigmatized as backward, Eastern, and primitive in distinction to the nobility and greatness of Turks.

Twenty years ago, Honneth argued that violation of the implicit ethical demand of mutual recognition is as much the cause of social conflict as struggle over material interests.¹⁰ This claim seemed peculiarly apt for Turkish politics in the 1990s. My research noted that fueling the commitments of both Islamist and Kurdish activists were feelings of indignation at the perception of Kemalists’ and Kemalism’s disrespect. However, because the language, experiences, and practices of their exclusions radically differed, it also noted that the predicament of non-pious Kurds (Sunni or Alevi) and religious Turks barely registered to the other. But what of relations between, and mutual recognition of the suffering of, pious Turks and religious Kurds?

State Islamist, Islamist, and Kurdish Islamist discourses

Not all Islamists were willing to connect the historical dots sketched out earlier by “conscious Kurds” (a term used by Kurds themselves, religious or otherwise, to refer to those who knew the history of Kurdish suffering under the Republic). One mainstream Muslim response to the Kurdish situation was the claim that recognition of a Kurdish issue would be a threat to the existence of the State. *State Islamist* discourse, exemplified in both the rhetoric of the *Diyanet* and, interestingly, given its current fate, the discourse of the influential Gülen movement, insisted that no concessions should be made to those who pursued political actions in the name of Kurdish identity. Rather, as Fethullah Gülen put it, the “problem of *Kürtlük* (Kurdishness) should be disposed of by Islamic education.”¹¹ What did that mean? For *statist Islamism*, the problem resided in the *Kurdishness* of the Kurds – transform that misplaced identification, and there would be no problem to ponder. Logically, ensuring that Kurds changed their self-perception – an internal ethnic cleansing – would eliminate the issue as well as recruit [ex]-Kurds as activists into the divine mission entrusted to Turkish Islam and Muslims, who amongst Islamic peoples were, for Gülen, the “standard bearers of the Koran’s message.”¹² In brief, because *statist Islamism* did not see heavy-handed assimilation as an issue of discrimination, it claimed, as Refah Party leader and then Prime Minister Necmettin Erbakan said in 1996 on a visit to Libya, that there was “no Kurdish question in Turkey but only a terrorist problem – because of it Turkey has given 10,000 martyrs in five years.”¹³

Not all Muslims were happy with *State Islamism*’s Turkish suprematism, its denial of the existence and equality of Kurds as a *kavim* (people/nation), and its lack of concern with the

suppression of Kurdish as a language. Indeed, my study established that a number of Islamist writers and intellectuals did feel that there was a pressing need for investigation into the disinterest of Turkey's Muslims in the plight of their fellow Muslims and Kurds in the south-east of the country. Their findings varied. For Öztürk, the emergence of a significant section of the Islamist community out of the Turkish nationalist movement was a great hindrance in developing a position.¹⁴ Similarly, Bulaç claimed that the threat of communism in the 1960s and 1970s contributed to an unfortunate, ongoing alliance between right-wing Muslims and nationalists.¹⁵ Behind this, he identified the long-term erosion of Muslim cross-cultural solidarity in the replacement of the *ummah* principle (the unity of the Muslim community) with the Western ideology of nationalism and of the nation-state. Pamak was less sure about its dissolution and more cynical about the selectivity of Muslims' acts of solidarity: he noted that while Turkish Muslims were ready supporters of the struggles of Palestinian or Bosnian Muslims, when it came to the plight of the Kurds under the administrators of the Turkish Republic, they were unwilling to show the same sensitivity.¹⁶

These self-critiques of the Islamic movement's statist engagement with the Kurdish issue led to certain solutions. If the reason for Muslims' indifference to the suffering of Kurds was because believers were not (yet) pure enough Muslims and still allowed extraneous influences (culture, history, politics, national sentiment) to influence them, then the answer was the erasure of ethnic traces (Western or Turkish) from the new Muslim subject and the constitution of the system along Islamic lines. For *Islamist discourse*, then, Muslim identity trumped other identifications, including that of Turkish nationalist. Indeed, Turkish nationalism derived from an ethnic self-love alien to the sources of esteem in an Islamic polity. However, just as *Islamism* condemned Turkish nationalism as a basis for just State politics, so too did it censure Kurdish nationalism and its petitioning for political rights on the basis of ethnic identity. Tarring each with the same brush, *Islamist discourse* made no distinction between state-sponsored nationalism that constructed a hegemonic national identity and subaltern nationalism explicable in terms of a reaction to its negative inscription within the homogenizing practices of the new nation. Both were presented as carriers of the alien mentality of the West. As Ali Bulaç put it in a neat maneuver, "the Turks, Arabs and Persians did not occupy Kurdish geography. The French Revolution occupied us (Muslims) with foreign and enemy ideals."¹⁷ Accordingly, to solve the Kurdish problem, *Islamist discourse* recommended the active withdrawal of Muslim consent from the de-Islamifying Republican regime and political struggle for its replacement by an Islamic order based on Muslim fraternity (*İslam kardeşliği*).

If *Kurdish Islamism* agreed with *Islamism* in defending the universality of Islam against the preferentialism of *statist Islamism's* Turkish chauvinism, it was not willing to reduce Kurds' experience/suffering to their suppression by the Republic as Muslims. Nor, therefore, was it convinced that the solution to their peculiar injury was to wait for a general and utopian Islamic revolution and new order that would then bestow on Kurds cultural rights or education in their own language. On the contrary, given the State and government's ceaseless generation and mobilization of Turkish nationalism, *Kurdish Islamism* defended the religious legitimacy of political struggle on the basis of Kurdish identity. Islam was interpreted as licensing the collective right to linguistic self-expression of every *kavim*, Muslim or otherwise. In other words, *Kurdish Islamism* was concerned with mounting a defense of Muslim cultural plurality against *Islamism's* suspicion of it. It did so by reworking the meaning of three religious ideals.

First, against Islamist accusations that Kurdish requests for cultural rights imperiled the unification of the *ummah*, it interpreted the Muslim ideal of the *ummah* to cater to God-created ethnic difference, indeed to be predicated on it. The Islamic *ummah* did not cancel

ethnic subjectivity but was built up upon it, demanding real solidarity between its different ethnic groups. In its light, Muslims should want for other Muslim peoples the most natural rights that they want for themselves. Not to seek justice for all was to splinter the unity of the *ummah*. Second, reinterpreting the popular *Islamist* slogan of Islamic *kardeşlik* (fraternity or brotherliness) that implied, when directed to the Kurdish problem, the cessation of particularistic claims in the name of Muslim unity against the enemies of Islam, *Kurdish Islamism* demanded the support of Turkish Muslims in the struggle of Kurds for God-given natural rights. Here, Islamic *kardeşlik* involved active support for the protection of ethnic difference, not its cancellation in some meta-Islamic identity. Third, like *Islamism*, *Kurdish Islamism* commended the institutionalization of *şeriat* law (shariah) as long-term solution to the Kurdish (and Kemalist) problem. However, shariah carried additional meanings for Kurdish Muslims: it was understood as providing a refuge, instituting a legal space that gave them permission to be Kurdish. “*İslamiyet Kürtlere ne veriyorsa ona razıyız*” (Kurds will be satisfied with whatever Islam gives),¹⁸ and what Islam gave was acknowledgment of the created difference of human beings and a political structure that catered for just such a difference.

In sum, my research in the second half of the 1990s identified a plurality of Islamist responses to the Kurdish question, which I provisionally disaggregated under the labels of *statist Islamist*, *Islamist*, and *Kurdish Islamist* discourses. What key political processes were articulated to them? One significant point to consider was the growing interest of Muslims in the issue in the 1990s, as shown in the sheer number of symposiums, workshops, conferences, conference proceedings, book publications, and journal articles/issues from which these competing Islamic positions were extracted. In them a chaotic and sometimes rancorous debate raked over the history of the Turkish Republic in search of clues to the agitated nature of the present. Second, putting aside *statist Islamism*’s “solution” of the assimilation of Kurds, the research discerned that the key source of this Islamist clash of interpretations resided not in the unfortunate influence of non-Islamic political philosophies on the Muslim community (as diagnosed by *Islamism*), but in the very making of an Islamist movement. At issue was its self-constitution through opposition to the Westernizing project of the Republic. In the ensuing cultural struggle between secularist and Islamist subjects, *Islamism*’s mobilizing of Muslims was threatened by the politicizing of other subordinated identities similarly repressed by Kemalism’s nationalism and civilizationalism.¹⁹ In particular, this included the ethnic conscientization of religious Kurds, who Islamists hoped would become natural allies in the struggle against the laicism of the Republic. Thus, the book concluded with a phrase that revealed both the dominant response of Islamists in the 1990s to the Kurdish problem and the reason for an emerging split between religious Turks and Kurds within it: “*Biz Kürt milliyetçi, Türk milliyetçi değiliz, biz İslam milliyetçiyiz*” (“we are not Kurdish or Turkish nationalists, we are Islamic nationalists”).²⁰ By contrast, for many religious Kurds, a true Islamic solution offered more than a second denial of ethnic specificity in the name of Islam.

The more things change

Twenty years later, in the light of 15 years of AK Party rule and of a host of other developments in Turkish politics, have Islamic-oriented groups and intellectuals changed their approach to the Kurdish issue? Do the 1990s differences between *Kurdish Islamist* and *Islamist* discourses continue? Are the “solutions” of *statist Islamism* still proffered as answers to the Kurdish problem? What is the fate in the present of these past Islamic analyses constructed to explain, justify, or oppose state and government politics toward Kurds?

In early 2017, when I was once again researching these questions in Istanbul, the concatenation of events inciting politics in Turkey did not make propitious circumstances for considered fieldwork research into the orientations of Muslim groups toward Kurds. For one, the ruling AK Party had declared a state of emergency on July 20, 2016, after a failed military coup, which (after a second renewal) was continuing at the time of fieldwork. Governing by decree, the Council of Ministers (chaired by the President) had created a legal situation in which the official suspension of human rights precluded individuals from seeking legal remedy or protection against arrest or State action. Indeed, according to Erol, “in their attempt to foil the coup Erdoğan and AKP have created legal conditions that make the political regime more similar to a military junta than a democratic government under peril.”²¹

Further, just as in the 1990s, the southeast provinces of Turkey were governed according to the full force of state of emergency legislation (and in some cities by martial law), under whose auspices, arrests and killings in the region were carried out with the aid of a media blackout, alongside impunity for military and state security forces personnel.²² Fieldwork there was not possible. Last, just as in 1982, when the post-coup military junta led by Kenan Evren organized a referendum on its new authoritarian and ultranationalistic constitution in a period of martial law, the AKP government was also pressing ahead with a referendum on major constitutional reform in a state of emergency. If passed, it would replace the parliamentary system with a new presidential one granting extraordinary powers to the elected President. In the pro-government newspapers and TV channels that dominated the media field and mediated reality to viewers, there was little room for considered coverage of other topics and little balanced debate about the proposed changes. Other more independent media outlets were unable to address the Kurdish issue, aware of both the provisions of emergency law and the closure or takeover of a large number of newspapers and television stations by the government.²³

Given these conditions, which also included the vilification, mass arrest, and trial of members of the Gülen organization²⁴ as everyday occurrences, I found it best to limit my research to a review of the Muslim presses, in particular to the arguments made in Islamic newspapers such as *Akit*, *Yeni Şafak*, and *Milli Gazete*. Insight into the continuation (or otherwise) of *Kurdish Islamist* discourse was harder to obtain, given the suppression of pro-Kurdish media (including of its religious voices), the militarized situation in the south-east, and the destruction of Kurdish political participation and problem-solving due to the takeover of HDP councils by the government.

One immediate difference was striking: unlike in the 1990s, when Islamic newspapers and journals relatively regularly published articles that investigated various dimensions of a “*Kurdish problem*,” the use of that term had disappeared. In 2017, there was no *Kurdish* question. Instead, in the Muslim newspapers, there was only a terror problem and condemnation of the “PKK/PYD/HDP” triangle, presented as a singular entity.²⁵ Through that ill-considered equation, Islamist presses disregarded the illegal processes through which the government was suppressing the HDP (and Kurdish municipalism more generally), despite it being a legal political actor within the Turkish electoral system.²⁶ At the time of research, HDP parliamentarians (who had gained 14 percent of the popular vote in the June 2015 elections) had been stripped of parliamentary immunity, charged with supporting terrorism, and taken to court. Selahattin Demirtas, co-chair of the party, was accused of sedition and terrorism, for which the prosecutor sought 130 years imprisonment.²⁷ None of this was protested in the Islamist newspapers, which barely mentioned events in the southeast, except to report the death of Turkish soldiers or of PKK guerrillas.

Indeed, the Islamic media did not criticize the AK Party government. This stood in stark contrast to the typically negative attitude toward state policy and government in Muslim

papers in the 1990s. Then Islamist discourse was ever ready to deride the general legitimacy of Kemalism and to advocate for its replacement by an Islamic order. By contrast, in 2017, the AK Party government was perceived as Islam-friendly, approved for its solving of one core conflict between laicists and pious Muslims, through its progressive lifting (in 2010, 2013, and 2014) of the ban that prohibited women from wearing the headscarf in universities, public administration, the police, and the armed forces. The AK Party's electoral success and subsequent control over the bureaucratic instruments of the Turkish state also meant that the historic Islamic critique of the concept of a Republic *per se* had lost traction. Thus, no longer did there appear a need for the conscription of religious Kurds into an alliance of the pious against a hostile state, which partly explained the absence of any admission of a *Kurdish* problem. Nevertheless, Islamic newspapers' moderating of their once sweeping 1990s condemnation of the Republic was "balanced" by harsh criticism directed at the opposition CHP for its supposed historic betrayal of Turkish-Islamic culture and for its continuing production of irreligious elitism. To give just one brief example, Mustafa Çelik's column "The treacherous foreigners amongst us" described laicists as the "reserve ammunition of our enemies."²⁸

A second consequence of the discursive reduction of the Kurdish question to the terrorism of the PKK was a change of emphasis on the malignant responsibility of the West for its existence. What in 1990s Islamism was literally "backgrounded" as one indirect cause of a *real* (Kurdish) issue – the West behind the Westernizing Republic – was foregrounded in 2017 as the sole reason for PKK terror. Thus, in an article titled "The West: Patron of Terrorists," Uğur Bahri Davarcı claimed that the West was pursuing a modern crusader war against Turkey, and that "the Western states that for years have fed terrorists who have targeted Turkey's national unity and indivisibility continue to be their shield."²⁹ According to Ahmet Fevzi Inceöz, "voting 'Yes' in the referendum was a way of saying no to Turkey's enemies and of opposing their games, of giving them a lesson."³⁰

These accusations were complemented by expression of an extraordinary enmity toward the "West" that was endemic in Islamic newspapers. For example, in a play on words, Fatih Kahraman reminded Muslims that just as weather in *Şubat* (February) is deceitful, so is

Şu/Batı [that West], which despite appearing as a friend and ally can never be trusted by Muslims. If we are Muslims we can never be friends with Jews, Christians and *Şu/Batı*. *Şu/Batı*, which always behaves hypocritically towards Muslims ... *Şu/Batı*, which from history until today has financed and organized the weapons, documents and terrorists that have caused the increase in our martyrs.³¹

For Şakir Tarım, those games even included the targeting of the institution of the family by "our mortal enemies, the European Union":

The family that they work to destroy is the last castle of our values. God forbid, if the family is demolished society collapses. Because our enemies know this truth, they have planned to wreck our last castle. 250 years ago the first page of the book '*How Can we Destroy Islam*' that was given to the English spy Hampher reads, 'We will demolish the family that is the source of religious upbringing.'³²

Christianity too was sometimes included as instrumental in supporting terrorism. In the same column cited ("The Calm before the Storm"), Dilipak wrote that "The PYD is co-operating not only with the United States of America but with the Christian armies of NATO and the Vatican."³³ Further, much more than in the 1990s, Christianity was regularly

demeaned as a religion, as in the article by Hacı Lale entitled “The Oath of Allegiance and the Bible” in which he claimed the Bible was changed according to the whims of the Pope and priests.³⁴ Together, then, in an interesting variation of Edward Said’s thesis in his book *Orientalism*, Islamist discourse in the present constructed the West/Christianity as a singular and hyper-activist identity given essential form through its hostility and inferiority to Turkey or Turkishness and Islam. Just as with Europe’s Orient, Turkish Islamism’s Occident was not a reflection of empirical reality but a representation that in positioning Turks and Muslims as the suffering subject obscured their own culpability in causing suffering to Kurds.

In short, in refusing to countenance any historical reasons for the existence of pro-Kurdish political movements in Turkey other than their creation and direction by the West, Islamist discourse withdrew its 1990s objection against the nationalism of the Turkish state. Thus, whereas in the 1990s, there was an attempt to convict Muslims for their delayed solidarity in noticing and addressing the situation of Kurds in Turkey, in 2017, any sympathy for Kurds or any critical reflection on the bias of the Turkish-Muslim self had evaporated. We might say that *Islamist* discourse on the Kurdish question had been replaced by the tenets of *statist Islamism*, with its blaming of the West and its denial that the AK Party government or the assimilative Turkish ethnic-state has anything to do with cultural and political realities constituting the Kurdish issue.

The more things stay the same

The eclipse of certain core elements of 1990s *Islamist* discourse on the Kurdish question (and their substitution in 2017 by the presumptions of *statist Islamism*) did not mean that others of its defining ideas had been forgotten. For example, along with insisting that there was no Kurdish but only a terror problem, the Islamic presses often reiterated *Islamism*’s self-serving 1990s critique of nationalism as an illegitimate form of identity sponsored by the West to imperil Muslim consciousness of the community of believers (*ümmet bilinci*). Thus, in an article written to commemorate the 99th anniversary of the death of Ottoman Sultan Abdülhamid II, Şevki Yılmaz explained that “we will continue to walk in the footsteps of Sultan Abdülhamid, father of the idea of Pan Islamism (the unity and leadership of Islam) against Turkism, Kurdism, Arabism and Denominationalism (*Mezhepçilik*), the weapons of Imperialism and Zionism.”³⁵ In a similar vein, in an article entitled “Who is the Superior Human,” the writer makes a familiar *Islamist* appeal to the erasure of ethnic identity in Muslims by Islam and thus to the censuring of multiculturalism by Islamist movements:

You are a people named Muslims by God. How much longer will you continue to stay fragmented as Turks, Kurds, Afghans, or Persians? Islam is our only nation. Because the most powerful and most genuine connection between, as well as the real nationality of, Arabs, Turks, Kurds, Albanians, Circassians and Laz, is nothing other than Islam.³⁶

Further, I was reminded of *Kurdish Islamism*’s accusation that *Islamism*’s care for Muslim solidarity and brotherliness did not extend to the suffering of Kurds by the storm of outrage in the Muslim press to the decision by the state of Israel (on February 12) to prohibit the amplified call to prayer in Jerusalem between 11.00 pm and 7.00 am. Even the head of the *Diyanet* was reported as saying to Israel that “if you forbid Jerusalem’s muezzins from reading the call to prayer, every Palestinian will become a muezzin and will proclaim it [*ezan*].”³⁷ Similarly, the striking lack of concern by Turkish Muslims for Kurds killed in the fighting between the state and the PKK contrasted with the extensive coverage in both Muslim newspapers and

television stations of the funerals of Turkish soldiers, declared martyrs for their nation. Yet, if Islamism was truly *neutral* toward ethnic identity as it claimed, why did it not equally mourn the death of Kurds as martyrs for *their* nation?

Finally, given that current Islamist discourse did not discuss (but for the West) a *Kurdish* question, we might expect it to also proclaim that the AK Party, after 15 years of rule, had in fact dealt with and remedied the Kurdish issue in Turkey. And sure enough, Yasin Aktay seemed to think so: in an article in *Yeni Şafak*, he wrote that

in the past there existed the topic of the Kurdish question, but today it is a subject that has been, in a word, ‘surpassed.’ From the point of view of the political level that Turkey has reached today, the Kurdish issue, being a problem that has already been solved, is only a psychological matter for those who have nothing else to do. Otherwise for both the society and for the state the Kurdish problem is a problem that has been solved.³⁸

Conclusion

Since my research in Istanbul into the Islamic social movement in the mid- to late 1990s, a multitude of major political changes have taken place that have conditioned the ability and ethics of Muslims to even mention the Kurdish issue. The position of Islamically inclined Muslims today can only be understood in relation to the most significant of these changes. They involve the electoral and institutional dominance of the AKP, the Ergenekon trials of the military in 2008 and the emergence of a post-Kemalist Turkey, the rise of a rival Kurdish municipalism in the south-east (the HDP) and their entry into the national Parliament, the Gezi Park protests in 2013 and their suppression by the government, and the referendum on major constitutional reform in April 2017. Of course, the significance of each of these events has been exaggerated in radically different ways by opposed media forces for their respective constituencies.

Yet, despite these changes, and despite the claim made by the AK Party that it is the only political force in Turkey capable of justly governing the nation, the testimony of Kurds is that the policies of the Turkish government and state continue to inflict suffering upon them.³⁹ The result is that Kurdish Muslims no more agree with the contemporary rebuke of Islamic newspapers for politics oriented to the conservation of Kurdish identity than they did in the 1990s. For that reason, if and when the extraordinary politics of the present state of emergency is lifted, I strongly suspect that research into changes or continuities in *Kurdish Islamist* discourse will confirm the situation that I described in the 1990s: that there is a major split between Kurdish and Turkish Muslims in Turkey on the causes and solution to the Kurdish issue, and that as long as Islamist discourse, in the name of an overt Islamic and covert Turkish identity, continues to deny Kurdish Muslims the legitimacy and necessity of political mobilization based on a defense of Kurdish ethnicity, this tension will fester.

Notes

- 1 See Çağlar Keyder and Ayşe Öncü, “Globalization of a Third-World Metropolis: Istanbul in the 1980s,” *Review* XV11 (Summer 1994), pp. 383–424.
- 2 Neşecan Balkan, Erol Balkan, and Ahmet Öncü (eds.), *The Neoliberal Landscape and the Rise of Islamist Capital in Turkey* (New York: Berghan, 2015).

- 3 Christopher Houston, *Islam, Kurds and the Turkish Nation-State* (Oxford: Berg Press, 2001).
- 4 “Cultural practices” here is shorthand for Islamism’s critique of the Republic’s targeting for transformation of a number of fields of sociality and sentiment, including gender relations, education, law, ethics, and aesthetics.
- 5 Much anthropological work at the time focused on the various counter-interventions (see Endnote 1) of the Islamist movement in different fields of social endeavor: for example, Nilüfer Göle, *Melez Desenler* (Istanbul: Metis, 2000); Ayşe İlyasoğlu, *Örtülü Kimlik* (Istanbul: Metis, 1994); Kenan Çayır, *Islamic Literature in Contemporary Turkey: From Epic to Novel* (New York: Palgrave MacMillan, 2007).
- 6 Yael Navaro-Yashin, *Faces of the State: Secularism and Public Life in Turkey* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2002), p. 22.
- 7 Michael Meeker, *A Nation of Empire: The Ottoman Legacy of Turkish Modernity* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2002), p. 158.
- 8 Mesut Yeğen, “The Turkish State Discourse and the Exclusion of Turkish Identity,” *Middle Eastern Studies* 32 (1996), pp. 216–229.
- 9 The words are from a 1961 report on the “Eastern problem” commissioned by the Turkish military after the coup in 1960, which refused to use the word “Kurds.” See Christopher Houston, “Kemalism and Beyond,” in *The Oxford Handbook of Contemporary Middle-Eastern and North African History* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2015), p. 6.
- 10 Alex Honneth, *The Struggle for Recognition* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 1995).
- 11 Cited in Faik Bulut, *Türk Basınında Kürtler* (Istanbul: Melsa Yayınlar, 1992), p. 15.
- 12 Ruşen Çakır, *Ayet ve Slogan: Türkiye’de İslami Oluşumlar* (Istanbul: Metis, 1990), p. 112.
- 13 *Yeni Şafak*, 7 October 1996.
- 14 Kemal Öztürk, *İnsanlığın Göçü* (Istanbul: Birleşik Yayıncılık, 1996). See Mustafa Sümbül, *Milliyetçi miyiz Müslüman mıyız?* (Bursa: Ümmet Yayınları, 1996) for a self-conscious description of his conversion from *ülküü* Turkish nationalist activist to Muslim.
- 15 Ali Bulaç, *Kurd Soruşturması* (Ankara: Sor Yayıncılık, 2002).
- 16 Mehmet Pamak, *Kürt Sorunu ve Müslümanlar* (Istanbul: Selam Yayınları, 1996).
- 17 Ali Bulaç, *Kürt Sorunu Nasıl Çözülür?* (Istanbul: Nubihar, 1996), p. 107.
- 18 Yunus Münis, “RP’den Ümitli Değilim,” *Yeni Dünya* 3 (September 1996), p. 22.
- 19 In his introduction to *Kemalism in the Political Thought in Modern Turkey* series, Ahmet İnel begins his account with this sentence: “*Milliyetçilik ve medeniyetçilik, Kemalizmin iki aşlı ögesidir.*” (Nationalism and civilizationalism are the two foundational elements of Kemalism).
- 20 Houston, *Islam, Kurds and the Turkish Nation-State*, p. 197.
- 21 Ali Erol, “Legality and Power: the 2016 Turkish Coup Attempt and the State of Emergency,” *Journal of the Oxford Centre for Socio-Legal Studies* 1 (2016). <https://joxcsls.com/2016/11/01/legality-and-power-the-2016-turkish-coup-attempt-and-the-state-of-emergency/>.
- 22 A number of civil society groups have published reports on online websites documenting various traumatizing aspects of the dirty war pursued by the Turkish military in their conflict with the PKK in the 1990s and early 2000s, including Faili Belli [<http://failibelli.org/tum-davalar/>], produced under the auspices of the *Turkish Economic and Social Studies Foundation* (TESEV), and Hafıza Merkezi [<http://hakikatadaletahafiza.org/en/>], website of the non-governmental organization, *Hafıza Merkezi* (Memory Center). The most recent report from the *Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights* (2017) into the human rights situation in South-East Turkey notes that in the last 18 months, there has been at least 1,200 civilian deaths there as well as numerous documented cases of enforced disappearances, torture, destruction of housing and cultural heritage, and severe curtailment of the right to freedom of opinion and expression as well as political participation.
- 23 According to the International Committee to Protect Journalists, the government has shut down at least 20 TV and radio stations after the declaration of emergency rule in July 2016, including a number of Kurdish language ones. See <https://cpj.org/2016/09/turkey-closes-at-least-20-tv-radio-stations.php>. See also, Freedom House’s report on the status of media in Turkey, bluntly classified as “Not Free”: <https://freedomhouse.org/report/freedom-net/2016/turkey>.
- 24 Although not of prime concern for this chapter, the government’s takeover of the Gülen movement’s educational facilities in Turkey has opened up an opportunity space for organizations close to the AKP to flourish, as has been evident in the expansion of the Maarif and Yunus Emre educational foundations. For information about the Gülen movement’s activities in the

- Kurdish-majority cities and their rivalry there with Kurdish Hizbullah, see Mustafa Gürbüz, *Rival Kurdish Movements in Turkey* (Amsterdam: Amsterdam University Press, 2016).
- 25 For example, see Abdurrahman Dilipak, *Akit*, February 22, 2017, p. 7.
- 26 See Nicole Watts, *Activists in Office: Kurdish Politics and Protest in Turkey* (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 2010).
- 27 Between February 13 and 20, over 800 HDP politicians, activists, members, or sympathizers have been detained, mostly on charges of making terrorist propaganda via social media. This is in addition to the 10,000 detentions and 3,000 arrests targeting the HDP and its sister party Democratic Regions Party (DBP) since the June 2015 elections.
- 28 *Akit*, February 22, 2017.
- 29 *Akit*, February 3, 2017.
- 30 *Akit*, February 1, 2017.
- 31 *Akit*, February 10, 2017.
- 32 *Milli Gazete*, February 11, 2017.
- 33 *Akit*, February 22, 2017.
- 34 *Akit*, February 1, 2017.
- 35 *Akit*, February 10, 2017.
- 36 *Akit*, February 10, 2017.
- 37 www.yenisafak.com/hayat/her-filistinli-muezzin-olur-ve-ezani-okur-2612529.
- 38 *Yeni Şafak*, February 7, 2017.
- 39 See Ramazan Aras, *The Formation of Kurdishness in Turkey: Political Violence, Fear and Pain* (London: Routledge, 2014); and Cuma Çiçek, “Kurdish Identity and Political Islam under AKP Rule,” *Research and Policy on Turkey* 1 (2015), pp. 147–163.

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- . “Kemalism and Beyond,” in *The Oxford Handbook of Contemporary Middle-Eastern and North African History*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2015.
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THE JEWISH COMMUNITIES IN KURDISTAN WITHIN THE TRIBAL KURDISH SOCIETY

Mordechai Zaken

Introduction and preliminary remarks

The Jews of Kurdistan believe that their ancestors were exiled from northern Israel by the king of Assyria, between 733 and 722 BCE, and were settled in “Halah and by the Habor, the River of Gozan, and in the cities of the Medes” (Kings II, 17:6; New King James Version). They favor the saying from the prophecy of Isaiah (27:13): “So it shall be in that day: the great trumpet will be blown; they will come, who are about to perish in the land of Assyria... and shall worship the Lord in the holy mount at Jerusalem.” From that era onward, we are in complete darkness for 2,000 years, until the great medieval Jewish traveler Benjamin of Tudela (circa 1170) rediscovered the Aramaic-speaking Jews.¹ Other travelers followed in his footsteps in the following centuries, and more testimonies were heard;² the most noteworthy come from Rabbi David D’Beth Hillel around 1824 and Rabbi Benjamin Joseph (Benjamin II) around 1844. The lack of written and archival records has challenged scholars dealing with Kurdistan, so at an early stage of my research, I realized that I had no choice but to interview Jewish informants (altogether more than 60) about their life in Kurdistan.³

The Jews of Kurdistan speak Eastern Neo-Aramaic, an offspring of the ancient East Aramaic and the Talmudic language.⁴ Today, together with the Assyrian Christians, they are the sole native speakers of Aramaic in the whole world. They also speak the tongues of their neighbors, Arabic, Turkish, Farsi and Kurdish, the latter two belonging to the Iranian branch of the Indo-European family.⁵

One could not comprehend their experience without grasping the following themes. The Jews were considered *ahl al-kitāb*, the People of the Holy Scriptures (i.e., the Bible and the New Testament) and were *dhimmī*, people entitled to protection by the *Qur’ān*.⁶ Nevertheless, unlike the Christians, who have had three major clashes with the Turkish and Iraqi authorities, and with tribal chieftains within 90 years, between 1840 and 1933, the Jews were a very small non-Muslim community and were generally submissive.⁷ They were generally perceived as unthreatening and reliable because not even once did the thought of communal disobedience cross their mind. James Claudius Rich, a scholar who looked for old artifacts to bring home to the British Museum, said, “I must here remark, that the Jews are generally to be trusted for local antiquities.”⁸ The Jews, especially those in rural areas, were noncombative subjects who relied on the tribal chiefs for protection. Lastly, urban Jews and

more particularly rural Jews generally worked in different occupations from those engaged in by their Kurdish neighbors, some of which were considered socially unacceptable to tribal Kurds. Therefore, in the rural area, there was virtually no occupational or economic competition between Jews and Kurds. The Jewish subjects supported their tribal chieftains (aghass) in financial and other ways in times of need. This is one of the reasons why they were considered assets in the eyes of their chieftains.

In 1909, a traveler reported that the Jewish "clients" had been divided among the aghas; each agha had a certain number of families under his patronage.⁹ Each Jewish patriarch "looked for a big tree to seek shelter in its shade." The Jews became protégés of the aghas and shaikhs in the region, and in this manner, "they insured their life and existence and felt relatively comfortable" in exchange for payoffs, such as offerings and the provision of service.¹⁰

The rural way of life was deeply rooted among the Jews of Kurdistan.¹¹ Already, early Jewish travelers noted that Jews lived in hundreds of Kurdish villages, cultivating fields, vineyards and orchards; tending their animals; and weaving traditional Kurdish costumes and carpets.¹² The existence of Jews in hundreds of villages for generations, maintaining an agricultural way of life, suggests that the Jews lived in rural Kurdistan with relative ease and security, and were able to provide for their families while observing their religious and spiritual practices. The status of rural Jews varied from one tribal jurisdiction to another and from one period to another. In any case, the social position of rural Jews was inferior to that of the tribesmen who occasionally took advantage of their lower status. Chieftains, tribesmen and rivals often exploited them economically and at times maltreated them.¹³

The Kurdish society was composed of two main classes: the *'ashiret*, or the tribal caste, and the non-tribal civilians, including the Jews.¹⁴ Most tribesmen were combatants who did not work (work is despicable for them) and therefore exploited their subjects, who were considered an asset, no different than a herd of sheep. Indeed, one meaning of the term "*reyet*" was simply herd (Kurd., from Arabic *ra'āyah*, relates generally to non-tribal subjects, and *ri'āyah* denotes defense or protection).¹⁵

In the rural region, the chieftain (the agha) was the sole authority over the rural population. He was the government, the chief of staff, the head of the police, the minister of finance and the judge, all embodied in one person. His ability to influence the life of his Jews was therefore decisive. The agha granted his patronage to his non-tribal subjects and protégés. This was the first and the nominal layer of the patronage. The tribesmen knew the Jewish protégés of their aghas, and it was clear that any misconduct of the Jews would result in severe tribal consequences.

The second layer was the physical shelter that was given to the Jews when traveling or staying overnight in villages under the tribal jurisdiction of their agha. The patronage enabled urban Jewish merchants, peddlers and others, who traveled regularly through the tribal jurisdiction, to do so safely. In a way, the non-tribal status of rural Jews made them an easier target for *firars* (Kurd., escapees, fugitives) or tribal enemies of their agha. Apparently, the retribution versus the abusers and offenders of the Jews was lacking because of the inequity within the Kurdish society and the inferior standing of Jews. The experience of the Jews in both the official judicial system and in the tribal justice system indicated leniency toward Muslim offenders of Jews.

Usually, the agha granted patronage to the Jews, who, in return, paid dues and performed services, one of which was a communal, unpaid, forced labor (Kurd., *zebara*), generally agricultural work in their master's field. In Kurdish, the agha calls his Jewish subjects "Cihûyê min" (Kurd., "my Jews"), suggesting dominance, if not ownership. The Jews refer to their chieftain as "my agha," bestowing both obedience and respect. Many rural aghas treated their Jews almost as their personal property.

Reports from eyewitnesses and observers in Kurdistan from the 19th and early 20th centuries describe rural Jews as slaves, subjugated to tribal chieftains in isolated places. These reports discuss the maltreatment, abuse and exploitation of rural Jews by their tribal aghas. This must be clarified since they were not slaves in the familiar sense but rather within the tribal Kurdish settings.¹⁶ They had in fact been non-tribal protégés and subjects of the tribal agha; indeed, not completely autonomous, and, in reality, the agha had an immense power over their life, but they were not to be labeled as slaves as one may imagine from the Western or Eastern civilizations. They had rights, families and property, and much freedom to work for their living. The selling of any of them by one agha to another meant the selling of the privileges that came with them.¹⁷ In any case, this kind of “slavery” was reduced by the British reign in their firm stance against tribal control.

It is worthwhile to discuss the image and perception of these Jews in the eyes of their neighbors. The Jewish traveler David D’Beth Hillel met in 1827 a governor south of Zakho, who questioned the authenticity of the Jews of Kurdistan and avoided eating the food they prepared (presumably *ḥallāl* or kosher) because they were “not [truly] from the children of Israel.” On the other hand, he regarded the Jews of Arabia, Egypt and Turkey as truly from the children of Israel. David D’Beth Hillel visited Başkale in 1827, near the Turkish-Iranian border, where the Muslims forbade his entry (not clear if to their houses or the town), fearing that the Jewish traveler would contaminate them.¹⁸ Only after begging and paying money was he allowed to enter.¹⁹ This dangerous tribal region was undesirable for non-Muslims and foreigners. Two years later, in 1829, the German orientalist Friedrich Eduard Schulz was murdered there in spite of the fact that he was escorted by two Persian officers and four servants.

In discussing the perception and image of the Jews in Kurdistan, “The Tale of Suto and Tato,” published in 1925, could serve as a mirror for tribal feuds and life in Kurdistan.²⁰ In this tale, Tato, his family and clan were under the control of the powerful aghas of Oramar. The feud begins when Tato can no longer tolerate the humiliation of his brothers by their tribal foes, the aghas of Oramar. He says to his older brothers, “I cannot submit like you, I will not make a Jew of myself in Suto’s hands.” According to the editors’ note, Tato said the following: I cannot continue and “admit myself to be a coward, and resign myself to the status of a slave.”²¹ As the editors explained the account to European readers, they noted that the sentence “we shall be forced to submit to Tato” means literally we shall “become Tato’s Jews.”²²

A common pattern of Jewish behavior reflecting their fragile position was the lack of response to violence and the reluctance to complain about wrongdoings in order not to fuel an atmosphere of hatred. A British traveler witnessed in 1840, in Arbil, an incident in which a young Shi‘ite slapped a respectable Jewish store-owner, cursed him and spat at his face. A local companion explained, “he is only a Jew.” The Jew was unable to respond. A Jewish emissary reported that seven Jews were murdered in Arbil within two years, and it seemed that the governor did not care, “as if the blood of the Jews is free,” and “the Jews are afraid to complain.”²³

The Jews were the weakest caste in the society and “gradually became the pariahs and outcast, despised and degraded.” They were exploited, robbed²⁴ and murdered by outlaws. Murder of Jews may have been justified by the socioreligious concept of “*Kafir-Kušt*” (Kurd., killing of infidels). The lack of proper, or any, police response and the leniency of both the tribal and judicial system toward murderers of Jews further show the insignificant value of a Jewish life.²⁵

When a murder of a Jew occurred in the tribal region in remote villages, it would generally lead to the migration of the whole family, which would be in a state of shock and distress

since it became apparent that the agha and the tribal society had failed, in practice, to provide protection. Their trust was exhausted. They would need to seek permission from the agha as it meant for him loss of future income (in dues and services), and they had to seek permission from the agha under whose jurisdiction they wished to settle. These *de facto* rules had been gathered from the experience of the frequent migration patterns of rural Jews.

The Jews' non-tribal status and social inferiority facilitated acts of abduction, either by force or through temptation, of young Jewish women by Kurdish men, for whom it was not as complicated and dangerous as the abduction of tribal women. Not only could Muslim Kurds marry in theory four wives; they also did not have to pay a dowry for the Jewish wife and her family.

In retrospect, these abductions were counted as converts into Islam of Jewish women. Therefore, the Jewish communities opposed these abductions. In general, the Jewish communities employed three mechanisms in an attempt to bring back kidnapped Jewish daughters to their families: the first method was an appeal to the local authority (local leaders, police officers and tribal chieftains) for the return of the kidnapped girls; the second method was the establishment of a communal panel of deliberation, through which the Jews would challenge the tribal Kurds involved in an attempt to have them bring the Jewish woman back to her family; and the third method was to allow a period of seclusion for the Jewish woman in question, during which she would contemplate her decision while separated from her Muslim associate and far from his influence, and under the supervision and the pressure of a respected Jewish person or family. In Mosul and the surrounding area, Sasson Tzemah, a member of parliament (1932–51), would press the police and the army to search for the abducted Jewish women. In Aqra, the Jewish family of Khawaja Khinno would act the same.

Interestingly, in 2011, I was introduced by a new source through an email correspondence from Turkey which reads (with the necessary editing) as follows:

I am a journalist from Turkey who has just found out that you have written a significant book regarding Kurdish Jews.... I have realized that I actually have links with the Khawaja Khinno (or Gabbai) family (originally from Aqra). The story, which you are telling in the book, is absolutely the same as what I have been told by my grandmother. My grandmother is a nephew of Khawaja Khinno (Turkish pronunciation: Xace Xino). She has been telling us her personal history and her family's history for many years. She is still alive and is most probably up to 100 years. She was married to a Kurdish man (my grandfather) in her early teen age [years] and moved (from Aqra, Iraq) to Turkey. She therefore has never ever seen any member of her family since then. We too basically, until now, had no idea of finding her family and had no clear knowledge of the family's survival. However, now, through your book, we know a lot. When I told these all to my grandma, she got excited about a possibility of which we could somehow find her family. If I understood correctly, one of her cousins, daughter of Yitzhak Khinno, Salima, is one of your sources in the work, or at least some members of the family were your sources. I would therefore be glad if you could help me find some of the members of the Gabbai family. I will be looking forward to hearing from you Mr. Zaken. Many thanks in advance, Hamza Aktan (Turkey).

This was a recollection from the past. A young Jewish girl, Nazê, was kidnapped from her home in Aqra, Iraqi Kurdistan, sometime between 1910 and 1920. In 2005, a grandchild of her made a film called *Nazê* in which we learn that she was tempted or seduced to leave her family and join a Muslim youth, a total stranger. She speaks about the status of her

Jewish family (Khawaja Khinno) and their relationships with both officials and with Barzani chieftains. Irfan Aktan, another grandson, wrote a book in 2005 entitled “Nazê, a story of migration” (in Turkish). Interestingly, the quotes of Nazê in the film were identical to the quotes of the members of Khawaja Khinno whom I interviewed during the 1980s and the 1990s (even though there had been no contact between the parties since the 1920s). Nazê’s voice and experience is an important testimony for abduction (via temptation) of Jewish girls by Kurds. In the movie, she speaks of her escape while Barzani tribesmen (the patriarchs of Khawaja Khinno have been in close contact with the chieftains of Barzan) are chasing them and trying to trace the abducted Jewish girls (there were two girls).

The Jews had been an important part of urban Kurdistan. In Sulaimaniya, in 1800, 16 years after the establishment of the city, a Jewish traveler, Edelman, reported that the Jews in Sulaimaniya “enjoy equal rights” from the authorities and live a “life of comfort and paradise, friendship and brotherhood.”²⁶ David D’Beth Hillel reported in 1826–27 that the pasha’s treasurer was the president of the Jewish community.²⁷ Most Jewish families in Kurdish urban centers earned their living as merchants. In Zakho alone, approximately half of the Jewish population earned their living by means of trade. In 1945, a Jewish emissary who visited Zakho reported that the Jews there worked in agriculture, crafts, smuggling and the transfer of lumber on rafts.²⁸ Like the Jews of Zakho, many Jews in Dohuk, Aqra, Amadiya, Arbil, Kirkuk and Sulaimaniya dealt in commerce. Jewish merchants maintained regular commercial contact with associates in Baghdad, Kirkuk, Arbil and Mosul. Several enterprising merchants traveled as far as Moscow, Tiflis, Tabriz, Esterkhan, Bombay and Calcutta.²⁹

In Kurdish, the general term for merchant is *bazirgan*.³⁰ Most urban Jews lived in separate neighborhoods (NA, *maḥalit hozaye*, Kurd., *majalah cûleke*), and they had representatives in the municipal administration based recently on the new municipal law of 1929.³¹ The Jewish communities had been traditionally recognized as a millet or religious community.³² In modern Iraq,³³ one of four parliament seats reserved for the Jews was for the northern Kurdish region. Many earned their living from trade and were merchants, peddlers, shopkeepers, loggers, raft-men and muleteers. Others worked as craftsmen, jewelers and farmers.

Most Jewish peddlers came from urban centers; only a small number of rural Jews worked occasionally as peddlers. In any case, most if not all their routes passed through rural and tribal regions. The city best known for its Jewish peddlers was Zakho, which was surrounded by hundreds of satellite villages. Peddlers would tour the villages, back and forth, usually in the spring and fall. The peddler would develop unique relationships with the tribal Kurds who would host him during his stopover in their village. These hosts were called *mare-bêsa* (NA, house-owner, host) for they hosted the Jewish peddlers in their home during their trips. The peddler would receive hospitality, some food, usually bread and tea, and shelter at the house of his host. He would cook his own *kosher* food and use his own pan and plate, according to Jewish dietary law. From time to time, he would give his host and his wife gifts or other desired goods.

In addition to material goods and merchandise, the peddlers circulated reports and folktales as entertainment in the isolated villages they visited. Acting as storytellers became almost second to being peddlers. Over time, Jewish peddlers developed the requisite skills of storytelling, and some became noted storytellers. This quality helped them in their relations with the Muslim villagers and smoothed their trade routes into the villages. Bois stressed that among the Kurds, *çirokbêj* (Kurd., storytelling) is “highly esteemed.”³⁴ The Jewish storyteller would sit in the *dîwanxane* (Kurd., guest room/house) of the local agha and tell news of tribal feuds and folktales. According to Rand and Rush, it seemed as if he “had saved his tales” from the entire year, and “they burst forth like a fountain of water.”³⁵

Jews lived in hundreds of villages throughout Kurdistan. Layard, around the middle of the 19th century, came across a large camp of nomadic Jews and visited their tents. It was on the road between Bashqala and Van, but according to Layard, there were many flock-keepers like them, spread throughout the mountains.³⁶

Hay concluded (1921) that the country between the two Zab Rivers was predominantly agricultural, and commerce was of secondary importance. Large numbers of Jewish villagers labored in agriculture, as farmers, owners of livestock, vine growers and the like, either on their own land, leased land or as day workers.³⁷ Van Bruinessen argues that until the beginning of the 20th century, Kurdish villages were self-sufficient in most products, and “most of the specialized crafts were practiced by the Christian and Jewish minorities in Kurdistan.”³⁸ Rural Jews labored mostly as weavers or dyers, occupations that were essential for the Kurds. There was hardly a village without one or two Jewish families who had no contact with their fellow Jews. Hence, we “understand the original, tragic meaning of exile and dispersion,” noted W. J. Fischel.³⁹

Jews were rarely harmed within their village or within the inhabited jurisdiction of their patron tribe. Within the tribe, the agha would usually protect the Jews from the local tribesmen and villagers. Around 1913, Sykes met three Jews from the Hakkārī region “traveling unarmed with various goods.” Sykes argued that these Jews “are practically immune from robbery and can travel in their own districts without fear.”⁴⁰ Many villages had one or two Jewish families, while at least one village recently, Sandur, not far from Dohuk, was entirely Jewish.⁴¹ During the early part of the 20th century, three Muslim Kurdish families still lived in Sandur, but their work on Saturdays troubled the harmony of the Jewish *Sabbath*. The Jewish mukhtar of Sandur, who was well-connected, asked a powerful friend, a judge from Dohuk, to relocate the Muslim Kurds from Sandur. Based on the agreement, the Jews were obliged to buy the houses belonging to the Kurds who moved to the outskirts of Sandur, leaving the core of the village to the Jews.⁴²

Indeed, in recent centuries, the Jews leaned on the rabbis in Baghdad, as can be seen in the responsa literature (שו"ת), but the Jewish learning shined in the 17th century, with a Jewish feminine precedent. Asenath Barzani (1590–1670) was a daughter of a noted scholar, Rabbi Samuel Barzani (b.1560) who taught in Mosul, Aqra and Amadiya. She married her father's favorite student, Yaacob Mizrahi, who pledged she would not be bothered with domestic work and would only focus on religious studies. Following his death, she became the head of the *yeshiva*⁴³ and the main rabbinic scholar in Kurdistan.⁴⁴

Recently, the education in urban centers was basic, as most children attended classes of rabbis at the synagogue for a few years until they joined the workforce. Writing was not common among them, and only a few individuals knew how to read and write. The girls knew only how to recite the “Shema Yisrael.”⁴⁵ Their main requirement was the household duties such as cleaning and cooking.

Tradition was very important for the Jews of Kurdistan. They observed their traditions, and no Jew ever worked on *Shabbat*. Education has changed somewhat when the “Alliance Israelite Universelle” began its activity in the early 20th century among the Jews of Kurdistan. They opened schools in Mosul, Kirkuk and in Sena (also spelled Sinna, Senneh, Sanandaj),⁴⁶ the capital of Persian Kurdistan, one for boys and one for girls. Until the Iranian Revolution (1979), the city had a small Aramaic-speaking Jewish community of about 4,000 people.⁴⁷

An old tradition among them has been pilgrimage to the grave, known as *ziyara* (NA., visit), of the biblical and righteous rabbis, the most popular of which was the graveyard of the prophet Nahum, which is supposedly in Alkosh near Mosul, “which seems to have the quality of a national sanctuary for the Kurdish Jews.” While pilgrims would visit the shrine

throughout the year, during *Shavuot*, known as '*ez-ziyara* (NA, "the holiday of pilgrimage"), several thousand people would come to stay at the compound of Nahum's grave. Rich noted in 1921 that Jews from all parts of Kurdistan, as far as Urmia and Julamerk (Hakkari) and Kotchannes, come on pilgrimage to it.⁴⁸

Every year, the Jews of Kurdistan used to go out to the countryside at the end of Passover to spend time with the family and celebrate. This was a secular, civil, communal tradition of recreation in nature, known as "*Seharane*," a picnic in the countryside, for a few days on meadows alongside streams, with plenty of food. Beginning in 1975, the annual *Saharane* celebration was celebrated in major parks in Israel, but it took place during the holiday of *Sukkot* (Tabernacles).

Just before the time of their final mass migration to Israel during 1951–52, about 25,000 Jews had been scattered throughout 200 villages and several towns, the overwhelming majority of which were in Iraq, 150 in total, 24 in Turkey, 19 in Persia and one community, al-Qamishli, in Syria. In Iraq, they lived within the boundaries of the provinces of Mosul, in Zakho, Dohuk, Aqra, Amadiya and Zibar,⁴⁹ as well as within the provinces of Kirkuk, Arbil and Sulaimaniya.

The previous centuries

Kurdistan was incorporated into the Ottoman Empire in the 16th century, but the Turks allowed local principalities to rule. For 500 years or so, no major political change occurred until the middle of the 19th century when Turkey crushed the Kurdish principalities in an attempt to restore its central authority. "The Jews were severely affected by the struggle and bloodshed," even more than they were affected by tyranny and caprices of some of the aghas. The collapse of the Kurdish principalities, notably Bohtan and Soran, shaped the fate of the population, as well as judicial and administrative reforms such as the *Tabu* or land registration reform of 1858 that allowed the emergence of a new and smaller, local, tribal cast of chieftains. The political instability and the emergence of this new class of chieftains and shaikhs steered numerous feuds and infighting that had influenced the security in the tribal region.

The 19th century provides gloomy accounts on the treatment of the Jews. One must note that we do not have a complete and detailed portrait of this topic, but only occasional reports. Given the dearth of documentation, it is quite reasonable that extreme events would attract the attention of contemporary observers. The gloomy accounts include blood libels, presumably originated by Christians, Greeks and Armenians in Persian Kurdistan; in Maraga (whose population was completely dismantled) in 1820; and in Urmia and Salmas in 1820–21.⁵⁰ The famous traveler Israel Joseph Benjamin, known as "Benjamin II," reported in 1848 on heavy taxes, forced labor and extortion of Jews by their aghas who treated them as their own property, at times selling them as slaves.⁵¹

In 1820, J. C. Rich reported that the tribesmen treated the villagers "as if they were created for their use." Rich noted that a tribesman once confessed to him "that the clans conceived the peasants to be merely created for their use; and wretched in deed is the condition of these Koordish cultivators." A chieftain explained to him, "I am taking from them dues...*zakat* (Ar. alms), or ten percent... and extort from them as much as I can, in all possible means."⁵² Benjamin II was astonished that Muslim oppression "did not stop even at the doorstep of the house of God." Attacks on synagogues, religious processions and ceremonies, and against Jewish women in reservoirs used for ritual purification were reported, some of which ended with fatal results.⁵³

In Arbil, Benjamin II reported on a brutal attack on a traditional Jewish procession with *Torah* scrolls to a new synagogue, with music and dances, by Muslims who killed several, injured others and razed the new synagogue to the ground. An ancient *Torah* scroll was transferred from Nisibin to Mardin and then to Diyarbakir, in order to protect it, due to repeated pillage and lack of a sense of security.⁵⁴ Benjamin II also reported of an assault on a synagogue in Rawanduz, on the Jewish New Year's Day, when the *shofar* (an ancient musical horn made of a ram's horn and used for Jewish religious purposes) sounded in the synagogue, and the Kurds rushed into the temple, attacked women and maltreated them, broke the symbolic trumpet and compelled the Jews to stop their ceremony.⁵⁵ Another bizarre practice that was widely reported had been the removal of corpses of Jews from their graves at night, cutting off the heads and throwing them into the river because of a belief that this would hasten the rain. Benjamin II was also astonished by the submissive manner in which the Jews accepted their fate: "My heart is burned from sorrow on [for] my people.... Our poor brethren think that it is their destiny to suffer, and submit patiently to their fate; the slightest improvement of which they consider an unexpected happiness."⁵⁶

Nevertheless, he also provided brighter pictures of "freedom from all oppression." Many were very wealthy, particularly those families engaged in agriculture that owned land and herds. Trying to explain the enduring Jewish presence despite their oppression, he explained that "they can trade throughout the country as much as they like." The fact the Jewish emigration had never stopped, indicates that his explanation was decent but partial. Nevertheless, the tribal dues they paid and the greedy aghas who wanted to keep the flow of a reliable source of income enabled their survival. The dues or commissions are known as *aghatusa* or *aghwusa* (Aramaic, the right of the agha for dues; Kurd., *aghati*).

A major occurrence in Kurdistan during the third and fourth decades of the 19th century involved the struggle between the major Kurdish principalities and the central Turkish administration. After so many years that partial control of Kurdistan was suitable for the Turkish government, the administration began changing its policy and seeking full control over the Kurdish and other peripheral principalities. Before the mid-19th century, Amadiya underwent a change that affected the city and its Jewish community. In 1828, Mîr (Kurd., prince) Muhammad of Rawanduz, also known as Mîrê Kor (Kurd., the Blind), laid siege to the town and conquered it. He plundered Amadiya and mistreated in particular its Jewish inhabitants, an important segment of the population who "were treated with merciless cruelty and oppression."⁵⁷ Many Jews were forced to migrate, and the less fortunate were subjected to his tyranny.⁵⁸ Around that time, the Jewish community of Amadiya had lost its premiere status to the Jewish community of Zakho.

By 1838, the Blind Mîr succeeded in subjugating other urban centers with Jewish populations, such as Rania, Koi, Arbil, Aqra and Zakho, penetrating as far as Jezira and Mardin. It is unclear whether Jews were treated as badly in these centers as in Amadiya. In 1838, the Turkish army captured Mîr Muhammad and subsequently executed him. This was one of the last semi-independent entities ruled by Kurdish tribal leaders. From the mid-19th century onward, the Turkish authorities administered this district more or less directly.⁵⁹

Following the removal of the Blind Agha, the Pasha of Mosul ruled Amadiya with an iron fist. The condition of the Jews improved a little, but they were obliged to carry water and stones from the plain up to the citadel, and to do every form of degrading work, which impeded their industry. Within a short time, this once flourishing community was reduced to a community of 100 families.⁶⁰ The economic conditions of the Jews deteriorated following the increasing political insecurity.⁶¹ The situation in Amadiya continued to worsen. In 1871, during another war over the city, the Muslims attacked the Jewish community; they

robbed the two synagogues and took the Torah scroll ornaments.⁶² No wonder that in 1881, the number of Jewish families reported to be living in Amadiya had been reduced to only 50.⁶³ These events ended the supremacy of the Jewish community of Amadiya and led to the emergence of the Jewish community of Zakho as an important urban Jewish center.

In 1863, the chief Rabbi in Istanbul learned of forced conversions, forced labor, removal of bodies from their graves and prohibition to buy estates and to tend the herds, which were occurring mostly in the communities of southeastern Turkey. Nevertheless, the picture was not always gloomy. In some towns, the local governors maintained their duties to protect the Jews. In 1880, Mordechai Edelman reported from Diyarbakir that the “local governor is a human lover who behaves well with God and people,” and “defends our miserable brothers from any trouble fallen upon them” because of the locals’ “eternal hostility.”⁶⁴

Binder, who visited Kurdistan in 1886, commented that the Kurds robbed the country in their way and the Turks in their way.⁶⁵ This double scissors activity has been the fate of the population for centuries. In 1892, the Jewish leadership of Zakho complained that the Kurds carried out a pogrom, burning houses and synagogues. Seven Jews were killed, and many others were imprisoned and tortured, and the taxes levied on the Jewish community increased drastically.⁶⁶ In 1895, an anti-Jewish incident occurred in Sulaimaniya when 21 Muslims attacked several Jews who were traveling out of town and inflicted on them a “cruel pounding.” The perpetrators then entered the town and began attacking the Jews, who closed their stores and locked themselves up inside their homes. Six Jews, who had been caught in the streets, were badly tortured and their lives endangered. The aggressors broke into Jewish homes, plundered their property and raped their wives; they violated the synagogue and tore the Torah scrolls, taking gold and silver instruments. The governor of the town (*mutasarraf*) dispatched soldiers, but the rioters outnumbered them. On the following day, the army intervened and restored public order by arresting 50 insurgents.

The assailants explained that their shaikh had incited them, but the shaikh denied these allegations. He was eventually released. Apparently, several Muslims had joined a group of Jews who were sitting in an orchard near the synagogue, drinking alcohol. The shaikh, who saw them sitting together with a group of Jews drinking alcohol (probably ‘*arāq*’),⁶⁷ became infuriated and ordered the attack on the Jews. Some Kurds followed his order, and the Jews remained locked up in their homes for seven days until the rioters were caught, to the relief of the Jews. For some time, soldiers patrolled the Jewish neighborhood in order to keep law and order. Shortly afterward, 20 rioters were sentenced reportedly to between 15 and 18 years in prison. The remaining two rioters were expelled from Sulaimaniya.⁶⁸ The decisive response of the authority seems justified, but it had been much excessive in comparison to the lack of response, or even worse, the leniency, of the authorities to offenders of Jews in other times and places in Kurdistan. It is possible that the communal nature of the attack motivated the authorities to react, in this case. The authorities handed down long sentences against the insurgents, sending a clear message to the community that such acts of communal rioting against the Jews would not be tolerated. As suggested, it seemed to be an atypical incident, and the authorities dealt with the perpetrators severely.

The Jews and their Aghas

The interactions between the aghas and their Jews may instruct us with instances and patterns of action that prevailed in the tribal Kurdish society. Three patterns of patronage have been noted in urban centers. In the first pattern, the Jews enjoyed the patronage of a powerful agha, as in Zakho; in the second pattern, a wealthy Jewish family used its wealth to gain

influence and secure the well-being of the community (the Khawaja Khinno household in Aqra); in the third pattern, the Jews had to be resourceful and pay out money to satisfy the greed and capriciousness of urban aghas, as in Dohuk and Amadiya. The relations between the tribal and the Jewish families from Zakho and Aqra go back two, three or four generations, as far back as within the living memory of the Jewish informants. Not only in urban centers did the Jews have interactions with their aghas, but also in the rural regions, as may be seen in the following accounts.

Sa'id Agha was the main tribal ruler of the Doskis (in NA., Dostiknaye) whose jurisdiction stretched from around Dohuk up to the banks of the Khabor River. According to British military reports, Sa'id Beg (ca. 1890–1947) of Geramaweh near Dohuk was the only one in his tribe “of any influence.”⁶⁹ The British described Sa'id Agha as someone who “is usually behind all troubles in Dohuk.” In 1941, a feud between the Muslim Kurds of the village Yekmala (Kurd., one household) and the Jews of the village of Sandur ended with a lethal attack against Sandur, in which seven Jews were murdered, including the *mukhtar*.

Sa'id Agha, with both Sandur and Yekmala under his jurisdiction, apparently approved the attack. The murderers became *firars* (Kurd., escapees) and hid out in the mountains, while Sa'id Agha arranged reconciliation with the families of the victims. He gathered all the villagers of Sandur and tried to appease them while blaming their dead *mukhtar* for causing troubles for Yekmala. As strange as it may seem, some Jews from Sandur justified or at least understood the murder of their *mukhtar*. Sa'id Agha offered the victims' families 30 dinars as compensation for each person who was murdered. He managed to dismiss the charges, and the murderers were able to return to their village. It may be suggested that the very fact that only Jews populated the village facilitated this kind of massacre because in mixed villages, the Jews always enjoyed the protection and defense of the tribesmen. In a village such as Sandur, they enjoyed Jewish hegemony but lacked security.

The Sufi Shaikhs of the Naqshbandi *ṭarīqa* (sufi order) from the Barzani family were among the most influential in Kurdistan. They originated in the village of Barzan and became a powerful tribe that played a significant role in the Kurdish national movement up to this day.⁷⁰ Wigram noted the modesty of the Shaikh of Barzan: “even less powerful chiefs” live in large castles, but the shaikh of Barzan “dwells among his own people” and the shaikh was “a merciful over-lord,” known for his fair treatment of his subjects.

“When he was quarrelling with the government and became *firar* (Kurd., an escapee, an outlaw) in the mountains ... he reaped the fruit of his good treatment of his villagers, for not a man, Christian or Moslem, ever dreamt of betraying him to his foes.”⁷¹

Wigram also noted the compassion and benevolence of the Shaikhs of Barzan toward non-Muslims. At the beginning of the 20th century, Shaikh Abd al-Salam II refused to declare *jihād*, or holy war, against the local Assyrians of Tkhuma, as initiated by some of the Muslim Kurdish rivals of the Tkhuma.⁷² This report stands in contrast with other reports of oppression against Christians by other Kurdish shaikhs and aghas, such as Shaikh Sadiq of Nehri, who was reportedly “a terrible oppressor of Christians.”⁷³

In 1944, during a visit in Aqra, Mulla Mustafa Barzani⁷⁴ approached his longtime Jewish friend from the main household in Aqra, Khawaja Khinno. Before his departure, at the courtyard in front of the police station, he distanced himself from the crowd and consulted with the two brothers. He told David Khawaja Khinno, ‘Hajji Qadir Agha Zibari (with whom he had just struck a tribal deal) spoke with me about marrying his sister and Shaikh Mahmud Agha Zibari spoke with me about marrying his daughter.’ David Khawaja Khinno

told him, “in my opinion, Shaikh Ahmad should marry the sister of Hajji Qadir Agha and you should take the daughter of Mahmud Agha.” Mulla Mustafa Barzani told him, “in that case, prepare gold jewelry for the bride.”⁷⁵

It may have been a genuine consultation, or a polite prelude for the request of gold and jewelry for the fiancées of the tribal Barzani leaders. In either case, it was rooted in a tradition between the families that lasted, at that point, at least two generations. Nevertheless, as the Jewish informants explained, “there was no time to prepare gold for the prospective brides.” Mulla Mustafa wanted the gold immediately, so David Khawaja Khinno sent messengers to bring the personal gold and jewelry of his two daughters, Salima and Manira. Mulla Mustafa Barzani took their gold and jewelry, put it in a bag and sent it to the prospective brides. Interestingly, when Barzani visited the Khawaja Khinno’s household in Tiberius, Israel, 30 years later, in 1973, he brought with him a large golden jewelry piece for Salima (Manira has passed away) and handed it to her in an honorable manner.⁷⁶

In 1943, when Eliyahu Khawaja Khinno died, Mulla Mustafa came in person to Aqra to pay condolences. He said to the entourage surrounding him, pointing out to the Khawaja Khinno household, “we are regarded as one family, in spite of the fact that we are from different faiths. I do not want that any harm would occur to them.” In one of these occasions, Mulla Mustafa was granted with a pistol, which he refused (I have many, he reportedly said), and a golden dagger, which he chose to keep. Mulla Mustafa (b.1903) and Dawud Khawaja Khinno (b.1895) had been lifetime friends, and their relationships facilitated the trust that was later created between Barzani and the Israeli government during the late 1960s and early 1970s.⁷⁷ Mulla Mustafa Barzani had asked his associates in the Mossad to try and locate for him his longtime friend David Khawaja Khinno. The Mossad in Israel managed to find David, who then owned a vegetable store in the hills of Tiberius. They took a photograph of David Khawajah Khinno in his old, plain, working clothes, and it was handed in the Kurdish mountains to the Kurdish leader. Reportedly, the response of Mulla Mustafa clarified to his Israeli associates the importance of David Khawaja Khinno in the eyes of Barzani. He remembered David as a wealthy, well-dressed Jewish leader, and was surprised to see a poorly looking grocer. The Mossad acted once again and provided a lengthy voice recording message in which David Khawaja Khinno talked to Barzani and told him of the development he had experienced since they last met, around 1945, when Mulla Mustafa with his soldiers left for a refuge period in Russia. During three Barzani’s visit to Israel, an important time was reserved for meetings with David Khawaja Khinno, once in the house of David Khawaja Khinno, surrounded by members of the family and neighbors of the Jewish Kurdish community. In the 1970s, Mulla Mustafa Barzani returned the golden dagger to David Khawaja Khinno, who, in turn, gave it to Haim Levakov, an Israeli Mossad agent who was an envoy to Barzani during the late 1960s and the early 1970s.⁷⁸

Generally, there were no synagogues in the villages. A unique character of Mulla Mustafa is discovered through his behavior in the village of Mergasor (Kurd., Red Meadow), in the early 1930s. He informed the Jews of the village,

soon, I will launch a war against my tribal enemies and the government, and the roads will be blocked. [Since you the Jews, cannot maintain your diet without a kosher meat] I will pay you to bring a slaughterer [a butcher] since without a slaughterer, how could you live [without kosher meat]?

Usually, a wandering Jewish rabbi, from a nearby town, would travel once or twice a year to remote villages and perform the main Jewish duties for the population, notably the

slaughtering of animals. But if a war or tribal feud occurred, this would obstruct the safe movement and arrival of passengers. The Jews invited an elderly slaughterer “whose hands were barely working.” He not only slaughtered their animals but also taught their children the Hebrew alphabet at the same opportunity. “Thanks to Mulla Mustafa Barzani I learned Hebrew,” an informant told me who was lucky to receive an education, unlike most children in the rural region.⁷⁹

‘Abd al-Karim Agha was the greatest benefactor of the Jews of Zakho. He became a myth in his life and remained a myth after his death when the Jews of Zakho, who immigrated to Israel, would always hail his deeds. Reportedly, he held no official title, although in practice, he acted as the *de facto* commissioner supervising the marketplace. He maintained everyday contact with the Jews, many of whom were merchants and shopkeepers. He played an important role in protecting the Jews, preventing Muslim Kurds from plotting against them. The Jews called him a “righteous gentile,” a title reserved for a protector of Diaspora Jews during times of tribulation.

During the 1940s and up to 1951, the Jews were occasionally subjected to provocation. These events occurred mainly during the last years of the Jewish presence in Zakho. However, “if someone harassed one of the Jews in the market and ‘Abd al-Karim Agha learned about it, he would come to the market and hit this person, and no one could save him from his hands.” During the final migration of the Jewish community in 1951–52, ‘Abd al-Karim Agha supervised in person the trips of the three convoys of Jews who left Zakho via Mosul to Baghdad. He went back and forth riding his own car with each group. The Jews, in retrospect, viewed this gesture of ‘Abd al-Karim Agha as a symbol of his commitment.

The British described Shaikh Muhammad Rabatke as “a character with a few wild followers over whom he has little control,” but his Jewish protégés praised him. The following incident occurred during the late Ottoman period. It illustrates the rural conduct of justice and involved the theft of a sheep belonging to a Jew. He placed the sheep in the care of the village shepherd, but “one evening, the sheep did not return home. My father asked the shepherd, ‘What happened?’ He replied: “nothing happened; there were no wolves, no thieves, why the sheep did not return home?” My father asked the neighbors, but they had not seen the sheep. Three days later, he went to Shaikh Muhammad and told him, “my sheep was lost; from the two thousand sheep only my sheep was lost.” The shaikh told him, “Go and ask around.” He replied, “I have already asked around and I waited three days before coming to see you and bothering you.” The Shaikh told him, “do not worry any more. Leave this matter to me. Go home and say nothing about it.” This occurred around the Jewish Feast of Tabernacles, around October. Nothing happened until the Jewish Feast of Pentecost (Heb., *Shavuot*) around May. Indeed, Shaikh Muhammad had many informers, but he did not find out any information.

Eventually, because of an argument that erupted between the wives of the two thieves, the details about the theft and the identity of the thieves became clear. The thieves were two Kurdish neighbors, Slaiman and Hussain. They caught the sheep in the forest and slaughtered it. Between their houses lived a Kurdish woman named Ayshe who overheard them. The house of the Jews was on the way to the fountain. On her way to the fountain, Ayshe stopped by the door and said, “oh door, these [so-and-so] persons stole your sheep.” The following day, the mother of the family met the Shaikh’s wife, Halime Khatun, near the fountain and informed her of the news. Later, the shaikh sent his servants to summon Slaiman. He told his servant, “Bring him in any condition, even if he is naked.” The servant went and told him, “Sulaiman, the shaikh loves you and wants to speak to you.” It was in the evening. He arose and went to the shaikh, who invited him to sit down. Sulaiman asked the shaikh, “What do

you want from me?” He said, “I have one question. If you wish to tell me the truth, say so.” He said, “Yes, agha.” The shaikh asked him, “Did you steal the Jew’s sheep from the herd?” He admitted, “Yes sir, I stole it.” The shaikh responded, “You may go home.” The following day, he summoned Hussain; he asked him the same question and received the same answer. Then he dismissed him too.

The shaikh had patience; he was clever. He waited eight days and then sent the two thieves the following message:

Tomorrow morning, I want you to provide one sheep for each leg of the stolen sheep. Each one of you should bring four sheep, both of you together eight sheep. You should go and tie them near the house of the Jew. In addition, you have three days to leave my village with your wives and families. If you do not leave within three days, I will burn you inside your houses.

The punishment was severe for the two villagers could not feed their families if they were forced to leave their estates. “Without cultivating their land their children were doomed to die from hunger.”

The following morning, when the Jewish family woke up they found eight sheep tied up near their house on Slaiman and Hussain’s plots of land. Slaiman and Hussain begged the shaikh for forgiveness. They tied a rope around their necks and climbed up to the house of the shaikh. Near the room of the shaikh, they got down on all fours, as if they were dogs; they lay down on the floor and went into his room. The shaikh told his guards, “Take these dogs out,” as if they contaminated the room. The mukhtar of the village asked the shaikh to have mercy on their children. The shaikh said, “If the residents from my village behave like this towards the Jew, how will other persons, from the outside, behave”? In the end, however, Shaikh Muhammad finally allowed them to remain in the village, but not before they suffered humiliation and condemnation. His stance in protecting the Jews of his village, however, made a strong statement.

Once, during the 1930s, a Turkish official visited Rabatke while Shaikh Muhammad was away. On his way, the Turkish official saw a Jewish woman weaving carpets. “He told his guard, go and bring this carpet.” Her son told me years later, “we had no choice. He gave my father a few pennies, to avoid the accusation that he took it without paying.” The next morning, when Shaikh Muhammad came back home and learned what happened, he summoned his son, Sayyid al-Ja’far, and dictated a letter to the Turkish official:

carry the carpet and return it to the Jews yourself. Nevertheless, if you are ashamed to bring it yourself, you should pay three times the price of a new carpet. The shaikh summoned my father and instructed him to give this letter to the official himself.

When my father arrived in Sware, his village, the official told his *gendarme*, “hold the Jew here.” He read the letter and told my father, “Take the carpet.” My father refused. He told him, “If I take it, the shaikh will kill me.” The official put in the envelope, three times the price of a new carpet. He was an important official; nevertheless, Shaikh Muhammad treated him, reportedly, just as he treated other thieves.⁸⁰

In 1931, members of a Jewish family residing in Rabatke planned to immigrate to Palestine. They decided to sell their property in the neighboring villages and traveled to the village of Spindare. “We walked in the street of Spindare. There were no Jews residing there; only Kurds lived there. One person was sitting on a chair in front of his house. He asked us, ‘You

must be Jews?’ We said, ‘Yes.’ He asked, ‘What are you going to do here?’ We said, ‘To sell our goods.’ He suggested, ‘Come and stay in my house for the night.’ His name was Hajji Abd al-Qadir.” The Jews of Rabatke and Hajji Abd al-Qadir had a long discussion during that evening. They told him of their intention to immigrate to Palestine, and he told them that he had made a pilgrimage to both Mecca and Jerusalem. He described Jerusalem quite accurately, as “a poor town, with no work [for its inhabitants], no land and no agriculture.” He suggested Haifa, as “a city with a harbor,” where they could find jobs and earn their living.

The Jewish men stayed in his house overnight, and the following morning they prepared to leave to sell their goods. They had tied up a mule and two donkeys near his house, but in the morning, they discovered that one of the donkeys was missing along with its load. Its rope had been cut. Their host, Hajji Abd al-Qadir, had already left and gone out to work in his field. Mizrahi recounted, “I told my uncles, ‘Let us go to the mukhtar,’ to the agha of the village. His name was Amin... We told him the whole story. We asked him to help us find our donkey that was lost.” The mukhtar told us,

What can I do? I know nothing and I cannot help you. I am not the keeper of your donkey. There are travelers who come here from Syria, Lebanon and many other countries. This is a public domain. How can I find your donkey now?

The Jews returned to Rabatke without their donkey and the goods. They went to Shaikh Muhammad Rabatke and told him the whole story. He asked them, “Why didn’t you go to the mukhtar?” They told him what the mukhtar had said. Shaikh Muhammad called his son Sayyid Ja’far and told him,

Write a letter to the mukhtar Amin; write to him: your name will be obliterated [If you would not act promptly]. The donkey belonging to our Jews was stolen. Even if it was stolen by travelers from Lebanon, from Egypt or Syria, I want it [back] from you, even if the donkey has risen to heaven.

The walking distance between Spindare and Rabatke was four hours. Shaikh Muhammad then summoned Mordechai, the son of Yoseph, the Jew whose donkey had been stolen. He told him, “Take this letter and give it to the mukhtar [of Spindare].” The shaikh warned him, “Do not drink and do not eat anything at his house” [in order not to allow him to receive anything from him and in order to teach him a lesson, explains Mizrahi].

Mordechai walked to Spindare, delivered Shaikh Muhammad’s letter to the mukhtar Amin, and returned immediately to Rabatke without even resting, eating or drinking, after four hours on the road. He returned and told Shaikh Muhammad, “I did what you told me.” The shaikh told him, “I hope that the donkey will not be returned. Do not worry; I will give you four mules in its stead.”

Well, we returned [from Spindare] on Thursday. He [Mordechai] took the letter to [the agha of] Spindare on Friday. On Saturday, we discovered the donkey walking alone to his home. Someone had brought it to the outskirts of the village and let it loose to return alone. The donkey was returned with the merchandise on it.

Thus, Shaikh Muhammad was well aware of his power, and the mukhtar of Spindare recognized his ability as well, as indicated both in the determination of Shaikh Muhammad and in the quick response of the villagers from Spindare.⁸¹

In 2014, a great grandchild of Shaikh Muhammad who now lives in Dohuk, Wahid b. Shaikh Raqib, contacted me following the publication of my book in Kurdish, in which he read the stories of the Jews and Shaikh Muhammad of Rabatke. He provided more details on the shaikh. We were told of an old Jewish cemetery in the west of the village, on the road to the Nisira village, called *gilkana jiya* (Kurd., the graves of Jews), indicating that they have lived in Rabatke for a long time. According to the shaikhs and elderly of Rabatke, the shaikh regarded them as subjects of the village, or in fact as complete citizens. His family members used the Arabic word “aṣḥâb,” allies, or friends. The choice of the word “friends” is interesting since the Qur’an clearly warns against taking the Jews and the Christians as friends or allies (Surat AL-Ma’idah (the table), verse 51).

Clearly, the study of the tribal Kurdish society reveals many Kurdish aghas who were greedy, cruel or tough in their treatment of their Jewish subjects and protégés, but we also came across Kurdish chieftains who helped and protected their Jewish subjects in a remarkable manner, as shown earlier.

The last chapter of the Jews in Kurdistan

World War I, commonly known as “saferbalek,” or general mobilization, shattered the urban Jewish communities. The Jews suffered from famine, arbitrary measures and forceful conscription campaigns. The Jews and Christians, who were *dhimmīs*, paid various taxes other than those paid by Muslim civilians, the most prominent of which was the *jizya*, or poll tax, that the Ottoman Empire abolished in 1855.⁸² The new compulsory draft law excluded Christians and Jews, who could pay instead *badal-‘askariyya*, a tax exempting them from military service.⁸³ From 1885 onward, this law was enforced more strictly,⁸⁴ although it exempted clerics, cripples and the chronically ill from the payment. In 1909, the Ottomans introduced a new law of compulsory service for every Ottoman citizen from the age of 19. A short time before the beginning of war, the draft age was lowered to 18, although non-Muslim citizens still could be exempt from military service by paying a fee.⁸⁵ Most of the Jews preferred to pay the *badal* tax in order to redeem themselves. Only those incapable of paying the tax were drafted into the army.

The Jews, who had never been part of the military before and did not feel any commitment to the government, attempted to evade the draft. They either escaped, seeking shelter in remote villages, far from the hands of the authorities, or paid bribes to postpone recruitment. Many others had been nevertheless drafted, but defected, and the authorities arrested their family members, notably sisters, to put pressure on them to turn themselves in. Still, a considerable number of Jews had been drafted; many were killed or injured and even became prisoners of war. By the end of World War I, most Jewish communities in south-eastern Turkey were devastated by the horrors of the war and the massacres of the Christians (Armenians, 1894–96; 1914–18 and Assyrians, 1914–18).

In times of war and uncertainty, the Jews tended to immigrate to a safer place. This has been their behavioral pattern. The majority of the Jews of southeastern Turkey immigrated to Palestine either before or after the war. Across the border, in Iraqi Kurdistan, the situation improved after World War I, with the British restoring peace and order and extending protection for the minorities. Nevertheless, a growing number of Jews from Iraq immigrated constantly to Palestine, but the effect of the British reign did not last long.

In 1941, the pro-Nazi Rashid ‘Ali coup inflamed anti-Semitic riots against Jews in Baghdad, known as the *Farhud*.⁸⁶ These were echoed in Kurdish towns with intimidation from instigators who wished to take advantage of the state of emergency, especially on

Fridays, following the public prayer. However, sensible local leaders and chieftains usually stopped the deterioration of the situation. The position of the Jews further worsened with the intensifying Arab-Jewish warfare in Palestine and the establishment of the State of Israel. The presence of Palestinian refugees and exiles in Iraq, notably the mufti Haj Amin al-Husseini, and the participation of Iraqi and Kurdish soldiers in the war in Palestine, increased the level of hatred toward local Jews.⁸⁷

The majority of the Jews of Kurdistan lived in Iraq. Prior to their final mass immigration to Israel during 1951–52, about 25,000 Kurdish Jews had been scattered in Iraq. By then, approximately 8,000–10,000 had already been living in Israel. In Persian Kurdistan, out of 10,330 Jews in 1953, about 6,200 had immigrated to Israel. In southeastern Turkey, as noted earlier, the numbers of Jews dwindled drastically due to World War I and the massacres, which had a negative effect on the minorities. In 1927, only about 2,700 Jews of all ethnic backgrounds remained in this region.⁸⁸

The Jews of Kurdistan immigrated to Palestine as early as the 16th century. Their last chapter in Kurdistan coincided with the establishment of the Jewish State (1948). Their last few years were marked by demonstrations (in which “Death to the Jews!” was a popular slogan) against Israel. During the last 11 years of the Jewish presence in Kurdistan, Jews faced raids and instances of tribal intimidation as well as detention and jailing on various “Zionist” charges. The establishment of the State of Israel was portrayed as a point in time when relations with their neighbors changed even more drastically. The position of the Jews in Iraqi Kurdistan further deteriorated following the war of 1948 between Arab countries and the Jews and after the establishment of the State of Israel. The tension between Muslims and Jews increased as Iraq and several other Arab countries joined in the fighting against the new Jewish State and were subsequently defeated. The hostility against the Jews in the parliament, in the press and in the streets was echoed in investigations and arrest of Jews on a variety of accusations.⁸⁹

Before the emigration, the Jews of Kurdistan came under growing disturbing pressure from their Muslim neighbors and from government agencies. The Jews prepared to leave behind their houses and properties and to immigrate to a country that they hardly knew anything about. The volume of business shrank. Mutual trust, which was necessary for business transactions, evaporated as the Muslims realized that the Jews were going to immigrate. The imminent migration of Kurdish Jews intensified the attempts by Jewish merchants to redeem their debts from business associates. For obvious reasons, not many debtors of Kurdish or Arab origin were willing to pay their debts to Jewish creditors just a short while before the emigration of Jews (after which the debt would be invalid).

This method of selling on credit was rooted in the Kurdish tribal setting and was one component of the complex relationship between Jewish traders and Kurdish tribesmen. This approach was partly related to the need of Jewish peddlers to sell all their goods while roaming in the villages and was partly based on the lack of money in the tribal society. This method was also part of the economic dominance and exploitation of Jewish subjects within the tribal Kurdish society. The Muslim population was well aware of the pending emigration of the Jews, and as a result, many Jews were not able to sell their assets at all or sold them at a very low price. Kurdish buyers exploited the situation and bought estates at a considerable reduction. Yoseph Gamlieli sold his vineyards for 200 Iraqi dinars, instead of a reported value of 1,000 dinars. In March 1951, before the start of the emigration, the Iraqi government decreed a “*tajmīd*” (Arab., freezing) of the assets, estates and property of the Jews emigrating from Iraq. This decree made many wealthy Jews, who had been registered for emigration, penniless. Nevertheless, a small number of Jews were able to bypass the decree.

On March 9, 1950, the Iraqi Parliament passed the law allowing the Jews to emigrate with the proviso that they renounce their Iraqi citizenship. Later, the Parliament also passed law no. 5/1951, freezing all of the assets of the Jews.⁹⁰ The giving up of the Iraqi citizenship was unparalleled and resulted in the mass registration for “Aliya” or immigration to Israel. Between 1949 and 1952, 123,371 Iraqi Jews, including all of the Jews of Kurdistan, were airlifted to Israel in what became to be known as “Operation Ezra and Nehemiah.”⁹¹ By 1952, practically all the Jews of Iraqi Kurdistan had immigrated to the State of Israel, thus ending the long historical chapter of Jews in the Kurdish lands. Dreams and prayers carried in their hearts for centuries were about to be fulfilled.

In Israel, 67 years after the mass migration, most of the Jews who came originally from Kurdistan had passed away. Only a handful of elderly Jews remained, most of whom have transmitted the Kurdish culture to their children and grandchildren. In Jerusalem and other communities throughout Israel, there are hundreds of thousands of second-, third- and fourth-generation offspring of Kurdish origin, who are well versed in the Kurdish heritage, music and cuisine, and express keen sentiments regarding their Kurdish identity.

Notes

- 1 The text of Benjamin of Tudela is available on the internet, as are many classic writings. www.sacred-texts.com/jud/mhl/mhl20.htm.
- 2 Consult Elkan Nathan Adler, *Jewish Travelers in the Middle Ages*, New York: Dover Publications, 1930.
- 3 Note that most of the subjects in this article have received a wider and lengthy treatment in the following books and articles of mine. Many topics that are treated henceforth are based on hundreds of interviews conducted with elderly Jewish Kurdish informants, within the framework of an oral history project designed to unveil the history of the Jews and the tribal Kurdish society. In the endnotes, henceforth, they are indicated with the full name and a number sign (#) such as “Moshe Yoseph Mizrahi (I#24),” that is informant no. 24. For more details on the subjects discussed in this article, see Mordechai Zaken respectively as follows, “Tribal Chieftains and their Jewish Subjects in Kurdistan: A Comparative Study in Survival,” PhD Thesis, The Hebrew University of Jerusalem, 2003; *The Jews of Kurdistan and their Tribal Chieftains: A Study in Survival*, second, revised Ebook edition, Jerusalem, 2015; and Brill, “Jewish Subjects and their Tribal Chieftains in Kurdistan A Study in Survival,” *Jewish Identities in a Changing World*, vol. 9, 2007. One may also consult the following translations into Arabic and Kurdish, *Yahud Kurdistan wa-ru’as’uhum al-qabaliyun: Dirasa fi fan al-baqa’*, trans. Su’ad M. Khader; Reviewers: ‘Abd al-Fatah Ali Yihya and Farast Mir’i; the Center for Academic Research, Beirut, 2013 (Arabic); D. Moredixai Zakin, *Culekekany Kurdistan*, Sulaimaniya and Erbil, 2015 (Sorani), as well as partial translations of the book, *Jews, Kurds and Arabs, between 1941 and 1952*, trans. by Dr. Amr Taher Ahmed into Kurmanji, Metin no. 148, October 2006: 98–123; and “Juifs, Kurdes et Arabs, entre 1941 et 1952,” *Etudes Kurdes*, no. 7, May 2005: 7–45. See also Erich Brauer, *The Jews of Kurdistan*, ed. Raphael Patai, Wayne State University Press, 1993; Yig’al Moshe Israel, Yig’al Baldgrin, and Zion Suleiman, *Across the River from Where Our Ancestors Came: The Jews in Urfa and Southeastern Turkey, Their immigration to Eretz Israel and Their Assimilation There*, Rishon Lezion Museum, 2013 (Heb); Ora Shwartz-Be’eri, *The Jews of Kurdistan: Daily Life, Customs, Arts and Crafts*, UPNE, 2000; Barukh, Yitzhak, Hessne, Jerusalem, 2012 (Heb); David Salman, *I Followed You, Jerusalem. (Heb.)*; *The Tells of Sabtuna [Nickname for Grandma]: Simha Salha Levi, 1920–2001*, Jerusalem, 2014 (Heb). The last three books in Hebrew represent a new genre of books written either by Kurdish Jews or family members and present the life story of individuals and families in both Kurdistan and Israel.
- 4 Simon Hopkins, “The Jews of Kurdistan in Eretz Israel and their Language,” *Pe’amim*, 56 (1993): 50–74 (Heb.)
- 5 An excellent book entitled *The Jews of Kurdistan, Lifestyle, Tradition and Art*, Israel Museum, 1981–82 (Heb.) was printed following a special exhibition on the same subject by the Israel Museum. Hebrew readers may find a short article by Shimon Marcus, “The Jews of Kurdistan,” *Mahanayim*, 1964: 93–4.

- 6 Claude Cahen, "Dhimma," EI²; G. Vajda, "Ahl al-Kitab," EI²; Benjamin Braude and Bernard Lewis (eds.), *Christians and Jews in the Ottoman Empire: The Function of the Plural Society*, 2 vols, London and New York: Holmes and Meier, 1982.
- 7 Consult Zaken (2003), PhD thesis, which compares the experience of the Jews and the Assyrians of Kurdistan.
- 8 James Claudius Rich, *Narrative of a Residence in Koordistan, and on the Site of Ancient Nineveh; with Journal of a Voyage Down the Tigris to Bagdad, and an Account of a Visit to Shirauz and Persepolis*, ed. by his widow, London, 1836: 111. Rich (1787–1820) was a British business agent, traveler and antiquarian scholar. In 1820, he undertook an extensive tour of the Chaldean villages in the north and visited the region of Sulaimaniya. The narrative of this journey, which contained the first scientific observation of the topography and geography of the region, was published by his widow Mary Mackintosh Rich.
- 9 N. Albalah in *O.W.*, vol. 9, 1909: 579, as quoted in Abraham Ben-Yaacob, *The Jewish Communities of Kurdistan*, second and revised ed., Jerusalem, 1981: 113. (Heb.)
- 10 Reuben Bar-Amon, "The City of Sulaimāniya," *Hithadshut*, vol. 5, 1985: 34 (Heb.); consult also Basile Nikitine, "La féodalité kurde," *Revue du Monde Musulman*, vol. 50, 2nd trimester, 1925: 1–26.
- 11 Ben-Yaacob (1981) named more than 200 villages in which Jews lived.
- 12 A good description of rural life in this region is Armenian village life before 1914. See Susie Hoogasian Villa and Mary Kilbourne Matossian, *Armenian Village Life before 1914*, Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 1982.
- 13 For this and other remarks related to Walter Joseph Fischel and Rabbi David D'Beth Hillel, consult the following items: *The Jews of Kurdistan: A First Hand Report on a Near Eastern Mountain Community*, 1949; *Unknown Jews in Unknown Lands: The Travels of Rabi David D'beth Hillel (1824–1832)*, 1972: 71–82; "Journey to Kurdistan, Persia and Baghdad, from the Book of Travels of Rabbi David D'Beth Hillel," *Sinai*, 1939: 218–54 (Heb.); See also an English version, "The Jews of Kurdistan a Hundred Years Ago: A Traveler's Record," *Jewish Social Studies*, 6, 3 (1944): 195–226. On Walter Joseph Fischel, one of the noted scholars of oriental Jewry of his time, see www.iranicaonline.org/articles/fischel/.
- 14 For a good treatment of the social organization in Kurdistan, see Fredrik Barth, *Principles of Social Organization in Southern Kurdistan*. Oslo: Brodene Jorgensen A/S Boktrykkeri, 1953.
- 15 Consult Martin Van Bruinessen, *Agha, Shaikh and State: On the Social and Political Organization in Kurdistan*, Rijswijk, revised edition, 1992, for a variety of subjects related to the tribal life and codes and the social structure within the tribe. There is also a photocopied version in the list of publications of the author: www.let.uu.nl/~martin.vanbruinessen/personal/publications/Bruinessen_ASS_Zed.pdf. For a general reference on the tribe and *tribesmen* see M. D. Sahlins, *Tribesmen*, New Jersey, 1968.
- 16 Benjamin II, I. J. (Benjamin the Second, henceforth Benjamin II), *Eight Years in Asia and Africa, from 1846 to 1855*, Hanover, 1859/1863: 92–3.
- 17 On the economic benefits of the landlord, such as unpaid labor, in these regions, see Cyrus Salmanzadeh, *Agricultural Change and Rural Society in Southern Iran*, Wisbech [Cambridgeshire]: Middle East and North African Studies Press, 1983: 114–5. For an excellent treatment of the landlord–peasant relations, see Ann K. S. Lambton, *Landlord and Peasant in Persia*, London: Oxford University Press, 1953.
- 18 According to the Shī'ite concept of *najis* or *najāsa* (ritual impurity), any contact with Jews or other infidels, animals or impure items, disqualifies a Shī'ī believer from performing his religious duties unless he undergoes an elaborate ritual of purification. The proximity to Persia may have influenced the practice that was dominant in the Shī'ite state, see W. J. Fischel, 1972: 76–7.
- 19 Fischel 1939: 239–40; Bernard Lewis, *The Jews of Islam*, Princeton University Press, 1984: 33; see also ṭahāra, EI¹.
- 20 Nikitine Basil and E. B. Soane, "The Tale of Suto and Tato," *BSOAS*, 3 (1923–25): 69–106.
- 21 *Ibid.*, 71.
- 22 *Ibid.*, 75.
- 23 The concept of "Kafir-Kušt" was related to the Presbyterian missionary Reverend Roger C. Cumberland who was murdered in Dohuk, in the Kurdish region of northern Iraq, in June 1938. The informant called him "Mr. Cumber" (cutting the surname into two syllables instead of three), saying he was hospitable and gracious, and used this concept of "Kafir-Kušt," explaining that killing of infidels, or of Jews and Christians, may fall under this category. See, for instance, www.questia.com/library/journal/1G1-433010713/a-death-in-dohuk-roger-c-cumberland-mission-and; www.reformiert-online.net/aktuell/details.php?id=1233&lg=span.

- 24 The word denoting rob or robbery in Neo-Aramaic is “shlakha,” that is, to take off (clothes, shoes), since the raiders would often rob the clothes of the victims as well.
- 25 The concept of “*Kafir-Kušt*” was related by one informant in reference to the murder of the Christian missionary Roger C. Cumberland in Dohuk, in the Kurdish region of northern Iraq, in June 1938. The informant who used this concept explained that killing of infidels, or of Jews and Christians, may fall under this category.
- 26 Mordechai Edelman was a Lithuanian scholar and writer who became fascinated with the world of ancient religious books and the study of theology. He visited both Iraq and Kurdistan in the pursuit of this task and detailed the state of the Jews of Kurdistan. www.tidhar.tourolib.org/tidhar/view/1/152 (Heb.); Mordechai Edelman, “Journeys in Assyria and Babylon,” *Hatzfira*, year 16, 1888 (Heb.).
- 27 Consult W. J. Fischel in all three editions on the subject (1939, 1944, 1972).
- 28 Mordechai Bibi, *Zionist Pioneering Underground in Iraq*, 1998, part 1: 449 (Heb.) quotes a report by Yitzhak Shvaiki dated January 30, 1945.
- 29 Reuben Bar-Amon, 1985: 32–4 (Heb.).
- 30 Bazirgan (Kur.), *bazaar*=market; *gan* is a suffix forming nouns and adjectives. *Bazirgan* means a merchant or a prosperous person. See also E. R. Leach, *Social and Economic Organisation of the Rowanduz Kurds*, London: The London School of Economics and Political Science, 1940: 42–4. A detailed version of this topic is available in M. Zaken, “Central Institutions and Commerce in the Jewish Community of Zakho,” *Hithadshut*, 5 (1985): 11–22 (Heb.).
- 31 Stephen Hemsley Longrigg, *Four Centuries of Modern Iraq*, Oxford, 1953, Reprint 1968: 203.
- 32 [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Millet_\(Ottoman_Empire\)](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Millet_(Ottoman_Empire)); Benjamin Braude, “Foundation Myths of the Millet System,” Benjamin Braude and Bernard Lewis, vol. 1:69–90; “Millet,” Bruce Masters, *Encyclopedia of the Ottoman Empire*, ed. Gábor Ágoston and Bruce Alan Masters, InfoBase Publishing, 2009: 383.
- 33 On Modern Iraq see Phebe Marr, *The Modern History of Iraq*, Boulder, San Francisco and Oxford: Westview Press, 1985.
- 34 Thomas Bois, *The Kurds*, trans. M. W. M. Welland, Beirut: 1966: 63.
- 35 Baruch Rand and Barbara Rush, *Around the World with Jewish Folktales: Jews of Kurdistan*, Toledo (Ohio): Toledo Board of Jewish Education, 1978: 9.
- 36 A.H. Layard, *Nineveh and Babylon*, 2 vols., London: John Murray, 1853, 2nd ed. 1867: 383–4.
- 37 W.R. Hay, *Two Years in Kurdistan: Experiences of a Political Officer 1918–1920*, London: Sidgwick and Jackson Ltd, 1921: 86–7.
- 38 Martin van Bruinessen: 18–9.
- 39 Fischel, *The Jews of Kurdistan: A First Hand report*, 1949.
- 40 M. Sykes, *The Caliph’s Last Heritage: A Short History of the Turkish Empire*, London: Macmillan and Co. Limited, 1915: 431–2.
- 41 *Dīr* (pl., *adyār*) in Arabic means a monastery or convent; in names of places, *dīr* indicates that Christians dwelled in that place.
- 42 Henry Field, “Jews of Sandur, Iraq,” *Asia*, 37 (1937): 709–10. One of the informants from Sandur who was particularly valuable was Salih Rahamim (I#37).
- 43 *Yeshiva* is a Jewish high-learning institution focusing on the study of traditional religious texts, primarily the Talmud and Torah.
- 44 Meir Benayahu, “Rabbi Samuel Barzani, the exile arch of Kurdistan,” *Sefunot*, 9 (1965): 23–125 (Heb.). On the internal position of the Jews in previous centuries, see Jacob Mann, “Documents concerning the Jews in Mosul and Kurdistan,” in his *Texts and Studies in Jewish History and Literature*, vol. I: 477–549. Cincinnati: Hebrew Union College, 1931; Philadelphia: Jewish Publication of America, 1935. Reprinted, New York: 1972.
- 45 https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Shema_Yisrael.
- 46 <https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Sanandaj>.
- 47 Geoffrey Khan, *The Jewish Neo-Aramaic Dialect of Sanandaj*, Piscataway, NJ: Gorgias Press, 1.
- 48 W. J. Fischel, 1972: 78; Rich, *Narrative of a Residence in Koordistan*, 1836: 111–2; Paul J. Magnarella, “A Note on the Aspects of Social Life among the Jewish Kurds of Sanandaj, Iran,” *The Jewish Journal of Sociology*, 11, 1 (June 1969).
- 49 George Harris, *Iraq: Its People, Its Society, Its Culture*, New Haven: Human Relations Area Files Press, 1958: 28.
- 50 Yitzhak Ben-Zvi, “Epistles from the Communities of Hamadan, Urmia and Barfarush,” *Sefunot*, the annual book of research of the Jewish communities in the East, Ben-Zvi Institute, 1964: 43–85. (Heb.)

- 51 Benjamin II 1859: 92–3, Fischel, First-Hand Report, 1949; During the 1930s Mir Muhammad (known also as Mir-i Kor, or the ‘Blind King,’ *kor*=blind in Kurdish), the leader of the principality of Soran, conquered most urban centers in (today’s) northern Iraq and even minted his own coins, a sign of an official rule in the Islamic domain. His cruelty toward the Jews and Jewish communities had been reported. In 1837, he was killed by the Turkish authorities in the midst of a Turkish campaign to regain central control over the Kurdish principalities. For more on Mir Kor, see David McDowall, *A Modern History of the Kurds*, London and New York: I. B. Tauris, 1997, Van Bruinessen, 1992, and consult the following blog as well: <https://lepzerin.wordpress.com/2012/03/19/the-revolt-of-mir-muhammad/>.
- 52 Rich, *Narrative of a residence in Koordistan*, 1836: 89–90, 95–6.
- 53 Benjamin II.
- 54 One of the proofs for these transfers is the conflict between the Jewish communities in the years to come, as the community of this Nisibin demanded the Torah Scroll back from the Jewish community of Diyarbakir.
- 55 Benjamin II, 1859: 91–2.
- 56 Benjamin II.
- 57 On the Blind Agha, see Van Bruinessen, *Agha Shaikh and State*: 74, 176, and 230.
- 58 A. H. Stern, *Dawnings of Light in the East*, London: Charles H. Purday, 1854: 225.
- 59 Hay 1921: 191.
- 60 Stern 1854: 225.
- 61 Eli Binyamin, “The Formation of the Jewish Community in Amadiya,” *Hithadshut*, 5 (1985): 25 (Heb.).
- 62 See the introduction above and Zaken (2003, 2007, 2015), which narrates instances of robbing the Torah Scrolls of Arbil Jewish community. Ben-Yaacob 1981: 79; Ben-Zvi 1951: 9; Benjamin II 1859: 59, 65, 70, 89–90, 91–2.
- 63 *Jewish Encyclopedia*: 586.
- 64 Mordechai Edelman.
- 65 Henry Binder, *Au Kurdistan, en Mésopotamie et en Perse (Mission scientifique du Ministère de l’Instruction Publique)*, Paris: Maison Quantin, 1887:197.
- 66 This letter is quoted in Ben-Yaacob 1981: 209–11. Originally, it appeared in an Indian (Calcutta) Jewish weekly, *Magid Yesharim*, 6th year, no. 9, 1895. In 1895, pogroms occurred against the Jews of Sulaimaniya. Jews were killed and tortured; Jewish women were violated, and stores were looted. Ben-Yaacob 1981: 111–3.
- 67 ‘Araq (Arabic, i.e., perspiration) is an alcoholic spirit based on anise. It is a clear, colorless, unsweetened anise-flavored alcoholic drink. This is the traditional and popular alcoholic beverage in the Arab world, especially in the Levant or the Mashriq and in the Maghreb, as well as in Iran and Turkey.
- 68 Ben-Yaacob 1981: 111–2, based on three letters from the Jewish community of Baghdad to the Jewish community in India, printed in the weekly *Magid Yesharim*, Calcutta, sixth year, 34 (1895): 36, 40.
- 69 *Military Report on Iraq (Area 9)*, 1929: 167, 232.
- 70 Consult Chapters 4 and 5 in Martin van Bruinessen’s, *Agha, Shaikh and State*, 1992.
- 71 Consult W. A. (William Ainger) Wigram, *The Cradle of Mankind: Life in Eastern Kurdistan*, London: Adam and Charles Black, 1914: 138–9.
- 72 Ibid., 143–4.
- 73 Ibid., 164; 177–9; 313–14.
- 74 Dana Adams Schmidt, *Journey among Brave Men*, Boston and Toronto: Little, Brown and Company, 1964: 45. For an excellent treatment of Barzani’s career see Michael M. Gunter, “Mulla Mustafa Barzani and the Kurdish Rebellion in Iraq: The Intelligence Factor,” *International Journal of Intelligence and Counterintelligence*, 7: 465–74.
- 75 Majid and Hertzel Gabbai (members of the Khawaja Khinno household of Aqra) (I#9&10).
- 76 Majid and Hertzel Gabbai (I#9&10).
- 77 See Zaken (2003, 2007, 2015); Shlomo Nakdimon, *The Hope That Crashed - The Israeli-Kurdish Connection 1963–1975*, 1996 (Heb.); consult the following three reports in the Hebrew press: “I Met Mustafa Barzani in the Eagles’ Nest in Kurdistan,” *Yedi’ot Ahronot*, 12 April, 1991 (Heb.); “The Kurdish People: Simple, Proud and Experience in Suffering,” *Yedi’ot Ahronot*, 7 April 1991(Heb.); and “Gandi [Nickname of General Rehavam Ze’evi] in the Land of the Kurds,” *Ma’ariv*, 16 May 1991 (Heb.).
- 78 On the Israeli involvement in Kurdistan, see Eliezer (Gaizi) Tzafrir, *Ana Kurdi, a War Novel and an Escape in Kurdistan*, Tel-Aviv, 1998 (Hen.); Sh. Nakdimon, *The Hope That collapsed, The Israeli-Kurdish*

- connection 1963–1975, Tel-Aviv, 1996 (Heb.); Shmuel Segev, *The Iranian Triangle: The Secret Relations Between Israel-Iran- and the United States*, Tel-Aviv, 1981 (Heb.); M. Zaken 1991 (Heb.).
- 79 Moshe Yitzhak Binyamin (I#3).
- 80 In 2014, a great grandchild of Shaikh Muhammad who initially contacted me through the internet told me many more details about his grandfather, adding that the shaikh and his family regarded the Jews as subjects of the village, or in fact as complete citizens. They used the Arabic word “aṣḥāb,” allies or friends, an interesting choice of word, because Jews and Christians are condemned in the Qur’an, as can be read in Surat AL-Ma’idah (the table), verse 51: O you who have faith, do not take the Jews and the Christians as friends/allies. They are friends of each other. And he amongst you that turns to them for friendship is one of them. Indeed, Allah guides not a people unjust.
- 81 Moshe Yoseph Mizrah (I#24.)
- 82 Lewis (1984: 14–6, 65–6, 195 n.9, 197 n.24) and A. Norman Stillman, *The Jews of Arab Lands: A History and Source Book*, Philadelphia, 1979: 95.
- 83 A person who paid *badal* ‘askari to be redeemed from military service was known as badalchi. Ci (pronounced chi) is a suffix used in Turkish forming nouns indicating occupation, association or belief of a person.
- 84 Nelida Fuccaro, *The Other Kurds: Yazidis in Colonial Iraq*, London and New York: I. B. Tauris, 1999: 49; Gerard Russell, *Heirs to Forgotten Kingdoms*, Simon & Schuster, 2014; Birgül Açikyildiz, *The Yazidis: The History of a Community, Culture and Religion*, I.B. Tauris, 2014.
- 85 Joseph Meir, *Social and Cultural Development of the Jews of Iraq, from 1830 Until Our Time*, Tel-Aviv: Naharayyim, 1989: 401 (Heb.).
- 86 Edwin Black, *The Farhud: Roots of the Arab-Nazi Alliance in the Holocaust*, 2010; Edwin Black, “A Farhud Legacy of Hate,” *Jerusalem Post*, 16 December, 2010; Abraham H. Miller, “Remembering the Farhud,” *FrontPageMagazine.com*, June 01, 2006; Zvi Elpeleg, *The Grand Mufti: Haj Amin al-Hussaini, Founder of the Palestinian National Movement*, trans. David Harvey, London: Frank Cass, 1993; Klaus Gensicke, *The Mufti of Jerusalem and the Nazis: The Berlin Years*, London: Valentine, 2011; N. Qazzaz, “The influence of Nazism in Iraq and the Anti-Jewish Activity, 1933–1941,” *Pe’aminim* 29 (1987): 48–71 (Heb.); Nissim Qazzaz, *The Jews of Iraq in the 20th century*, Jerusalem, 1991 (Heb.).
- 87 A telling letter from the Mufti of Jerusalem, Hajj Amin al-Hussaini to Hitler, in Majid Khadduri, *Independent Iraq 1932–1958*, Oxford Press, 1960: 378–80.
- 88 According to the population estimates by Andree’s “Zur Volkskunde der Juden” (pub Leipzig, 1881), there were 25,000 or so Jews across Kurdistan in the 1940s. The distribution of the Kurdish Jews in Northern Iraq by 1947 is based mainly on the Iraqi statistics: 3,109 in Arbil province, 4,042 in Kirkuk, 10,345 in Mosul, 2,271 in Sulamaniya and 2,851 in Diyala province, the total being 22,618. The estimates of the Jewish population in southeastern Turkey are more complicated, since they came from different ethnic traditions, Arabic, Spanish, Ladino, Turkish, and Kurdish or Aramaic. Most of the Jews of Urfa immigrated to Palestine already in 1896, following the massacres of the Armenians in 1895. The Jews of Jezira had left by 1924. Similarly, most of the Jews of Diyarbakir, Mardin, Bashqala, Van, Julamerk and Nisibin had left by the early 20th century. See also Amnon Cohen, “Immigration of Jews to Palestine from Persian Kurdistan and East Turkey after the First World War,” *Pe’aminim*, 5 (1980): 87–93 (Heb.).
- 89 Moti Zaken, “The Lost from the Land of Ashur- the Migrations from Kurdistan and Settlement in Eretz-Israel,” *’Edot-’Edut le-Israel*, eds. Prof. Avshalom Mizrahi and Rabbi Aharon Ben-David, Netanya: The Association for Society and Culture, Documentation and Research, 2001: 340–73 (Heb.)
- 90 Law No. 1 of 1950, entitled “Supplement to Ordinance Cancelling Iraqi Nationality,” in fact deprived Jews of their Iraqi nationality. Section 1 stipulated that “the Council of Ministers may cancel the Iraqi nationality of the Iraqi Jew who willingly desires to leave Iraq...” Law No. 5 of 1951 entitled “A law for the Supervision and Administration of the Property of Jews who have Forfeited Iraqi Nationality” also deprived them of their property. Section 2(a) “freezes” Jewish property (Official Iraqi Gazette, 9 March, 10 March 1951, English version, p. 17).
- 91 Based on official census. *Yearbooks of the Jewish communities: The Jewish Case before the Anglo-American Committee of Inquiry*, 1946; J. B. Schechtman, *On Wings of Eagles: The Flight, Exodus and Homecoming of Oriental Jewry*, N.Y. Yosseloff, 1961.

YEZIDI BAPTISM AND REBAPTISM

Resilience, reintegration, and religious adaptation

Tyler Fisher and Nahro Zagros

The Yezidis¹ and their distinctive religion rocketed to international attention in August 2014, when international media broadcast real-time coverage of Islamic State's genocidal siege of Sinjar. Prior to that date, to the wider world beyond the upper reaches of Mesopotamia, the Yezidis were little more than a footnote in histories of the region, an ethnographic curiosity, or a brief encounter in travelers' tales. Now, they are the subject of specific humanitarian initiatives, photography exhibitions, a symphony, documentaries, and Congressional resolutions. One striking indication of this drastic change in wider recognition is the inclusion of Yezidism in works of reference. For instance, *The Penguin Dictionary of Religions, from Abraham to Zoroaster* (1984) and the *Encyclopedic Dictionary of Cults, Sects, and World Religions* (2006), in spite of their claims of comprehensive coverage, make no mention of the Yezidis. In the aftermath of the ethno-sectarian massacres, displacements, and abductions in Sinjar, however, Yezidis figure in *Great Events in Religion: An Encyclopedia of Pivotal Events in Religious History* (El-Moursi 2016, II.512–14), the title of which reflects the very different status the Yezidis currently occupy in international consideration as targets of the Islamic State's self-proclaimed caliphate. Yet the creeds and rituals of the Yezidis' unique religion remain largely inscrutable to outsiders—a religion historically misconstrued and sensationalized as devil worship or dismissed as an impenetrable, unsystematic syncretism of neighboring faiths. This chapter examines one key dimension of Yezidi culture which has not yet received sustained scholarly attention: namely, water baptism (*mor kirin*), specifically in the waters of Kanîya Spî (the White Spring). This rite and its practice, evolution, and associated lore, we argue, are crucial to understanding the Yezidi religion and the community's resilience in the face of the recent genocidal campaigns.

The following account of Yezidi baptism is based on personal interviews in the Badinan province of Kurdistan, Iraq, and participant observation at Kanîya Spî itself, in November 2016. In order to gather a wide, representative cross section of Yezidis' perspectives, experiences, and conceptualizations of their baptismal traditions, the series of interviews intentionally included at least one woman and one man from each of the three Yezidi castes (Mirîd, Pir, and Sheikh). Thirteen interviewees participated in total, ranging in age from 14 to 84 years.² Before delving into their responses, however, we must first situate the baptismal spring in the context of the Yezidi belief system more broadly.

Kaniya Spî, the White Spring: fountainhead of creation and preservation

“This is my Vatican,” a Yezidi remarked as he accompanied us to Lalish (ShMMi52). The valley of Lalish, the Yezidis’ most sacred site, has three focal points. In the midst of the valley’s cluster of mausoleums, among the distinctively fluted spires, lodging quarters, and natural caves to which the Yezidis ascribe varying commemorative and supernatural significance, the principal acts of devotion center on the tomb of Sheikh Adi, the Spring of Zemzem, and the White Spring. The latter spring, Kaniya Spî, is integral to Yezidi cosmogony and constitutes a centerpiece of their personal devotion and community cohesion. As such, it figures prominently in the *qawwali*, the traditional songs that preserve the Yezidis’ sacred lore.

In the account of Creation in “Qewlê Zebûnî Meksûr,” for one, Lalish is the Yezidis’ Eden, with Kaniya Spî its principal feature: “Lalish lies at the centre / Its hallmark is the White Spring / The sign of earth and heaven” (stanza 20, trans. Kreyenbroek and Jindy 2005, 60). “Qewlê Îmanê,” among other hymns in the same vein, specifies that the creation of the White Spring preceded the creation of the earth, sky, and oceans, and designates it the Yezidis’ *qibla* or orienting point for devotion (ibid., 83–88). “Qewlê Qere Ferqan” describes the waters of the White Spring as a pre-eternal leavening agent for the creation of all material substance (ibid., 96–97; Khalal 2009, 20–21). In the Yezidi cosmogony, then, Kaniya Spî is the primordial source, the Creator’s most elemental ingredient, the physical and symbolic wellspring of the Yezidi Paradise.

Like many peoples of Mesopotamia, the Yezidis have a story of a worldwide flood, in which a singular hero, his family, and representative specimens of animal life survive the deluge in an Ark. According to the Yezidi oral tradition, the pure, primeval waters of the White Spring—so essential to creation and purification—were also preserved in the midst of the floodwaters, which arose, by contrast, from a murky neighboring spring in Shaykhân (MâMPi51). As Baba Sheikh described it to us, the Yezidis

consider the water of Kaniya Spî to be pure. We believe that when the Flood happened, Kaniya Spî stayed pure and clean. It’s for cleansing, this water. [...] The water was pure before, during, and after the Flood. [...] There were so many rocks, wood, and debris: the floodwaters were dark, but Kaniya Spî’s water remained white.

A refugee from Khānasor added, “God’s will preserved the purity of Kaniya Spî during the Flood” (KhāMS62). Regarding the supernatural mechanism by which this divine preservation was accomplished, a learned Pir recounted that “when the Flood began, the water of Kaniya Spî became like a whirlwind, standing in the middle of the Flood, and never mixed with the floodwater” (ShMPi64). Other accounts depict the spring rising like a tower or pillar, firmly safeguarded in the midst of the Flood. Clearly, there is a strong dualistic dimension at the heart of the Yezidis’ Flood narrative, which sharply distinguishes pollution and purity, destruction and preservation, foregrounding the motif of the White Spring. Nevertheless, although the symbolic resonances are apparent, the Yezidis’ doctrines, songs, and stories leave the spring’s significance and implications for baptism largely implicit; those who created and transmitted these texts doubtless presumed these aspects to be recognizable and comprehensible to the relevant community. For the implications of Kaniya Spî as an integral source and site of baptism, we turn now to the record of outsiders’ observations and Yezidis’ own explanations.

Baptism in theory and practice

Curiously, from the late 17th century to the early 19th century C.E., the various Latin, Italian, French, and German accounts of the Yezidi religion are utterly silent concerning

the fact that the Yezidi religious customs include water baptism. This omission is even more striking when set alongside the details some of these accounts offer concerning such matters as customary greetings, shamanic rituals, circumcision, and burial rites among the Yezidis, and suggests that the Yezidis themselves might have been deliberately reticent about baptism at that time. Claudius James Rich's *Narrative of a Residence in Koordistan* (1836) was the first to report that the Yezidis practice baptism. This posthumously published journal of the visit that Rich and his wife made to the region in December 1820 observes that the Yezidis "admit both baptism and circumcision." Although the Riches' expedition did not include a visit to Lalish, their footnote regarding Yezidi baptism draws on information from an unnamed "Christian priest who has been at [the shrine of] Sheikh Adi": "There is a spring of water in it [i.e. in Lalish] which is received into a basin, and used by the Yezids [*sic*] for baptising their children, whom they dip three times, but say no prayers on the occasion" (II.69–70). This brief, secondhand record offers the earliest known account of the Yezidi baptismal rite.

Asahel Grant, a medical missionary who worked in Ottoman Kurdistan, also mentions, in passing, that the Yezidis "practise the right [*sic*] of baptism" (1841, 31), but, perhaps surprisingly in view of his vocation, he offers no account of the custom. In the same decade, Austen Henry Layard, who was instrumental in securing the Yezidis some measure of legal protection from depredations under Ottoman authority, earned their confidence and was able to add further details concerning their baptismal rite. He observed that "They baptise in water, like the Christians; if possible, within seven days after birth" (1849, I.300). He learned, moreover, that Yezidi baptism bore no connection to the naming of a child at birth but rather that "the rite of baptism [was] reserved for a future day, when the child could be carried to the tomb of Sheikh Adi, and could bear immersion in its sacred waters" (I.274–75). Here, Layard confuses or conflates the two sacred springs within Lalish for he assumes that the Yezidis baptise in the spring called Zemzem, within the shrine of Sheikh Adi, wherein he describes

a reservoir filled by an abundant spring issuing from the rock [...]. The water of the reservoir is regarded with peculiar veneration, and is believed to be derived from the holy well of Zemzem. In it children are baptized, and it is used for other sacred purposes.

(1849, 282–83)

In fact, while the Yezidis ascribe medicinal and cleansing properties to the waters of Zemzem, the functions of baptism pertain exclusively to the waters of Kaniya Spî.³

Many subsequent accounts perpetuated Layard's error regarding Zemzem.⁴ His contemporary, George Percy Badger, similarly muddies the waters, as the saying goes, by confusing the Yezidi rite of baptism with pilgrims' customary "ceremonial washings" at Lalish (the "ablutions repeated at every new visit to the shrine of Sheikh Adi"), yet he offers some perceptive remarks about the Yezidis' more general reverence for water as "a most powerful agent in communicating temporal blessings to mankind. Hence almost every fountain and spring is considered sacred" (1852, I.117, 128).⁵ These early accounts established a precedent for imprecise or cursory treatment of Yezidi baptism, a manner which has continued to characterize more recent scholarship. A meticulous, detailed account of the phenomenon has been lacking—a lacuna the current study seeks, in part, to fill.⁶

The White Spring is the Yezidis' baptismal font, housed within a tripartite baptistery, which stands slightly uphill to the southwest of the Suq al-Ma'rifa and Sheikh 'Adi's sanctuary at Lalish. The spring itself wells up in an oblong cistern in the largest of the baptistery's three chambers and then flows into separate basins or pools in the other two

chambers, all three having a separate doorway. The tripartite division corresponds to a traditional distinction among three categories of whom or what is to be baptised where: the uppermost chamber is for baptising religious paraphernalia, such as sacred ornaments and the clothing of religious leaders; *kaniya kurkah*, the subsequent chamber, is for boys; and *kaniya kichka*, the third and smallest chamber before the spring water exits the baptistery as a free-flowing stream, is for girls (ShMMi52).⁷ Unprompted, Baba Sheikh and Baba Chawish corroborated this traditional tripartite organization in their comments on *mor kirin*.

Mor kirin, the Yezidis' term, which we have translated as "baptism," literally and etymologically denotes the action of "stamping" or "sealing" in Kurdish. In the Yezidis' conceptualization, the rite serves, among other functions, to signal a person's membership in the community. "Every Yezidi must be baptised, or they are not Yezidis" (ShMPi64). Concomitantly, it assigns his or her status as clean (*halal*) as opposed to *haram*. "It's like you are registering your baby (*halal kirdn*)" (ShMMi52); "anyone who is not baptised is not *halal*, because baptism confers purity" (KhāMS62). According to Baba Chawish, if a Yezidi is not baptised, no animal they slaughter or food they serve will be *halal* or acceptable (although an unbaptised person could still be buried in a Yezidi cemetery). For this reason, Yezidis generally endeavor to take their children for baptism at Kaniya Spî as soon as possible following their birth; however, there is no strict requirement regarding the age at which a person must be baptised. This allows Yezidis who live far away from Lalish to come for baptism when they are able (MāFP69, MāMP51). Alternatively, as Baba Chawish explained, distance can be overcome by transporting water from Kaniya Spî for baptisms abroad:

The water is holy (*piroz*). Whatever one washes with this water will become holy, too. Any object, whether liquid or solid, will be purified by this water. People coming from foreign lands take both waters with them — that of Kaniya Spî and Zemzem. The law [*khanun*] is that baptism should happen here [in Lalish]. But some people, to satisfy the parents, do it with water transported elsewhere.⁸

In summary, "Yezidis are baptised once, but revisiting Kaniya Spî is recommended" (KhāMS62). "Every Yezidi must be baptised once, but it is highly recommended that, afterwards, Yezidis should wash their faces with the holy water every time they visit Lalish, to be renewed (*nujan kird*)," and it is also common practice to drink the water of Kaniya Spî when visiting Lalish (ShMPi64).

Many Yezidis, displaced from their homelands by the Islamic State, now reside as refugees in provinces nearer to Lalish. Some have taken advantage of this proximity in order to be baptised for the first time at an older age. One *mirîd*, who was 13 when the Islamic State took over her home village in Sinjar, reported, "I was baptised when we ran away, but I was always a Yezidi" (TallBFMi15). Another Sinjari father commented, "Coming here as a refugee, it was a good opportunity to baptise my older son. Families worry about children who have not yet been baptised. Some do it during the baby's first week" (KhāMS62). One mother reflected on having brought her two girls and two boys to be baptised:

Mor kirin signifies purification. Without baptising children, you don't feel comfortable. You don't think you've done your duty as a parent. Because of this strong belief, that's why you see people coming from around the world to baptize their children here.

(MāFMi31)

Displacement from Sinjar gave another young woman, along with her brother and sister, the opportunity to make doubly sure that they had indeed been properly baptised: “I came here to be baptised when I was a child, according to my mother, but I had no recollection of that, so I wanted to be sure, so I came for rebaptism” (KhāFS19).⁹

The customary officiant at the White Spring is called a *mijêwir* (keeper, guardian, custodian), and his or her occupation is known as *ber derîye* or *ser derîye*, denoting the officiant’s position just outside the door of the spring.¹⁰ This office, appointed by the Mir, pertains only to the Pir Buala lineage and, for the past dozen years or so, has been filled by a woman whom everyone knows as Diye Asmar. (She herself is unwilling or unable to state with certainty the number of years she has held this role.) In Diye Asmar’s own words, she conducts the ritual in the following manner:

Families come here, bringing their unbaptised children, they tell me, ‘Mother, we want to baptise this child.’ The mother or the father, one of them, will bring the child inside, and I will baptise the child. I pour water three times on their heads.

With words and gestures that do not vary according to sex, Diye Asmar performs the baptism by affusion, rapidly scooping water into her hand and letting the water pour down three times on the subject’s head. She then places her wet hand on the subject’s head while pronouncing a blessing upon them. There is no longer a set formula for the blessing. On various occasions, Diye Asmar gave us varied versions: “I put my hand on their head, and I say, ‘I wish you well, may God protect you.’ I say things along these lines.” A moment later she rendered her blessing as “God protect you, give you gifts, make you live a thousand years, make you stay healthy.” In yet another version, her blessing invoked the White Spring itself, as if it were an animate entity: “Kaniya Spî make your wishes come true. Kaniya Spî make you healthy, bring you gifts, preserve you from troubles, exalt you and make you likeable.” We even witnessed Diye Asmar perform baptisms without ostensibly saying any blessing at all. When we inquired about this, she initially protested that she had indeed pronounced a blessing, but later she allowed that she had only said it within herself.

At the close of the baptism, there is often an exchange of gifts, as Diye Asmar gives white headscarves to the newly baptised: “And I say, ‘You are all most welcome. Come back next year with another child!’” They give her money for her services, and parents give gifts to their children. “Everyone claps to show their joy” (MāFMi31). The whole ceremony lasts only about two minutes (MāMP51), but celebrations continue afterward. After tossing candies or chocolates to bystanders (KhāFS19), the child and his or her parents receive congratulations from those in attendance,

and then, when they return home, they will serve food to their family and neighbors. On that occasion, they serve food in their house for their neighbors. They will usually sacrifice an animal and distribute the meat to the neighbors.

(ShMMi52)

Baptism can take place on any day of the week as well as during *eids*, with as many as 2,000 people being baptised per day, from morning to evening, on major *eids* of pilgrimage (ShMMi52). Traditionally, those being baptised must wear an article of white clothing. “For young boys, they wear white clothes. For girls, it is a wreath of white flowers around their heads” (MāFMi31). In practice, we observed a wide range in the application of this custom.

Some infants were dressed entirely in white, while others might wear only white socks or a similar token white item.

Thus far, we have seen initiatory, purificatory, and renovative effects attributed to *mor kirin*. One additional effect deserves mention. Although the Yezidis maintain a steadfast agnosticism regarding whether or not baptism confers any salvific advantage in relation to the afterlife (post-mortem destiny being, in their view, entirely as God wills, beyond the influence of a ritual), they do consider it to have salutary influences on physical health and length of life, not unlike the terms of Diye Asmar's blessings. One explanation we heard concerning why parents would want to baptise their child as soon as possible is that *mor kirin* can avert sickness for the child and even fend against infant mortality.

When a child is born, the first thing parents, especially mothers, think about is to baptise him or her. It is their first concern. Sometimes your neighbours or relatives will ask you whether you have baptised your child. If you say something like, 'No, he was ill', they will say, 'Oh you should have done it first thing. He would get better soon'. They think that a baptised child is more likely to avoid catching illnesses and live longer. The parents are concerned to do the baptism first thing. They think that after baptism the baby will be healthy and live long.

(ShMMi52)

Initiatory, purificatory, renovative, and salutary—these special properties of the Kaniya Spî baptismal water can be extended not only geographically to Yezidis residing at a distance by carrying away the water itself from the White Spring as we have seen, but also via little balls or pellets of dry mud about the size of marbles. The Yezidis call these *barat*. According to Baba Chawish, *barat* are prepared by unmarried Yezidis using mud from a cave of Lalish, mixed with water from Kaniya Spî. Moreover, baptism in the waters of Kaniya Spî extends to non-human entities and inanimate material as well. Strangely, akin to the old English tradition of baptising church bells, Yezidi religious paraphernalia must be baptised. This includes the clothing of all religious leaders, even Baba Sheikh's walking stick; the peacock image of Melek Tawus; the metal ornaments (*hlêl*) that adorn the summits of Yezidi spires—baptised in Kaniya Spî once every two years; the *pari* cloths in seven different colors (red, green, white, black, silver, brown, yellow—each representing one of the Yezidis' seven angels), which also adorn spires and tombs; historical, religious manuscripts in metal containers; *nishan*, the symbolic metal heirlooms that represent particular family lines; and even prayer beads (ShMMi52, ShMPi64). Ultimately, "anything that comes from Lalish is baptised, even souvenirs" (KhāMS62). Certain foodstuffs too, especially yoghurt, bread, and grain products, are baptised annually in early spring when sheep and goats tend to produce the most milk. "Yezidi villages take their yoghurt, food, wheat and barley, couscous, and so forth, to be baptised at Kaniya Spî" on days allocated to particular villages (ShMMi52).

For all of these materials, as when baptising humans, the *mijêwir* officiates, and pours water from Kaniya Spî three times on the object while pronouncing a blessing on it (ShMPi64). The vast number of items to be baptised might seem to present an enormous, unmanageable task for one *mijêwir*, a woman who is, after all, approaching 70 years of age, but it is not necessary that each particular item must be baptised directly in order to acquire the properties of Kaniya Spî. Significantly, the Yezidis imagine its supernatural properties as communicable and treat them as such. Recalling the *qawwali* on the Creation, in which the water of Kaniya Spî functions as a leavening agent for created matter, the annual baptism of yoghurt offers a very tangible picture of this concept.

The earth, the universe, was not created until Kaniya Spî water was mixed with it. That is why, in March, we take yoghurt to Kaniya Spî, and from there we make *mast au* (yoghurt water) to bring home and create more yoghurt from it [as a starter culture].

(ShMMi52)

This custom is called *nujan*, literally an annual renewal of each household's yoghurt and bread. The same can be achieved via adding *barat* to the yoghurt culture, or by adding baptised bread to other foods to communicate Kaniya Spî's purification and renewal. The water of Kaniya Spî is, in a sense, positively infectious.

The Yezidis have conserved and perpetuated their religion largely via a complex body of customs and oral tradition, rather than in a fixed, canonical text. Variation in ceremonies and doctrine is likely, if not inevitable. The baptismal rite, through innovation and the discarding of certain features, has evolved within the community's living memory. Yezidis perceive and readily acknowledge a relaxing of formalities in the administration of *mor kirin*. The formulaic blessings of old are forgotten, and baptism is now applied by affusion or aspersion rather than by immersion:

Before, [the *mijêwir*] used to immerse the child three times, but now they think that the children will be frightened by this, so she only sprinkles the water on their faces. They also recite a saying, but unfortunately I cannot remember. People no longer know the formal sayings. To be honest, even Diye Asmar does not know the saying. She only says, 'May God look after you and give you health and long life.'

(ShMPi64)

Moreover, the clear distinction among the three baptismal chambers at Kaniya Spî is now ignored more often than not. Most human baptisms today take place in the chamber that is theoretically designated for the religious paraphernalia and other inanimate materials, rather than in one of the sex-specific chambers. Reasons for this are apparent. The uppermost chamber at Kaniya Spî is also the most commodious. It more easily accommodates the sheer number of Yezidis who are seeking *mor kirin*.

Sometimes if it is very crowded, they bring the water from [the uppermost chamber at Kaniya Spî], and can baptise people outside.

People used to only visit Lalish very rarely. Only fifty Yezidis might be baptised in a year. There are so many now that it would require staffing each of the three baptismal chambers

to allow for the old differentiation by sex (ShMMi52). Yezidis from Ba'shîqa Bâzân have resisted this change. As Diye Asmar explained,

If they are from Ba'shîqa Bâzân, I will open the other doors [to Kaniya Spî]. I will baptise their children there. It's not like it used to be anymore. Most of them come here. Those who know our tradition, they know where to go.

Other elements that characterized the ritual in former times also seem to be neglected now.

In the past, they used to put some mud on the baptised child's clothes as a symbol to show that they had just been baptised. Also, they would put a white cloth around his head or shoulders. That piece of cloth was also baptised.

(ShMPi64)

Yezidis also remarked on other, more superficial changes in their baptismal rite. For instance, those celebrating “used to scatter dried figs or raisins, which they brought specially from their home villages, but now it is candies or chocolates” (ShMMi52).

Spiritual cleansing in the wake of desecration

A far more momentous change in creed and custom emerged in response to the devastation inflicted by the Islamic State. Traditionally, in Yezidism, if a Yezidi chooses to marry a non-Yezidi, he or she would be considered utterly cut off from the community. The same applies to those who are sexually violated; Yezidism regards them as defiled, fit to pertain only to the one who took them by force. “The girls who were in the hands of the Islamic State, had all been baptised before, but they became *haram* at the hands (*ketiye destet wan*, captured, in their hands, with a sexual connotation) of non-Yezidis” (ShMMi52). Yezidi women and girls like Farida Khalaf, abducted and enslaved by men of the Islamic State, understood this principle all too well. Farida's eloquent memoir of her ordeal declares,

one thing was clear to us all: if an ISIS fighter decided to make us his wife, our life was over. We would bring disgrace to our families and be cast out of the community. No Yazidi man would want to marry us afterwards. It must not come to that. We bore a responsibility to ourselves and the honour of our families.

(2017, 66–67)

A legend concerning Hafiz Pasha, the governor of Diyarbakir whose military campaigns of 1837–38 decimated the Yezidi population, sheds light on the mentality that the Islamic State endeavored to exploit.

Hafiz Pasha seized a Yezidi girl from Mount Sinjar. She was called Khazal. When Hafiz Pasha's soldiers were looking for Yezidis to abduct, they saw her and took her. When her husband returned home and realized she was missing, he asked his children where Khazal was. They told him she had been taken by Hafiz Pasha. He took his sword and went to take his revenge. He found her with Hafiz Pasha and declared that he would kill him and take her back. She answered that she could no longer be a Yezidi, having been forcibly taken, and asked him not to kill the Pasha but to return to take care of the children as well as he could.

(ShMPi64)

The storyteller glossed his recounting of this legend: “Daesh [i.e. the Islamic State] understands our way of thinking and had seen our weaknesses and were trying to destroy us. How might they best achieve their objectives? By making sure that there were no women left.” The Islamic State's genocidal tactics are not limited to mass killings.

The abductors explicitly exploited the Yezidi belief in loss of belonging through defilement, as a way to persuade their captives against resistance. “The jihadis told the girls, ‘From now on, it's over. You are no longer Yezidis,’” Baba Sheikh said. He recalled his reasoning

on the matter: “Even prostitutes can go back to their own families and cultures. If prostitutes can be welcomed back, why can’t we receive our girls? Whoever comes back is welcome.” The Yezidis needed a potent new way to formally represent that welcome—to reincorporate those who escaped or were rescued from the Islamic State.

The solution was a return to the White Spring. Baba Sheikh issued a decree, dated February 6, 2015, as a form of counter-propaganda, declaring men and women who had accepted forced conversions or been physically defiled still to be Yezidis. He proudly emphasizes his role in making this decision:

I realize the revolutionary impact of reintegrating the abducted women. It was my decision alone.¹¹ The Mir was absent [overseas], and in his absence we had to make a decision. I am authorized to make an official order as the source of spiritual authority [*majahadeen*, (Arabic for spiritual authority)] for the Yezidis.

The decree was announced in writing and broadcast via television in Kurdish, Arabic, and English. Women who were still held captive at the time of the decree later told Baba Sheikh of their reaction.

The girls reported that they were under extreme pressure, sold from one person to another, under persecution, unsure of their future. And the jihadis said that they would be killed if they left; they would be unwelcome in the Yezidi community. Some of the girls said they were terrified, but when the announcement was made, they told me it gave them hope: ‘We saw you on television talking about it; we were very happy’. I received the girls when they came back, and I remained with them until they left for Germany. I was there [at Kaniya Spî] when they cast water on them. Then we gave them *barat*. I told them, ‘Welcome back. You are most welcome. You are *halal*.’ They are not *haram*. What they did to them, it was not their choice. Islamic State thought they could break the Yezidi community by taking the women. But this decision broke that way of thinking.

In the wake of Baba Sheikh’s decree, those who had escaped or been rescued from the Islamic State, old and young alike, were restored to their socioreligious home by rebaptism. “The first day upon their return, they try to bring them to Lalish,” a witness explained. He went on to detail the exuberant relief with which the girls participated in renewed *mor kirin*.

They threw a greater amount of water on the girls [than normal], and many of the girls splashed the water over their faces and arms after the baptism. Three times they cast the water. Even after baptism, the girls themselves washed their faces and eyes with the water. (ShMMi52)

Diye Asmar described how she conducted baptisms *en masse* for the returning women.

They all came here. I rebaptised all of them. They left money at the door [of Kaniya Spî]. I said, ‘You are all poor people. Take your money with you. You don’t have to pay.’ They all came one by one. Some were accompanied by their mothers, but some came alone. There were many more than a hundred. I did not count. People gathered to watch. They came in a group. Each took one or two minutes, and it was emotional. As I poured water on them, they wept. I wept along with them. Nothing was different about how the baptisms were conducted for the abducted women.

Diye Asmar's son, who often assists her at Kaniya Spî, described it this way:

We brought the girls here and they were rebaptised — the same process as with little children. We must remember that these girls were taken by force. So now we rebaptise them Normally baptism is just once, but these were special circumstances.

(MāMPi51)

By one estimate, some 2,600 Yezidis have been rebaptised after escaping from the Islamic State, including men and boys (ShMMi52). “Although their hearts were broken, it was soothing for them, this process, and also as a form of defiance, so many young Yezidi men came back from Germany to marry the rebaptised Yezidis. The families welcomed the idea” (ShMPi64).

In Ba'adrê, we listened to refugees whose families have been shattered by the Islamic State massacres and abductions. Under the care of humanitarian aid agencies, one 14-year-old girl is busying herself there with simple, daily routines just to occupy her mind. Her father was killed by the Islamic State; she and her grandmother and other women of her family were taken captive to Tal Afar. This young girl endured forced conversion, forced labor, and rape at the hands of the Islamic State. One of the other Yezidi girls, held captive in Tal Afar, knew enough about medicine to add Allermine (chlorpheniramine) tablets to the food the girls served to their “owners” to induce sleep. That is how they made their escape. Separately, they fled on foot. Young and old walked all the way from Tal Afar to Mount Sinjar, from which they were airlifted by helicopter to Duhok. One of this girl's sisters and a cousin remain in captivity in Syria as slaves of the Islamic State. She gave an account of her reunion with her relatives and her visit to Lalish:

I was welcomed back into my family. My family received me with great respect. Although my legs were very sore [from the long walk to safety], I went [to Lalish] on the first day upon arriving, wearing a white headscarf. I was part of a group, with my family as well. I was re-baptised alone, with my aunt accompanying me into Kaniya Spî. We went to the room [of the baptistery]. The woman there, Diye Asmar, threw water into my face — I think it was three times — and it was very nice to be back there. She then said a few blessings. It was amazing. It was very nice (*galek khosh bu*).

(SiFMi14)

Her grandmother also paid a visit to Lalish for rebaptism, though only after a period of recovery following the arduous trek to Mount Sinjar:

My legs were swollen. I could not make the journey to Lalish for two months after escaping. [...] I was *halal* anyway,¹² but we made ourselves *halal* again. Until we go to Kaniya Spî, undergo baptism, and drink the water of Kaniya Spî, we are not *halal*. We go there to make ourselves *halal*. We drink the water because it is a holy water.

(SiFMi63)

As for how she felt about being rebaptised, her granddaughter added, “I felt that from now on I have full freedom.”

Conclusion after the cataclysm

In relation to the mythology concerning the worldwide Flood, one Sinjari sheikh recalled the following story:

In the town of ‘Ayn Sifnī, where Noah built the Ark, there is a tomb of an innocent Yezidi woman who took yoghurt to Noah each day, asking when the Flood would take place. That woman was miraculously preserved during the Flood, although she did not board the Ark.

(*KhāMS62*)

The parallels are clear, and it is not surprising that a conversation about Kaniya Spî and baptism brought the story to the sheikh’s mind. Like the White Spring, this faithful woman and her innocence remained safeguarded in the midst of the darkest cataclysm, and, as a survivor, she was restored to the world that emerged after the Flood. For the Yezidis subjected to atrocities at the hands of the Islamic State, the pre-eternal water of Kaniya Spî holds reassurance of their belonging. The Spring imparts what it represents in myth and ritual: purity, preservation, resilience, renewal. The ingredients and tools for the religious leaders’ vital innovation were already inherent in the traditions concerning the White Spring, already recognized as adaptable in the face of evolving ritual norms, and ready to be formulated into a formidable gesture of resistance. Adaptability is a key component here. In a paradox that is more apparent than real, a certain intrinsic flexibility—an openness to reform within the tradition—may prove to be Yezidism’s greatest force for preservation, maintaining their vibrant way of life in spite of all the factors that threaten their fragile survival as a people.

Baba Chawish’s comments were unequivocal concerning the importance of baptism: “*Mor kirin* is the most important thing for us. [...] It is a holy thing, and it is the first point in Yezidism.” The age-old rite and site of Yezidi baptism has now taken on fresh importance as a decisive means of reasserting the community’s integrity and self-determination.

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Notes

- 1 Among the various transliterations of the name of this ethno-religious group, *Yezidis* is the version that now prevails among academic publications, while the United Nations and the mass media, including the BBC, *The New York Times*, *The Guardian*, *Newsweek*, Reuters, and National Geographic, have generally tended to use the alternative *Yazidis*. One unfortunate, inadvertent consequence of spelling *Yazidi* in this way is that it reinforces an erroneous association with the Umayyad caliph Yazid ibn Mu‘āwiya, with implications of a primordial Arab apostasy; the association carries peril in a region where extremists seek justification for genocide. See Asatrian and Arakelova (2014, 46–48) for an instance of this error. *Êzidi* perhaps most closely approximates what the Yezidis call themselves. The initial /j/ in the *Yezidi* or *Yazidi* form of the name is most likely a reflection of the tendency for native speakers of Arabic to insert this phoneme as a substitute for /ê/. For the transliteration of geographical terms, this essay follows Cecil John Edmonds’s meticulous survey of Yezidi places and populations, which he produced for the Royal Asiatic Society (1967, 82–87).
- 2 Although our informants were willing for us to record their names, we have chosen not to identify them by name here, with the exception of Khirto Haji Ismail, the Yezidis’ religious head (Baba Sheikh); Baba Chawish, the high priest and cantor of Lalish; and Diye Asmar, the baptismal officiant at Kaniya Spî; because they are already, in effect, public figures. As the security situation remains precarious at present, the potential for reprisals is real, and caution is imperative. Thus, we have adopted and adapted Philip Kreyenbroek’s method of encoding Yezidi informants’ identities

by place of origin, sex, caste, and age (2009, 13–14); for example, ShFMi47 represents a 47-year-old woman Mirîd from Shaykhân. See the Appendix for abbreviations of castes and places of origin.

- 3 Philip Kreyenbroek's notes on Layard's description of the springs are enlightening (1995, 88–89). Cecil John Edmonds was among the first to distinguish between Zemzem's and Kaniya Spî's separate ritual functions, and noted, moreover, the separate chambers for male and female children within the Kaniya Spî baptistery (1967, 19).
- 4 See, for example, W. B. Heard (1911, 209); Joseph (1919, 161), who flagrantly plagiarizes Layard; and the discussion in Abbas Al-Azzawi's "Notes on the Yezidis," which quotes Nuri Beg, writing in 1912:

the baby is brought to the tomb of Sheikh Adi and taken inside by the Sheikh to the dark vault there and plunged three times into water which they claim to be the water of 'Zam-Zam' [*siç*]. No one enters the vault except the Sheikh, the parents, and the other relatives waiting outside, and no one is allowed to move in its direction. While the Sheikh immerses the baby he addresses it to place trust in 'Tawus Melek' and to remain in his faith and tells it that the reward for so doing will be blessing and piety. This is said, or what resembles it, in the Kurdish language in a loud voice so that the people waiting outside can hear.

(Abbas 1951, 91)

- 5 Cf. the introductory remarks of one of our interviewees:

Yezidis are baptized in the water of Kaniya Spî. Water is very significant among ancient peoples, and particularly among the Yezidis. The water of Kaniya Spî was regarded as holy from the beginning to the present. Water is important because it is the source of life for humans, for crops, and for animals. The holiest water is that of Kaniya Spî.

(ShMMi52)

- 6 For instance, Birgül Açıkyıldız gives a self-contradictory account of the rite ([2010] 2014, 99–100). John Guest's otherwise excellent history of the Yezidis devotes as much attention to the "sacred newts" that purportedly live in Kaniya Spî as to the rituals performed there ([1993] 2010, 37, 39); we found no current evidence of newts in the spring. Ezter Spät's *The Yezidis* briefly describes the White Spring as a site of baptism (2005, 26, 55–56). Of greater value is Spät's doctoral thesis for its in-depth discussion of the Yezidi practice of baptizing sacred clothing called *khirqe* (2009, 119–36). Kreyenbroek laments the paucity of information concerning Yezidi baptism: "Beyond the fact that baptism (*mor kirin*) is practised in Yezidism, little precise information appears to be available, probably because the details of individual ceremonies vary." He offers a brief compilation of earlier descriptions of the rite (1995, 159).
- 7 See Açıkyıldız's detailed architectural description, photographs, and diagrams of the Kaniya Spî baptistery ([2010] 2014, 177–81).
- 8 Interestingly, Layard noted this allowance in his second expedition among the Yezidis:

When a child is born near enough to the tomb of Sheikh Adi, to be taken there without great inconvenience or danger, it should be baptized as early as possible after birth. The Cawals in their periodical visitations carry a bottle or skin filled with the holy water, to baptize those children who cannot be brought to the shrine

(1853, 93)

and this custom survives today. Kreyenbroek records, however, a perceived waning of importance placed on baptism among Yezidis in the diaspora who cannot readily travel to Northern Iraq (2009, 31).

- 9 Another woman similarly reported having chosen to be (re)baptized as an adult because she did not fully trust her mother's memory of the alleged baptism as a child (MāFMi31).
- 10 In addition to these terms, Baba Sheikh used *dergavan* and the Arabic *haras* to refer to the officiants at Kaniya Spî.
- 11 While this might be technically true, Baba Sheikh omits to mention the appeals from the wider Yezidi community leading up to his decree, as well as the input of the Council of Spiritual Leaders and the Mir on the formulation of his decision.
- 12 The implication is that she had not been sexually abused by her captors.

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Appendix

Abbreviations used for castes and places of origin:

BaBā Ba'shīqa Bāzān
Khā Khānasor
Mā Māmraḥān
Mi Mirîd
Pi Pir
S Sheikh
Sh Shaykhān
Si Sinjar City
TallA Tal Afar
TallB Tall Banat
TallQ Tall Qaşab

PART VI

Geography and travel



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16

THE GEOPOLITICS OF THE KURDS SINCE WORLD WAR I

Between Iraq and other hard places

Michael B. Bishku

Introduction

Since World War I, 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. At the same time, the Kurdish people have been affected by developments not only in the Middle East but elsewhere in the world. Before World War I, the vast majority of Kurds were under the rule of the Ottoman Empire; they were members of the Muslim *millet* (nation), the Empire's largest confessional group, protecting the frontiers of that state, whose greatest adversary was Russia, and living in lands also inhabited by a sizable minority of Armenians, whose loyalty was suspect to Sultan Abdul Hamid II (1876–1909) and later to the Young Turk triumvirate of Enver, Jemal and Talat (1913–1918). During both times (1894–1896 and 1915–1917), massacres (and deportations) of Armenian civilians took place, which the Armenians refer to as a “genocide” and in which Kurdish militias participated; however, many more Kurds refused to take part and even actively protected their neighbors.¹ Nevertheless, a large number of Kurds had no desire to be under the rule of a Christian Armenian state, whether created by Russia or the Western European powers.² Indeed, while the Ottomans had suppressed semi-independent Kurdish principalities during the early 19th century, just such a fear led to the unsuccessful Sheikh Ubaydallah rebellion in 1880, during which there was the intention of establishing an independent Kurdistan.³

Following World War I, the Kurds were promised the possibility of “local autonomy” in southeastern Anatolia under the provisions of the Treaty of Sèvres imposed upon the Ottoman Empire. The Armenians, on the other hand, were promised a “free and independent state” in former Ottoman territories of northeastern Anatolia under that same treaty but had to be content with a brief period of independence (1918–1920) in a small part of the former Russian Empire facilitated by the instability of the Communist Revolution and the subsequent Civil War, and later quashed by the newly created Soviet Union. Meanwhile, Great Britain cobbled together the new country of Iraq under Hashemite rule, including ethnic Kurds together with Sunni and Shi'a Muslims. The Republic of Turkey was recognized under the Treaty of Lausanne, which ignored the promises to the Kurds (and Armenians); Pahlavi Iran also proceeded to create a unitary state. Both countries also cooperated with the British to stifle any attempts at Kurdish nationalism. Meanwhile, France, which had a

League of Nations mandate over Syria (and created a separate entity of Lebanon, politically beneficial to Christian Maronites), thought little about the Kurds.

The Cold War following World War II offered new opportunities for (as well as obstacles to) the expression of Kurdish nationalism with the Soviet-Western rivalry; the Arab-Israeli conflict; and opposing views of Turkish, Arab and Iranian nationalism. Since the Gulf War of 1990–1991, the Kurdish autonomous region in Iraq has given inspiration for the aspirations of the Kurds of Turkey who have engaged in insurrection formally since 1984, sprinkled with shorter periods of cease-fires and negotiations. Kurdish nationalist aspirations were less pronounced in Iran and virtually nonexistent in Syria until the current civil war in that country, in which the Peshmerga military forces of the Iraqi autonomous region have provided assistance.

Post-World War I: Middle Eastern unitary states, European imperialism and Kurdish nationalism

Under Article 62 of the Treaty of Sèvres of August 1920, the fate of Kurdish self-determination was in the hands of the victorious European powers:

A Commission sitting at Constantinople and composed of three members by the British, French and Italian Governments respectively shall draft within six months ... a scheme of local autonomy for the predominantly Kurdish areas lying east of the Euphrates, south of the southern boundary of Armenia as it may be hereafter determined, and north of the frontier of Turkey with Syria and Mesopotamia [i.e. Iraq].

The Article also calls for the “full safeguards for protection of the Assyro-Chaldeans [indigenous Middle Eastern Christians] and other racial and religious minorities within these areas,” while Article 64 states that within one year of the treaty coming into force, the

Kurdish peoples within the areas defined in Article 62 shall address themselves to the Council of the League of Nations in such a manner as to show that a majority of the population of these areas desires independence from Turkey, and if the Council considers that these people are capable of such independence and recommends that it should be granted to them, Turkey hereby agrees to execute such a recommendation, and to renounce all rights and title over these areas.⁴

The Kurdish author Kendal Nezan states that the Treaty of Sèvres

was not only profoundly unjust and humiliating for the Turkish people [with a truncated state in northern Anatolia], it was also an affront to the Kurds ... as the ‘independent Kurdistan’ envisaged was in fact ... a country from which two-thirds of its territory had been lopped off, including its fertile areas and its traditional grazing grounds.⁵

Two months after the signing of the Treaty, a Kurdish rebellion broke out in Tunceli (Dersim) in order to strengthen their position politically while assuming that the Turkish nationalists or Kemalists (followers of Mustafa Kemal, who had established their own regime in Ankara in 1919) were not in a strong enough position to challenge their quest for independence (or, at the very least, autonomy). However, Kurdish political, tribal and sectarian divisions contributed to the failure of what is known as the Koçgiri rebellion (named for the

tribe most involved); by the spring of 1920, it was crushed, and the Kemalists, who had also used political patronage and distributions of land, could then concentrate on driving both the Armenians and the Greeks out of territories claimed and/or occupied in Anatolia in December 1920 and September 1922, respectively.

Moreover, even though the British encouraged Kurdish aspirations, the French and the British were more concerned with establishing and consolidating power in the former Ottoman territories of Syria and Iraq, respectively, and unwilling to engage the Kemalists militarily. Indeed, Great Britain signed an armistice with the Kemalists in October 1922 – the French and Italians had earlier given up claims to “spheres of influence” in Anatolia – and a British destroyer took Sultan Mehmed VI into exile in November 1922. The Treaty of Lausanne of July 1923, which replaced the Treaty of Sèvres, recognized the territorial integrity of Turkey, but Turkey was obligated under Article 38 to “assure full and complete protection of life and liberty [of] ... all [its] inhabitants ... without distinction of birth, nationality, language, race or religion”;⁶ however, unfortunately for the Kurds, there was no mechanism to ensure that Turkey would protect these rights. Great Britain also withdrew its support of Kurdish nationalism as part of its policy of trying to isolate Soviet Russia by strengthening its relations with Turkey and Iran; at the same time, it wanted to protect oil interests in Mosul province in Iraq. Turkey claimed the predominantly Kurdish-populated area, which also had a Turcoman (Turkish-speaking) minority, until June 1926, when it surrendered its rights in return for 10 percent of the region’s oil revenues for 25 years.

Under the Republic established in October 1923, Turkey began the process of conforming to a unitary state. President Mustafa Kemal – who was officially conferred the surname Atatürk in 1934 by the Turkish parliament – adopted a Constitution in 1924, which read, “Without religious and ethnic difference, every person of the people of Turkey, who is a citizen is regarded as a Turk.”⁷ That year, a legal prohibition was instituted against speaking the Kurdish language in public places, while in 1926, the Turkish Ministry of Education decreed that ethnic distinction should not be emphasized as it “harmed Turkish identity.”⁸ Indeed, geographical terms like Kurdistan passed out of existence, while Kurds were referred to as “Mountain Turks.” Secularism came hand in hand with nationalism as, in 1924, the caliphate was abolished; van Bruinessen refers to that institution as the “most important symbol of Turkish-Kurdish brotherhood.”⁹ The sultan, who also held the title of caliph (successor to the Prophet Muhammad), had cooperated with the British and fled the country in 1922. It was in this environment that the Sheikh Said rebellion broke out. While this insurrection’s primary goal was to have an independent Kurdistan, it used religious phraseology such as *jihad* (holy war) to describe its actions against the republic, and the sheikh took the title *amir al-mujahidin* (commander of the warriors of the faith); other goals included restoring the caliphate as well as *shari’a* (Islamic religious law) since Western law, which had begun to be introduced to the Ottoman Empire during the 19th century, intensified under the republic. Sheikh Said was executed. There were some 16 Kurdish uprisings in Anatolia between 1924 and 1938 suppressed by the Turkish military,¹⁰ with the Sheikh Said revolt marking the “beginning of ‘implacable Kemalism.’ Systematic deportations and razing of villages, brutality and killing of innocents, martial law or special regimes in Kurdistan now became the commonplace experience.”¹¹ Iran used similar methods.

In 1926, Turkey and Iran signed a Treaty of Friendship and Security, which had implications for the Kurds. The two governments agreed in Article 5

Not to allow in their territory the formation or presence of organizations or groups of persons whose object is to disturb the peace and security of the other country or to

change its government, or the presence of persons or groups of persons planning to attack the other country by propaganda or by any other means.¹²

This was necessary as during their respective processes of “Turkification” or “Persianization,” conflict spilled over the border, such as in the case of the revolts of Agha Ismail Simqu, who, like his counterparts in Iraq, Sheikh Mahmud and Sheikh Ahmad Barzani – the older brother of Mullah Mustafa Barzani – during the 1920s and 1930s, wanted to resist their respective central government’s attempts to control their regions; Simqu was ambushed and killed in Iran in 1930, while the Iraqi Kurdish leaders survived in exile or in hiding. Iraq became an independent Kingdom ruled by a Sunni monarchy in 1932, but Kurdish autonomy remained an unachievable dream. In 1937, Turkey, Iran, Iraq and Afghanistan signed the Sa’dabad Pact (named for the palace in Tehran); this nonaggression pact also had implications for the Kurds as the verbiage in Article 7 had similar intent to that of Article 5 in the Turco-Iranian treaty of friendship and security.¹³ However, by this time, Kurdish groups in Turkey, Iran and Iraq appeared to have been cowed or beaten into submission. The Iraq uprising in 1943 of Mustafa Barzani, who secured the release of his brother Ahmad in 1944 but had to flee to Iran the following year, was a wake-up call.

From the Cold War to the present: Soviet/Russian-Western rivalry; the Arab-Israeli conflict; and the clash of Turkish, Iranian, Arab and Kurdish nationalisms

During the Cold War, the situation of the Kurds became interconnected with Soviet-Western relations; the Arab-Israeli conflict; and especially national rivalries between Turkey and Syria, between Iran and Iraq in particular, and in overall relations between those latter four Middle Eastern states.¹⁴ Since then, there are still connections, though they are not as intense in Russian-Western relations; as for the Arab-Israeli conflict, the issue of the Palestinians is paramount, and when Israel’s interactions with the Iraqi Kurds are of the economic or cultural nature, they are of little concern to Turkey, which has common interests as well. The Syrian Civil War and the instability caused by the Islamic State (ISIS), both there and in Iraq, do affect interstate relations in the Middle East.

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, at the same time, 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 Kurdish 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. 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.

As for Israel, since its establishment in 1948, it 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. 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 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 toward the Palestinians. While the Arab world has been generally unsympathetic to the plight of the Kurds, Israeli involvement with the latter until the 2003 Iraq War was largely directed toward weakening Iraq's ability to militarily challenge Israel either directly or indirectly; since the Iranian revolution, it 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.

Also, 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 as well as all of Iraq's Middle Eastern neighbors. In the Syrian Civil War, Russia, the United States, Iran and Turkey all support the territorial integrity of Syria, but Russia and Iran support the government of Bashar al-Assad; the United States provides support to the Syrian Kurdish Peoples' Protection Units (YPG) whose troops are supplied in large part by the Democratic Union Party (PYD), viewed by Turkey as an extension of the PKK. Both Turkey and the United States support factions within the broad Syrian opposition. This complex web of alliances exists even though all factions oppose ISIS.

In January 1946, Qazi Muhammad, who led the Kurdish Democratic Party (KDP) and was the preeminent political and religious leader, became president of the breakaway Mahabad Republic. However, he was very dependent upon the Soviet Union, which occupied Iran during World War II and was more concerned about acquiring oil interests in that country and with 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.

Mullah Mustafa Barzani, on the other hand, whose forces provided some of the republic's best troops, fled with his men – as did the Azerbaijani leadership – to the Soviet Union. The British Foreign Office was skeptical of Mullah Barzani's (and Sheikh Mahmud'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.¹⁵

Mullah 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, he 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.”¹⁶ 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. Barzani’s time in the Soviet Union “seemed to disabuse him of any socialist leanings he had.”¹⁷ And afterward, he insistently told Western visitors “I am not a Communist. When I sought asylum in Russia I had no choice.”¹⁸ Indeed, Barzani refused to establish a Kurdish government-in-exile in 1950, and, according to Jalal Talabani, who would split from the KDP in 1975 to establish the rival Patriotic Union of Kurdistan (PUK) in Damascus and had visited Barzani for the first time in Moscow in 1957, Barzani had no interest in Marxism.

As a journalist for *Pravda* working for the KGB, Yevgeny Primakov visited Barzani in Iraqi Kurdistan in 1966, 1968 and finally early in 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 to dealing with Iran as it “was his only link with the outside world” and over the course of discussions asserted, “We do not want to secede from 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.”¹⁹ 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 ensure Arab control of Kirkuk, and the Kurds refused to close the border with Iran. 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?²⁰

However, Barzani had no faith in Iran. He stated 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.”²¹ In fact, *The New York Times* reporter Dana Adams Schmidt asserts that 14 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.”²² Yet the United States was unreceptive until May 1972, as according to the *Pike Report* on clandestine activities of the C.I.A., it “might ... provide the Soviet Union with an opportunity to make trouble [for our allies],” meaning Turkey and Iran.²³ 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.”²⁴ President Richard Nixon approved a plan that secretly provided \$16 million in arms and cash, a small

but symbolic sum compared to the Iranian investment, to Barzani.²⁵ Arms supplied to the Kurds included Russian and Chinese rifles, automatic weapons, obsolescent anti-aircraft guns and low-power artillery captured by the Israelis from the Arabs during the 1967 War. The C.I.A. and the State Department originally had misgivings about United States' participation as "the Kurds would inevitably be betrayed by Tehran."²⁶

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 equal usage 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 and to improve their respective relations with countries in the Arab world. Shortly after, Barzani sent a frantic message to Kissinger, reminding the Secretary of State of the United States' promises of support despite Iran's action, for which he never received a reply. When C.I.A Director William Colby followed up on Barzani's appeal, he was informed by Kissinger that "secret service operations are not missionary work."²⁷ Barzani and many of his *Peshmerga* fighters fled to Iran while the Mullah died of cancer in the United States in 1979. For decades, his son Masud refused to meet with Kissinger, who because of his "betrayal ... made him one of the greatest villains in Kurdish history."²⁸ 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 – it created a safe haven for the Kurds in northern Iraq, and together with Saddam Hussein's decision to pull out of the region in October, the United States "unwittingly became the midwife to a de facto Kurdish state, something it certainly never desired." And for the next 12 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?"²⁹

It was through the Shah's Iran that Israel would provide aid to the Kurds. In August 1965, the Israelis provided a training course for *Peshmerga* officers that lasted three months and was code-named *Marvad* (carpet). The following year, the Israelis set up a field hospital for the Kurds during the summer of 1966.³⁰ The Kurds also assisted 3,000 Iraqi Jews to escape, who eventually flew from Tehran to Tel Aviv.³¹ 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. 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 Arab-Israeli war.

As mentioned earlier, during the 1970s, Israel continued to support the Kurds in cooperation with the Shah's Iran, but he abruptly ended his assistance in March 1975, with the signing of the Algiers Accord. While the Shah reportedly told Uri Lubriani, the head of the 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; in the words of Eliezer Tsafir, the head of Mossad operations in Iraqi Kurdistan, "[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. During one of his visits to Israel in the 1970s, the Kurdish leader reportedly suggested to Shimon Peres, who was then minister of defense, that the Israelis participate in a joint campaign in which they would overthrow the government in Syria, while his forces would do 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.

Journalist Seymour Hersh 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."³⁵ However, this did nothing to disturb Turkish-Israeli military ties, 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, head of the Kurdish 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 a democracy in the Middle East."³⁶ In another interview three years earlier, Masud Barzani declared that "If an Israeli embassy were opened in Baghdad, we would no doubt open an Israeli consulate in Erbil."³⁷

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 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 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;³⁸ 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.³⁹ 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; the PKK organization was 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 its intelligence service provided money, arms, logistical assistance and false identification papers to PKK operatives.⁴⁰ (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 World War II. 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, was captured in Kenya the following year and has been in prison in Turkey since then.⁴¹ A few months later, the PKK established a unilateral cease-fire that was rescinded in 2004. Syria abided by its agreement, but is now engaged in civil war, jeopardizing Turkey's security.

The Syrian Civil War, which began in 2011, changed everything. Turkey fears the breakup of that country and the establishment of a Kurdish state on its southern border. It was slow to become involved in the war against ISIS; before then, there were accusations from the Syrian opposition supported by the United States that Turkey was cooperating with Jabhat al-Nusra (now known as Jabhat Fatah al-Sham), an al-Qaeda affiliate.⁴² In September 2016, U.S. Special operations forces began cooperating with Turkish forces just inside Syria as they were previously embedded with Kurdish forces of the YPG. They have also been successful in separating the respective military units and in setting up a line of communication to keep them focused on fighting ISIS.⁴³

Conclusion

Over the last few decades, the Kurdish nationalist organizations of Iraq, Iran and Turkey (and lately those in Syria) have operated in the same fashion as the Israelis – "The enemy of my enemy is my friend." Mullah 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 afterward, both Masud Barzani and Jalal Talabani 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.

Notes

- 1 Klein (2011), 180–181.
- 2 McDowall (2004), 56–57 and 104–105.
- 3 Olson (1989), 2.
- 4 Text in Hurewitz (1979), 220–225.
- 5 Kendal [Nezan], "The Kurds under the Ottoman Empire," in Chaliand (1993), 35.
- 6 Text in Hurewitz (1979), 326–337.
- 7 Yavuz (2001), 9.
- 8 Mango (1999), 428.

- 9 Van Bruinessen (1992), 281.
- 10 Kirişci and Winrow (1997), 100.
- 11 McDowall (2004), 198.
- 12 Text in Hurewitz (1979), 370–371.
- 13 Ibid., 509–510.
- 14 Bishku (2013), 73–89.
- 15 Quoted in Bulloch and Morris (1993), 97.
- 16 Quoted in Randal (1997), 132.
- 17 Lawrence (2009), 18.
- 18 Quoted in Randal (1997), 135.
- 19 Quoted in Primakov (2009), 329–330.
- 20 Quoted in McDowall (2004), 336.
- 21 Quoted in Ghareeb (1981), 140.
- 22 Quoted in Gunter (1992), 26.
- 23 Quoted in Ismet Shariff Vanly, “Kurdistan in Iraq,” in Chaliand (1993), 169.
- 24 Ibid.
- 25 Entessar (2010), 163.
- 26 Parsi (2007), 53–54.
- 27 Quoted in Vanly, in Chaliand (1993), 174.
- 28 Lawrence (2009), 27 and 209–210.
- 29 Ibid., 62.
- 30 Black and Morris (1991), 184.
- 31 Raviv and Melman (1990), 82.
- 32 Quoted in Parsi (2007), 57–58.
- 33 Golan (1989), 118.
- 34 McDowall (2004), 315.
- 35 Quoted in Hersh (2004), 359.
- 36 Quoted in Kirchick (2010).
- 37 Quoted in Ibid.
- 38 Bulloch and Morris (1993), 213.
- 39 Aburish (2000), 167.
- 40 Gunter (1997), 93–94.
- 41 Bishku (2012), 43–46.
- 42 Bishku (2015), 19.
- 43 Gibbons-Neff (2016).
- 44 Lawrence (2009), 15.
- 45 McDowall (2004), 384.

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ROAMING IRAQI KURDISTAN

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This is about being adventurous, exploring a land, and discovering its people. Traveling to and through any country is often about confronting expectations with the personal experience of meeting reality: flat, desert, hot, dry, or violent. Despite the Middle East's persistent image of pervasive violence, there are extensive areas that are safe and secure; easily accessible and warmly welcoming; unhesitatingly friendly and hospitable; and freezing cold in winter, with rugged snowy mountains, and lusciously green in spring, with wildflowers everywhere, with deep canyons and lakes, and with flowing waterfalls, rivers, and streams. Iraqi Kurdistan, a major part of northern Iraq, is one such area. Touch wood, no American nor any other Westerner has been fatally harmed in Iraqi Kurdistan during the 2003 Iraq War and its aftermath, to date.

Since 2003, there have been fewer than a dozen terrorist explosions in Iraqi Kurdistan, while numerous explosions in the rest of Iraq are uncountable. Of course, Iraqi Kurdistan is not perfect, no place is, but where else in the world is criminal behavior so low, drug abuse socially and culturally not tolerated, and taxes virtually nonexistent? Though the Islamic State of Iraq and Syria (ISIS) is currently on the wane, for three threatening years, Iraqi Kurdistan effectively faced its savagery across its southern 650-mile-long frontier. Iraqi Kurdistan became a safe haven for nearly two million internally displaced persons (IDPs) of every ethnicity and religion in Iraq, and refugees mostly from Syria but also from Iran and Turkey.

Some parts of the Middle East are very interesting and attractive to cultural and recreational tourists, academic scholars and educationists, public service practitioners who focus on humanitarian relief and development, conflict and post-conflict specialists, agriculturalists, and many others who endeavor to understand and involve themselves in the human condition. Iraqi Kurdistan is one of those parts. Too often, when we view any part of the world where there is conflict, we mostly talk of politics and economics, how these well-developed disciplines are intertwined, and how they explain situations and influence relations with other parts of the world and become the main focus of external sources of attention and discussion.

But what about the land itself, the stone and dirt, the water, and the air that surrounds it all? And of equal significance, what about the people themselves, especially when their cultural heritage is many centuries, indeed many millennia, old? For native, indigenous,

traditional peoples, their land is theirs, and everything that has occurred on their land belongs first and foremost to them and to one else. It is their land and their cultural heritage that distinguishes them from all others.

To begin to know and understand the land is to acquire a spatial feel of its geography and a sense of direction. Equally, it is important to get to know and understand the cultural heritage of the people who belong to the land. Like native, indigenous, traditional peoples most anywhere, the people of Kurdistan—Kurdistanis, as they are best called, to use a more inclusive term—are closely connected to their land. They are mostly of the mountains but also of the plains. Today, they are more an urbanized people but also a people of thousands of small, rural communities.

Most Kurdistanis live in a Middle East plagued by numerous dynamic, and complex divisions that too often erupting into destructive conflict. To whatever extent we look back through its excessively long history, it seems like the Middle East has been as it is ever since forever. In this oldest of the seven cradles of civilization, as defined and determined by academia, here, in Upper Mesopotamia, an essential characteristic of human nature was determined for all posterity: ‘destructive conflict’ as an essential element of the human condition. And ever since, humankind has been struggling to thwart it. This is ever so true at the family level, where there is the strongest tendency for peaceful living. Kurdistanis family ties are tight. Parents struggle to take care of their elders and provide for their children. Children go to school and do what good, innocent children do, and they grow up to assume the responsibilities their parents assumed. And so it has been since forever. Traveling through Iraqi Kurdistan is about being witness to the land and understanding how its people sustain and fulfill themselves in their time-honored ways. It’s about learning about a dramatic life change, from existing under a cloud of fear and force and destruction to living in an openness that is limited only by the often-comforting constraints of mores and sociocultural traditions.

Kurdistan is an extremely ancient land long recognized for its distinctiveness. Five hundred years ago, an Ottoman sultan treated Kurdistan separately by entering into formal governing arrangements with its leaders. Treaties, maps, and other evidence attesting to these bilateral relations are being discovered in the libraries of the world, including the US Library of Congress, Harvard Library system, and Newberry Library in Chicago. Following incessant destructive conflict far away from Kurdistan, in accordance with 17th-century treaties, the European world agreed to coexist as separate countries. These countries were recognized under a mutually agreed sovereignty concept that what goes on within a country stays in that country, and no other country need interfere. That said, through external intervention, ancient ‘Greater’ Kurdistan, with a population currently estimated at more than 35 million, became divided by a 20th-century foreign agreement into today’s Iraq, Syria, and Turkey. Kurdistanis of Iran were always separate, an integral part of that country since much earlier times. But in more recent times, in each country, its Kurdistanis people were for the most part subjected to an exclusive status. They were targeted for treatment as a lesser and separate minority by dominant groups that failed to develop a meaningful, sustainable, and inclusive national ethos. By their presence, Kurdistanis assumed some of the characteristics of the dominant ruling national groups. But they remained who they were and struggled to live as who they are. To live as themselves, some struggle to separate into a country of their own. Others struggle for autonomy within the country they found themselves.

Iraqi Kurdistan—Kurdistan of Iraq—is that part of Greater Kurdistan sometimes called Southern Kurdistan or Bashur. It covers the whole northern part of Iraq bordering Iran, Turkey, and Syria where Kurdistanis predominate, but not all Kurdistanis are Kurdish or

ethnic Kurds. By ethnicity, most native, indigenous, traditional Kurdistanis are people more of a 'Kurdish' culture, while others are Turkmens, Armenians, and Arabs. Some profess to be ethnic Assyrians. By religion, today's Kurdistanis are predominantly Muslim, mostly Sunni but also Shia. Among non-Muslims, Yezidis practice the oldest of Kurdistan's active religions. Kurdistan is home to one of the oldest Christian communities in the world, originating perhaps as early as the first or second century AD. They continue to speak a neoAramaic language, a derivative of the language spoken by Jesus Christ. While virtually all emigrated around the very early 1950s, with very few remaining today, the Jews of Kurdistan, descendants of the Israelites, are among the oldest Jewish communities in the world, about 2,700 years old. They spoke Jewish neoAramaic, a related but different language than Christian neoAramaic. While Jews, Kakayees, and Zoroastrians are very few in number, they are no less integral to the diverse religious makeup of the Kurdistan that is their homeland. Another way of looking at Kurdistanis is that they are traditional inhabitants of that part of northern Iraq that has remained predominately non-Arab.

Iraqi Kurdistan is littered with archaeological evidence of ancient civilizations and communities. There's a Roman bridge in Zakho, an over two-millennia-old (the oldest) aqueduct in the world on a well-engineered canal, the battleground where Alexander the Great defeated the Persian King Darius in 331 BC, a Christian monastery that has been functioning since the 4th century AD, and a citadel that is claimed to be the oldest continuously inhabited human settlement in the world. And there are thousands of additional sites waiting to be carefully examined for their stories to be told in contribution to Kurdistan's rich cultural heritage.

These millennia-old stories continue down through the ages to modern times where, for decades, virtually all families throughout Iraqi Kurdistan became survivors from living in an environment of force and fear. Tens of thousands of families in thousands of communities throughout Iraqi Kurdistan were subjected to their homes being destroyed and their lands being made uninhabitable. They were forcibly displaced to be disconnected from their lands and livelihoods, and subjected to chemical weapon attacks all across their homeland, from near the border with Turkey in the northwest all the way down to Halabja in the southeast, near the border with Iran. The latest period of that rich cultural heritage continues in what we observe while roaming around Iraqi Kurdistan today. Many would say the incredible positive change we witness began 100 years ago, following World War I, when the promise of a separate future was denied. But down through the decades, grievances and events persisted to highlight injustice and atrocities.

Beginning on September 11, 1961, resistance took a more active form through revolution that continued in one form or another until the 1991 Gulf War over Kuwait opened the door to a dramatic opportunity for a better future. The 2003 war in Iraq blew that door off its hinges, and the people of Iraqi Kurdistan ran through it to an incredible future that was previously unthinkable, indeed undreamable. While Iraqi Kurdistan continues to face severe challenges, its achievements since 1991 and especially since 2003 are nothing short of remarkable. For an overwhelming number of families, life is good. Indeed, for many families, life has never been better. The evidence is everywhere. Personal security has consistently exceeded the standards of many places in the industrialized countries of Europe and the Americas. Energy security is good and rapidly becoming better. Public revenue security has strong potential in Iraqi Kurdistan's extensive oil and gas reserves, in the expansive availability of land and water to support agribusiness, and in the burgeoning educational and training facilities and services to prepare students for active participation in an increasingly globalized world.

The number of commercial enterprises has greatly increased to the extent that virtually everything the world produces is readily available, and if it isn't, it can be arranged within a reasonably short period. Modern shopping malls, apartment complexes and hotels, restaurants and cafes, amusement parks and sports facilities are features that did not exist before 2003. Long neglected water and electricity services and road networks have greatly expanded since 2003. Modern telecommunication systems that began late under international trade sanctions during the early 2000s have rapidly expanded since 2003, with the latest in mobile phone services, fiber optic cabling, and Wi-Fi reaching into many rural areas.

In the meantime, despite severe financial difficulties, ISIS, and an extraordinary number of displaced people, Iraqi Kurdistan remains wonderful outdoor adventure country to be explored, discovered, and enjoyed. Road networks have greatly improved since 1991, especially since 2003. With well over 5,000 communities (cities, towns, villages, hamlets), more than the whole rest of Iraq, the terrain varies from smooth plains to very rugged mountainous areas. Motorable roads and tracks throughout Iraqi Kurdistan go into very remote areas and connect welcoming people everywhere. Security has not been an issue, which makes exploration and discovery especially enjoyable. But it's important to avoid some border areas, notably in the north where Turkish security forces engage insurgent groups, and along the southern frontier facing ISIS. In between is a very wide expanse of territory to roam at will, anywhere, anytime. Western visitors sometimes remark they feel safer in Iraqi Kurdistan than in their hometowns. Visitors as well as citizens, women as well as men, can move most anywhere in Iraqi Kurdistan at any time, alone, without security arrangements of any kind.

It wasn't always this way. In May 1992, the first internationally-observed elections in Iraq were held in what became known as the Kurdistan Region, which is roughly half of Iraqi Kurdistan. These regional elections led to the formation of the Iraqi Kurdistan Parliament (IKP), initially called the Kurdistan National Assembly (KNA), and the Kurdistan Regional Government (KRG). At the time, the Kurdistan Region was littered with many thousands of destroyed communities where its people were forcibly displaced from their ancestral lands and disconnected from their livelihoods. Many were herded into some 75 so-called 'collective towns' with features not too unlike reservations for Native Americans. Others relocated to existing cities and towns or migrated to other countries to become refugees.

The Gulf War over Kuwait occurred in early 1991. This international war of liberation led many thousands to return, reconstruct, and resettle their destroyed communities, and to rebuild their lives. For some, it was the fourth time they rebuilt their homes. Regional elections in May 1992 followed the late-1991 separation of the Kurdistan Region from the rest of Iraq by the regime of Saddam Hussein. In October 1991, the Government of Iraq (GoI) established an east-west (Iran to Syria) militarized demarcation line, emptied the banks, removed its flags, and withdrew its administration from territory north of the line. Tens of thousands of families south of the line were forcibly displaced into territory north of the line where thousands of communities were destroyed. In effect, the GoI abandoned about 10% of the land area of Iraq and over three million of its citizens. To administer the area, a consortium of Kurdistan political parties, the Kurdistan Front (KF), cooperated and conducted regional elections in May 1992.

The separated Kurdistan Region included parts of six governorates, not the complete three governorates (provinces) of Duhok, Erbil, and Slemani that existed before the separation, which incorrectly continue to be depicted in too many news articles and other reports. For example, Akre District was actually in Nineveh Governorate, but included in the Kurdistan Region. On the other hand, Makhmour District was actually in Erbil Governorate, but NOT included in the Kurdistan Region. After separation, travelers from other parts of Iraq

driving into the Kurdistan Region passed through GoI border-like checkpoints, only worse. At first, vehicles had to empty their fuel tanks down to only a few liters. Food and other personal materials were confiscated, thrown into a pile on the side of the road and burned. Later, vehicular traffic was stopped, and travelers were deliberately humiliated by being required to ride the five kilometers between the GoI and Kurdistan Region checkpoints in the back of dump trucks.

Before separation, the shortest, fastest way between Erbil and Duhok was via Mosul, normally only about an hour and a half journey. After separation, because there was no bridge across the Great Zab River in Kurdistan-controlled territory, the only route from Erbil to Duhok was via Shaqlawa up through Gali Ali Baig to Soran, then west to Mergasur and Goratu to Rezan, Barzan, Balinda, Amedi, and Zawita, a journey of at least eight hours. Back then, major portions of this route were unpaved: for example, from Goratu through Rezan and Barzan to Balinda, a long distance of billowing dust and flying stones. In the absence of a bridge across the Great Zab River in KRG-controlled territory, the only alternative to this eight-hour journey was a makeshift, one-vehicle ferry pushed across the Great Zab River by an outboard motorboat on a route from Erbil via Shaqlawa to Akre, Atrush, and Zawita to Duhok.

Today, the situation for travelers has completely changed. There are many more and much better roads, modern bridges, tunnels, overpasses, and underpasses that never existed before 2003. New stretches of modern highways and secondary roads continue under construction. And new tracks continue to be cut across the plains and through difficult remote mountain areas. Some mountain tracks are on incredibly spectacular scenic routes. There are innumerable excursion opportunities to take advantage of in Iraqi Kurdistan. To illustrate, let's take a very doable day trip to acquire an introduction and overview of what's possible in only one good, long, but leisurely, day through an incredible breath of landscape, history, urban and rural communities, and religions. Our journey begins and ends in Erbil, the centrally located capital city of the Kurdistan Region.

Ainkawa is a very old, predominantly Christian community adjacent to Erbil. Before 2003, Ainkawa was quite separate, but rapid growth has not only more than doubled its urban area, it has brought it closer to joining its much larger neighbor. Today, it's not so easy determining where Erbil City ends and Ainkawa begins. Ainkawa is home to Christians of one of the oldest Christian communities in the world that began perhaps as early as the 1st or 2nd century. That Christian religion has been known as the Church of the East and became affiliated with Nestorianism that spread from the Mediterranean all the way to China and India. Today, it is formally called the Holy Apostolic Catholic Assyrian Church of the East with its headquarters in Ainkawa headed by its Patriarch. Its adherents are often called Assyrians, and they claim their origins from the Assyrian Empire. Because it is an offshoot of the Church of the East, the much larger Chaldean Catholic Church that began in the 16th century has perhaps less connection with the much earlier Chaldeans of southern Mesopotamia. The Chaldean Catholic Church, with its headquarters and Patriarch in Baghdad, is affiliated with the Pope who is also the Patriarch of the Roman Catholic Church.

Many Christians have fled other parts of Iraq into Iraqi Kurdistan. Some facilities, including a seminary, have been relocated from Baghdad to Ainkawa. Both Assyrians and Chaldeans have churches and church-related facilities in Ainkawa, including schools and a university. Assyrians and Chaldeans both speak neoAramaic, a Semitic language, in the same language family as Hebrew and Arabic, a derivative of the language spoken by Jesus Christ. In predominantly Christian areas of Iraqi Kurdistan, neoAramaic is taught in public schools fully funded by the KRG.

Recently, Ainkawa has also become home to Mandeans, followers of John the Baptist, who also speak a Semitic neoAramaic language, at least in their liturgy. Since 2003, they have fled persecution from Baghdad and areas in southern Iraq. They are neither Christian nor Muslim but are acknowledged as the Sabians in the Quran to be 'People of the Book', an Islamic term referring to Jews, Christians, Sabians, and sometimes applied to members of other religions, including Zoroastrians.

From Erbil, travel through Ainkawa toward Ifraz, a village on the Great Zab River, a major tributary of the Tigris River. At Ifraz, turn right toward Darashakran Syrian Refugee Camp. Just past Darashakran, there is a security checkpoint. Go through the checkpoint and just ahead, turn left and follow the road to an unfinished bridge across the Great Zab River. After crossing, follow the road to Rovia, a junction town to Duhok, Akre, and Bardarash. Turn left toward Bardarash. Continue beyond Bardarash and through a security checkpoint and look for a sign on the right to Deir Mar Matti (St. Matthew Monastery). After the sign, turn right and proceed nine kilometers up a switchback (zigzag) on Maqlub Mountain, a long rise up out of the surrounding plains, to the doorstep of Mar Matti Monastery. This monastery belongs to the Syriac Orthodox Church that emerged during the time of the Byzantine Empire in Antioch, a town founded by one of Alexander the Great's generals, which is close to the modern Turkish town of Antakya. The headquarters of the Syriac Orthodox Church and Patriarch is in Damascus, and its adherents are known as Syriacs, who also speak a neoAramaic language.

There is also a Syriac Catholic Church, an offshoot of the Syriac Orthodox Church affiliated with the Pope and the Roman Catholic Church, founded by the Apostle Saint Peter before he went to Rome, in Antioch, where followers of Jesus were first called 'Christians'. Today, the headquarters and Patriarch of the Syriac Catholic Church are in Beirut. Nearby Maqlub Mountain in Iraqi Kurdistan is the town of Bashiqa that is roughly half Christian and half Yezidi. There are two churches side-by-side almost touching each other, one Syriac Orthodox and the other Syriac Catholic.

After leaving Mar Matti Monastery, return toward Bardarash. At the checkpoint, immediately turn left and follow the paved road along the northern side of Maqlub Mountain to the last paved road that goes to the right. Turn right and follow the road to the highway that runs from Rovia to Duhok. Remember, you passed through Rovia on your way to Mar Matti Monastery. As you drive from the northern side of Maqlub Mountain to the Rovia-Duhok highway, you pass through the Battlefield of Gaugamela where Greek-Macedonian Alexander the Great defeated Persian King Darius III in 331 BC. This is sometimes called the Battle of Arbela, which is modern-day Erbil, perhaps because it was the closest, better-known place at that time. There isn't anything to see at the Gaugamela Battlefield today. Archaeologists have yet to examine the area in detail to map it out and tell us more than we already know. But when you view the feature film *Alexander* with Colin Farrell and Angelina Jolie, you can watch the great battle play out and say, 'I was there!'

As you approach the Rovia-Duhok main road, immediately to the left is the Yezidi 'collective town' of Mehat. Cross over to the other side of the main road and turn left toward Duhok. A little ahead, opposite Mehat, before going up a rather steep hill with Betnaur village at the top, turn right onto a dirt road, and within about ten minutes, you will arrive at the oldest aqueduct in the world, completed in 700 BC, a wide and long stone bridge that carried water in a canal across a shallow valley. There's a sign on the right about an archaeological site, but the sign is not very conspicuous and could easily be missed. A Harvard archaeologist describes the two-million fitted stone aqueduct as an engineering jewel of the Assyrian Empire. The University of Chicago Oriental Institute in 1935 published a 140-page academic report on this aqueduct constructed by Assyrian King Sennacherib

(Google: OI-UChicago Sennecherib's Aqueduct). On the sides of the aqueduct are cuneiform inscriptions, perhaps the oldest form of writing in the world, attesting to King Sennecherib's masterpiece of Assyrian engineering.

Return to the main road and continue past Betnaur village toward Duhok. After about ten minutes is a major junction with food and other services. Turn right at the junction toward the district headquarters of Shekhan, sometimes also called Ain Sifni, which is predominantly a Yezidi town. Continue through the town and beyond into the countryside. Perhaps after about 15 minutes, there's a good paved road to the right along a mountainous area. Turn right, and follow the road for about 20 minutes to the impressive Assyrian rock sculptures (bas reliefs) at Khennis. This is the headwaters of the canal with the oldest aqueduct that ran all the way to Nineveh, the capital of the Assyrian Empire, which today is part of modern-day Mosul. An Oxford researcher proposes that this canal brought water to the ancient Hanging Gardens of Babylon, which were not actually in Babylon, where no evidence from excavations has been discovered, but in Nineveh (Nineveh – Lost Gardens of Babylon).

Return toward Shekhan, but at the junction, instead of turning left toward Shekhan, turn right. Within about 15 minutes, on the left is the road up to Lalish, the paramount religious site of the Yezidis. Very soon after starting up the road, on the left is a caravanseraï, an old inn where travelers and their animals would stay. It's usually overlooked because the roof level is below the road level. Though rough and unkempt, it's worth the moment to go down the hillside to enter from the side and see its fascinating interior.

Ahead at the end of the road is Lalish, a valley complex of shrines and facilities for caretakers and pilgrims to stay. All are welcome. Within the main shrine complex is a series of courtyards and rooms and passageways that go down to a sacred spring, the crypt of the religious reformer Sheikh Adi, and a room of classic pottery urns storing olive oil used to light numerous lamps throughout the temple complex every evening. Early October is usually a special ceremonial period, but due to extreme tragedy inflicted on Yezidis, these ceremonies during the past few years have not been held.

From Lalish, next is a longer stretch through the town of Atrush along a main road with Christian villages to Mareba and Qasrok to the picturesque and fascinating old part of Akre City with its steep mountainsides packed with homes that in earlier times were Muslim, Christian, and Jewish. A former Israeli defense minister is originally from Akre. In a nearby valley is the shrine of a prominent Sufi. It is here that the Spring Equinox, March 21, is celebrated as Kurdish New Year's Day in a major way with fire and a torch parade on a mountain with Zoroastrian ruins on its summit.

Proceeding beyond Akre on the way back to Erbil, instead of going straight to Erbil, after about 15 minutes, turn left through the scenic gorge of Gali Zanta, through Dinarta Town, up and over Pires Mountain, and down into the expansive valley of the Great Zab River. Dinarta was once upon a time a Jewish town tucked up in the mountains. To the east is Nahle Valley where there are eight Christian villages still functioning. After crossing the Great Zab River at Ble, turn right and follow the road along the river to Rezan where the Rukuchuk River joins the Great Zab River, which eventually joins the Tigris River. In other words, you can get in a canoe in Rezan and go all the way to Baghdad. If you want. In any case, there are fish restaurants in Rezan that are a favorite stop for travelers. About 20 minutes from Rezan along the Great Zab River, turn left up a road through another spectacular gorge with a side road to Shanidar Cave that is perhaps the oldest archaeological site in all of Asia. Here, during the late 1950s and early 1960s, a Smithsonian Institution and Columbia University archaeological team discovered skeletons of Neanderthals over 50,000 years old.

Continue up the gorge to the junction at Goratu and turn right to Mergasur and Soran. At the Soran junction turn right down through the gorge of Gali Ali Baig, the deepest canyons in the Middle East with its waterfall depicted on the 5,000 Iraqi dinar currency note. This is a spectacular part of the fabled Hamilton Road from Erbil to the Iranian border. From 1928 to 1932, New Zealand (British) engineer A.M. Hamilton carved the road to connect the British and Persian Empires through the rugged mountains of Kurdistan that made it possible to travel from London to Tehran overland by rail and road within eleven days. Hamilton tells the story of constructing the road in his book *'Road through Kurdistan'*.

Finally, continue down the Hamilton Road to reach Shaqlawa town before dark for a debriefing session at the Swedish Village Stars Restaurant over parzola (little lamb chops) and beverages. Erbil is less than an hour ahead, and since there isn't much to see along the way, little is missed by traveling in the dark. Shaqlawa is a scenic town with a significant Christian population. This lengthy day trip is doable without rushing, especially during that time of year when days are longer. For shorter days, it can be adjusted. However, it illustrates what can be done in a day when a reasonable minimal amount of time is spent at each stop. This trip, only one of many possible day trips, is helpful in acquiring a spatial feel and sense of time in Iraqi Kurdistan.

In one long day, let's see where we've been: Erbil, Ainkawa, Darashakran Syrian Refugee Camp, Great Zab River, Rovia, Mar Matti (St. Matthew) Monastery, Gaugamela Battlefield, Sennecherib's Aqueduct, Shekhan Town, Khennis Assyrian bas reliefs, Lalish caravanserai and Yezidi paramount religious site, Old Akre Town with Zoroastrian ruins, Gali Zanta, Pires Mountain, valley of the Great Zab River near Ble-Rezan where the Rukuchuk joins the Great Zab, Shanidar Cave, Goratu, Mergasur, Soran, Hamilton Road through Gali Ali Baig-Shaqlawa, and back to Erbil. We passed through a wide variety of landscapes: plains, mountains, gorges, canyons, rivers, and waterfalls. More importantly, of no less equal significance, is that we passed through numerous homeland communities where the people have been of five different religions: Zoroastrians, Yezidis, Jews, Christians, and Muslims. All are welcome in today's Iraqi Kurdistan. And so are adventurers, explorers, and discoverers.

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PART VII

Women



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18

KURDISH WOMEN

Anna Grabolle-Çeliker

This entry begins with the caveat that terms such as “Kurds” and “Kurdish women” are generalisations that, as will be obvious from other entries in this handbook, need to be tempered by considerations of variety in terms of language, geography and social class. Nevertheless, certain structural constraints, political developments and similarities in gender regimes make it meaningful to discuss “Kurdish women”. As women and as members of a nation without a state, they have faced double discrimination, gender-based and ethnicity-based, in the countries they live in.^{1,2,3} This is true in all the countries where there are significant Kurdish populations, that is, Turkey, Iraq, Iran and Syria as well as in the diaspora in Europe.^{4,5,6,7}

The traditional Kurdish gender regime – discrimination under “Classic Patriarchy”

Referring to the universality of patriarchy, Mojab and Hassanpour point out that

[e]ach regime of patriarchy is particular. Kurdish patriarchy is different from Italian patriarchy. Nonetheless, patriarchies form a universal regime insofar as they perpetrate, without exception, physical and symbolic violence towards women.⁸

A similar acknowledgement of universal patriarchy is made by Kandiyoti, who then goes on to argue the existence of different ideal types of patriarchy. Her categorisation is useful because it argues that in different types of patriarchy, women are involved in different types of “patriarchal bargain”. The traditional Kurdish gender regime closely fits her description of “Classic Patriarchy”, a gender regime she ascribes to “North Africa, the Muslim Middle East (including Turkey, Pakistan, and Iran) and South and East Asia (specifically India and China)”.⁹

Classic Patriarchy, according to Kandiyoti, can be found in societies with patrilineal descent and post-marital patrilocal residence (i.e., a bride moving into the groom’s household or village). This arrangement of cohabitation in the husband’s family after marriage creates two areas of tension where women “bargain” with patriarchy.

The first bargain is that a young bride, *bûk* in Kurmanci Kurdish, accepts her inferior position as a young, new outsider in the patrilineage. Particularly in rural areas, Kurdish women have left their natal homes and moved into their husband’s household after marriage,

occupying a precarious position until they have consolidated their place by continuing the patrilineage through the birth of sons.¹⁰ This inferior status of young brides has been described as follows:

‘Being a bride’ can be evaluated as a marginal status, which, for the woman entering her husband’s home, involves not speaking to her father-in-law or any males in the family and any of the females older than her, not eating in front of them, taking on the hardest work, not leaving the house, not taking her children onto her lap in front of anyone, and other behaviour.¹¹

The delayed return for accepting an initially inferior position – the “bargain” – is the relatively high status a woman can achieve as the mother of sons and the mother-in-law to new brides in later life.

Kurdish society has traditionally been characterised by a gender-age hierarchy that gives most power to older men over younger men and women. Genealogical recitation has remembered generations of men,¹² patrilineal land has been farmed by patrilineages and, when division has become unavoidable, the land has been inherited by sons and not by daughters.^{13,14} Strohmeier and Yalçın-Heckmann speak of an “ideology of patrilinear solidarity”, especially in rural areas.¹⁵

When Kurdish women and men speak of marriage, they often describe it as a transaction between families who “give” or “take” a girl, reflecting both corporate patrilineal identity and perceived passivity of women in the choice of their marriage partner. We know from Bourdieu that the image of lineage elders controlling marriages in their kin group is sometimes only a façade that is upheld and hides “practical kinship”, that is, numerous female and male actors behind the scene who work towards a marriage.¹⁶ We also know, however, that all too often Kurdish women have been married without being asked; they have, indeed, been “given” and “taken”.

In marriage, Kurdish women face a second “bargain”; as their husbands’ mothers try to keep their sons’ loyalty for provision and care in old age, the young wives need to prove their worth to their husbands and vie with their mothers-in-law in order to “earn” their husbands’ primary loyalty, which includes financial provision. This second bargain means that women offer domesticity, modesty and seclusion in return for economic security.¹⁷

The traditional Kurdish gender regime has placed great emphasis on honour and shame; controlling women’s conduct, labour and sexuality has been seen as the right and duty of the father, husband and the wider patrilineage.^{18,19,20} Gender segregation is common during work, meals and socialisation.^{21,22,23}

Of course the traditional Kurdish gender regime is a multi-stranded ideology that can be perpetuated, reinforced, challenged and changed by both women and men. Factors such as education levels, marriage age, rural or urban habitation, social class, migration, religious beliefs and traumatic experiences during oppression and war all influence the way that Kurdish women and men act and are allowed to act. The following are historical examples of Kurdish women whose lives challenged Classic Patriarchy.

Exceptions to the rule: female Kurdish leaders in history

In an article on female Kurdish leaders, van Bruinessen describes reports from as early as the 17th century, of women acting as heads of tribes. He argues that while women could become leaders in their own right among Kurds perhaps more easily than among other

groups in the Middle East, these women owed their initial position to powerful fathers or husbands: “high birth may compensate for the disadvantages of female gender”.²⁴ Ordinary Kurdish women were much more constrained by conventions.^{25,26} The following examples of famous historical female Kurdish leaders are thus to be understood as exceptions rather than the rule.

Bruinessen cites the famous travel-writer Evliya Çelebi, who writes about Khanzade Sultan, the leader of an army of up to 40,000–50,000 men. She led her army in raids from her province in Harir and Soran (in today’s Iraqī Kurdistan) to Iran in the mid-17th century.

Around 200 years later, there are reports of a ruling Kurdish lady in Maraş (today’s Turkey), Kara Fatima Khanum. She is said to have taken over rule when her husband was imprisoned. In order to regain favour with the Ottoman sultan, she fought in the Crimean War with her cavalry unit.

At the turn of the 19th century, Adela Khanum, herself from the Persian Kurdish aristocracy, married a Kurdish tribal leader and governor in Halabja (in today’s Iraq); after her marriage, she is said to have transformed Halabja from a dusty, sleepy village into a stylish garden town with thriving trade. Following her husband’s death, she ruled indirectly for another 15 years through her son, who was appointed governor, until her death in 1924. She managed to maintain influence despite Ottoman and British pressure for more control in the area.²⁷

Bruinessen further refers to Kurdish intellectual Musa Anter’s list of Kurdish female tribal leaders in the Mardin area of the early to mid-20th century, including Anter’s own mother, Fasla Khatun. Two of these leaders, Perikhan Khatun and Shemsî Khatun, became so influential after their husbands’ deaths that their sons were later referred to as sons of their mothers rather than their fathers, as patrilineal ideology normally demands.²⁸

Again in the early and mid-20th century, a woman rose to the highest position among the Yazidi Kurds. After the death of her husband, the Mir Ali Beg, in 1913, Mayan Khatun, herself from a Mir family, became the regent for her son. She managed to continue to reign even after her son’s death, by becoming guardian of her then underage grandson.²⁹ Historian Hür points out how Mayan Khatun ruled in turbulent times, when non-Muslims were being forced to convert, during both World Wars and during a time when both the British and the French were clamouring for influence in the area. She is described as a strong, self-reliant leader.³⁰

Hür goes on to name two more examples of female Kurdish leaders. Zarife Hanım was the wife of Alişer Bey, one of the leaders of the Alevi Kurdish Koçgiri Rebellion that began in 1921, at the time when the Ottoman Empire was being dissolved. Zarife Hanım is said to have given counsel to her husband and to have fought alongside him. After the rebellion was quashed, the couple fled, but were eventually killed in 1937.³¹

Hür’s final example is from Iran. Mina Hanım was the wife of Qazi Muhammed, the leader of the short-lived Mahabad Kurdish Republic (January–December 1946). With his support, she formed the Kurdish Women’s Union (Hür cites it as *Yekîti Afretanî Jinên Kurdistan*,³² but Mojab speaks of the Union of the Democratic Women of Kurdistan, *Yeketi Jinanî Demokratî Kurdistan*, or the Women’s Party, *Hizbî Yayan*³³).

Many Kurdish women today enter the political arena in their own right, without having to resort to an initial connection to the social and political capital of fathers, husbands or other male relatives. The following discusses how, in addition to gender-based discrimination, Kurdish women have also faced and overcome oppression as members of minority ethnic groups in different states.

Discrimination by the State and increasing politicisation of Kurdish women

The nationalisms of the dominant ethnic groups in Turkey, Iran, Iraq and Syria have denigrated Kurdish culture and language and discriminated against Kurds politically and economically.^{34,35,36} Furthermore, the patriarchal gender regime of traditional Kurdish society has been reinforced by similar gender regimes among the ethnic groups Kurds coexist with in the aforementioned countries.

When there have been state-led initiatives to “modernise” Kurdish women, they have come at the cost of linguistic and cultural assimilation by the dominant ethnic groups.³⁷ While access to (more) education and work is desirable for improving women’s position in their family and in the wider society, the concomitant loss of Kurdish “authenticity” may be opposed by Kurdish nationalist movements, which tend to mystify women as embodiments of “real Kurdishness”.

In the following, I discuss experiences of Kurdish women and their increasing politicisation in relation to both anti-Kurdish and Kurdish nationalisms. A similarity in different countries seems to have been that the Kurdish nationalist movements have prioritised Kurdish liberation from ethnic oppression over the emancipation of women. And even when pro-Kurdish movements have promoted women’s rights, there has long been a tendency for this to consist of top-down concessions rather than the wish for real change in relations between genders at the domestic and societal level.

Turkey

The first official Kurdish Women’s organisation was the *Kürt Kadınları Teâlî Cemiyeti* (Society for the Advancement of Kurdish Women) founded in Istanbul in 1919. At a time when the Ottoman Empire was breaking down and people were looking for alternative societal models, many Kurdish unions and parties were founded; this organisation was the women’s counterpart to the Society for the Advancement of Kurdistan (*Kürdistan Teâlî Cemiyeti*).³⁸ In an opening speech, the president of the society, Encam Yalmuki, said, “Today the fate of all nations is changing and everyone is being given rights. We, too, want our rights because there are millions of Kurds out there and there is a great Kurdistan”.³⁹ While historiography on Ottoman women’s movements seems to have ignored the foundation of this society,⁴⁰ it cannot yet be considered a “Kurdish women’s movement” in its own right;⁴¹ from the activities the society carried out within its one year until closure, it seems indeed more of a charitable organisation, regardless of the political fervour in the opening speech.

The new Turkish Republic, founded in 1923, generally did not support women’s movements; rather, there were top-down reforms to emancipate women as symbols of a “modern” republic. Only in the 1980s did feminist movements in Turkey really go beyond this “state feminism” to demand rights for women not only as a class but also as individuals.⁴² At this point, however, the double discrimination mentioned at the beginning came into play again; Kurdish feminists felt excluded by Turkish feminists because of their ethnicity and by Kurdish nationalists because of their feminist identity.⁴³

Kurdish women’s politicisation has its origins in the military coup of 1980 and its violent aftermath. Arakon argues that the loss of relatives, continuous state violence, as well as the responsibility for keeping families together economically and socially, were all factors that politicised Kurdish women more than Turkish women.⁴⁴ I would add to this the traumatic experience of internal displacement that at least a million, if not millions of, Kurdish villagers experienced due to forced village clearances and flight from the armed conflict between the

Turkish Army and the Kurdish guerrilla PKK (*Partiya Karkerên Kurdistanê*, Kurdistan Workers' Party),⁴⁵ a factor that has led to more ethnic awareness and politicisation.⁴⁶

Kurdish women protesters who became visible in the public sphere were initially relatives, often mothers, of mostly male political activists and later also of PKK guerrillas. Women who had lost their husbands or sons in police or army custody began protesting against these disappearances with a silent weekly sit-in, holding pictures of the "disappeared" and demanding knowledge of their relatives' whereabouts or at least confirmation of their deaths. The first protest of these "Saturday Mothers" (*Cumartesi Anneleri*) took place in 1995. After a government crackdown in 1999, the silent protests had to be discontinued for a decade. Since 2009, however, protesters have continued to meet; the name has changed to Saturday Mothers/Saturday People to be more inclusive.^{47,48}

Another movement in Turkey with roots in the 1990s is that of the "Peace Mothers" (*Barış Anneleri*). The group was founded in 1996. The initial idea was to bring together both mothers of PKK fighters and those of soldiers of the Turkish Army who had died in the conflict since 1984, but it has remained mostly a group of Kurdish mothers. The stated aim of this group was to end the war.⁴⁹

Both of these groups used the symbol of motherhood, perhaps a sacred, universal symbol that people of a wide variety of political opinions could empathise with. They did manage to meet with government representatives; the Saturday Mothers/People met with then Prime Minister Erdoğan in 2011; the Peace Mothers marched from Diyarbakır to Ankara and also made attempts to meet with the then chief of general staff. However, state and nationalist discourse were quick to denigrate these mothers and to juxtapose the "Mothers of Martyrs" (i.e., soldiers who had been killed in the conflict with the PKK) and, in an obviously derogatory reference to the Saturday Mothers, the "Friday Mothers" (mothers of the dead soldiers who were shown to visit their sons' graves every Friday) as mothers worthy of glorification. Kurdish female protesters were thus mostly denied legitimacy and also faced police violence, arrests and prosecution.⁵⁰

According to Açıık, feminist Kurdish groups were formed in the mid-1990s.⁵¹ Magazines addressing Kurdish feminists and women began to be published: *Yaşamda Özgür Kadın* (known to be close to the PKK and closed down in 2000) and *Roza* and *Jûn* from 1996 to 2000.^{52,53} The focus of *Yaşamda Özgür Kadın* was "more on how Kurdish women can contribute to the national struggle", while the other two magazines were "primarily concerned with challenging sexist and racist practices".⁵⁴

As peaceful protests, civil disobedience and political involvement were oppressed by the Turkish state, many Kurdish women also became attracted to the militant PKK. By as early as 1993, up to 30% of the guerrilla fighters were said to be women;^{55,56} they were organised in the separate YJA Star (*Yekîneyên Jinên Azad ên Star*, Free Women's Units). The PKK had realised, quite pragmatically, that the traditional Kurdish gender regime would hinder widespread participation of both men (who would have to leave women behind without protection) and women (who would be outside of their male relatives' control). The organisation thus denounced "tribal" and traditional kinship structures as impediments to both individualisation and nationalist fervour.⁵⁷

Çağlayan points out an interesting discursive shift in the speeches of PKK leader Abdullah Öcalan over the years, as more women joined its ranks: "In the 1980s, Öcalan spoke to militant men about how they should treat women, that is, he spoke with men about women; in the 1990s, however, he spoke with women militants about men".⁵⁸ One should not forget, however, that the traditional Kurdish gender regime has lagged behind PKK rhetoric; thus, additional push-factors for joining the PKK were also patriarchal control, forced marriage and violence against women in Kurdish society.

Because political activism in pro-Kurdish parties was long impossible, the first Kurdish politicians to enter parliament did so as MPs for left-wing parties. Leyla Zana was the first Kurdish woman to become a parliamentarian. She had become politicised after marriage to a much-older Kurdish politician who was later imprisoned and was one of four Kurdish MPs elected into parliament in 1991. Zana became a symbol of the Kurdish movement when she came to the swearing-in ceremony in parliament wearing a headband in Kurdish colours (green, red and yellow) and added a sentence in Kurdish to her swearing-in oath, a move that caused fury in the Turkish establishment. Her Kurdish addition was “I take this oath for the brotherhood between the Turkish people and the Kurdish people”. In 1994, four Kurdish MPs were stripped of their immunity; their “separatist activities” led to a decade-long imprisonment.⁵⁹ After her release, Zana continued to be politically active. She was elected as an independent MP in the pro-Kurdish movement in 2011. In 2015, after being re-elected as MP for the Peoples’ Democratic Party (HDP), Zana again changed her oath, swearing not “before the great Turkish Nation” but rather “before the great nation of Turkey” (i.e., a multi-ethnic and not only Turkish entity). She also preceded her oath with a sentence in Kurdish, saying, “With hope for honourable and permanent peace”.⁶⁰ Because this oath was not accepted, she is currently not a full MP.

Since pro-Kurdish political parties have been able to become active in Turkey, they have committed themselves to ever-larger women quotas from 1999 onwards. The most recent pro-Kurdish party in parliament and local government, the HDP, has placed two co-mayors in each municipality it rules and co-party chairs at the top of the party.⁶¹ For the June 2015 general elections, the HDP set itself a 50% gender quota and a 10% Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, and Transgender (LGBT) quota. In the end, 40% of its elected parliamentarians were women.⁶²

It has to be emphasised, however, that Kurdish male politicians did not readily accept these quotas and women’s participation. Gülten Kışanak is a veteran Kurdish politician who worked as journalist, MP and co-mayor of Diyarbakır until her arrest in October 2016. In an interview in August 2016, she described this male reluctance, saying that the most difficult time of her life was not in prison in 1980, when she experienced torture and humiliation at the hands of the Turkish state, but “it was the struggle we had to fight in order to get a women’s quota for MPs”.⁶³ The co-chair system was first implemented in 2004, but, said Kışanak, the female co-chairs were not taken seriously by their male counterparts, who often argued that “society was not ready” for women representing them. The symbolic representation only became more equal after 2007. The increasing visibility and involvement of women in parliamentary and local politics has put other mainstream Turkish parties to shame (and sometimes effected change) and is also challenging the traditional Kurdish gender regime at the party’s base.⁶⁴

In 2015, the peace process between the Turkish government and pro-Kurdish groups broke down, both because the Kurdish HDP had not supported President Erdoğan’s ambitions for a presidential system and because of Turkey’s attack on Kurdish groups in Northern Syria.⁶⁵ In the aftermath of the breakdown, Kurdish women have been affected severely; many civilians have died or been made homeless by government attacks in the urban war that has been raging in Kurdish cities, such as Şırnak, Cizre, Silopi and Diyarbakır.⁶⁶ Under later crackdowns many Kurdish women’s Nongovernmental Organizations (NGOs) were closed.⁶⁷ Finally, local and national politicians from the HDP were taken into custody or imprisoned, many of them women. At a time when Kurdish women were overcoming gender discrimination in their own ranks and felt careful optimism about a peaceful solution to the Kurdish issue, state discrimination and oppression took over again.

Iraq

In Iraq, Kurdish women have experienced decades of violence. Like their fellow Iraqi citizens, they lived through the Iran–Iraq War (1980–1988). As Kurds, however, they were additionally targeted by chemical weapons and mass executions in the Anfal campaigns in 1988, a brutal reprisal for the Kurdish fight for autonomy from Iraq and military collaboration with Iran. Although exact numbers are unknown, one estimate is of 150,000–200,000 civilian deaths. In addition, 1.5 million people were forcibly displaced as around 4,000 villages and hamlets were destroyed.⁶⁸ Several countries have defined these campaigns as genocide against Kurds.⁶⁹

After the Gulf War of 1991, a “safe haven” in Northern Iraq was delineated by the US to protect Kurds from Iraqi reprisals. This area was ruled by the rivalling Patriotic Union of Kurdistan (PUK) and Kurdistan Democratic Party (KDP), who were engaged in “an almost-fratricidal conflict”.^{70,71} In addition, the UN embargo against the whole of Iraq and a further embargo of Saddam Hussein against the Kurdish north reduced civilians’ life expectancy and impoverished them.⁷²

Nevertheless, the Kurdish areas fared relatively better than the rest of Iraq. This was true after the war of 2003 as well.⁷³ It can be argued that for women, living in a Kurdish autonomous region has meant that double discrimination has been reduced; absence of oppression because of ethnic identity means that women face “only” the challenge of patriarchal values.

Since the region became fully autonomous in 2005 as the Kurdistan Regional Government (KRG), living conditions for Kurdish women have improved relative to wider Iraq. This has to do with the international involvement of diplomacy, politics, trade and NGOs, as well as the KRG’s desire to gain international credibility and further independence.⁷⁴ The KRG states on its official website that it has increased its gender quota from 25% to 30% and that there are 36 female MPs in the current cabinet of 111 parliamentarians.⁷⁵ However, just like in Turkey, it has been easier for Kurdish women to achieve civic and political rights than a more far-reaching reform of Kurdish society. As Al-Ali and Pratt point out, demands for women’s representation in the public sphere are more readily accepted than demands that concern family life and women as individuals. There is still pressure by the Kurdish nationalist movement on Kurdish women to embody their cause and to symbolise difference from Iraqi Arab women.⁷⁶ In addition, the ethnic division between Kurdish and Arab women seems to have been replicated on a regional level, with suspicion between women from the rivalling political parties and, later, between women in government positions versus those working in civil society.⁷⁷

What does seem to unite most Kurdish women activists is their wish to see more progress in women’s rights than is currently the case in southern and central Iraq. This, in turn, may push them to prioritise Kurdish autonomy as a first step towards achieving a more progressive Kurdistan that is independent of the Islamist influences further south. As currently the Iraqi constitution may override the Kurdish Iraqi one, male Kurdish nationalists may also compromise on gender rights in order to pursue what they conceive as more important issues, such as “Kirkuk, oil and federalism”.⁷⁸

Women activists in the KRG have many urgent issues to deal with. Despite improvements in human rights, violence against women continues in Kurdish society, with reports of forced marriages and honour killings;⁷⁹ indeed, incidents of honour-based violence (HBV) even seemed to increase after the creation of the safe haven. Competing interpretations of Kurdish nationalism came to the fore as tribes, religious groups and others vied for power, and “authentic” Kurdish culture and gender norms were glorified. Tribal and patronage interests have undermined the prosecution of HBV as men resort to inter-tribal bargaining

rather than applying the law.⁸⁰ An article on the increase of self-immolation of Kurdish women in Kurdish Iraq since its autonomy points to the fact that Iraqi Kurdish society has not come to terms with all the trauma that people have experienced, much of which is now manifesting as domestic violence.⁸¹

Another issue is female genital mutilation (FGM), which has been found to be widespread in Iraqi Kurdistan; a Human Rights Watch report from 2010 estimates that between 40% and 57% of women in certain districts had been mutilated.⁸² A medical survey in Erbil/Hewlêr found that 58.6% of the women examined had suffered FGM, most at the age of 4–7.⁸³ While this practice was finally banned by the KRG in 2011,⁸⁴ the practice seemed to be continuing.⁸⁵ A more recent report in 2015 was more optimistic, indicating that there was a major reduction of incidents in the new generation of girls; the NGO conducting the survey believes that further awareness-raising as well as support from religious authorities is vital to completely eradicate the practice.⁸⁶

According to Mojab, “[i]f war unleashed more violence against women in Iraqi Kurdistan, it also produced resistance against violence”.⁸⁷ She listed the Independent Women’s Organisation (founded 1993) and the Women’s Union of Kurdistan (founded 1997) as important centres of women’s activism.⁸⁸ Begikhani and Gill note further women’s activism a decade later; women have founded shelters and hotlines and informed women about them in the media; they have organised marches and initiatives for more civic rights of women and against HBV. It is notable that Kurdish women from the diaspora have reached out to support such efforts. Examples of such diaspora organisations are the Kurdish Women’s Alliance against Honour Killings (KWAHK), the Kurdish Women’s Rights Watch (KWRW) and the Iranian and Kurdish Women’s Rights Organisation (IKWRO), all based in the UK.⁸⁹

Women’s activism in Iraqi Kurdistan still needs to move out of the cities to reach women in the countryside. It also needs to reach out to men because addressing women only will not make significant changes in gender relations and male attitudes to FGM, HBV and civic and political rights of Kurdish women.⁹⁰

A separate mention must be made of the Yazidi Kurdish women of Northern Iraq because their separate religious identity has always added a third layer of discrimination to struggle against. Yazidis have experienced “cycles of persecution” since Ottoman times.⁹¹ The most recent persecution was genocidal in nature: in August 2014, the Islamic State (IS) attacked Yazidi villages around Mount Sinjar in Northern Iraq, killing many men in mass executions and kidnapping women and children. At the time of writing, there were thousands of Yazidi women and girls still in IS hands, many in Syria, sold as chattel and enduring systematic sexual violence. Young Yazidi boys had been forced to join IS as fighters.⁹²

Thousands of Yazidi women and children fled the IS attacks by going up Mount Sinjar; they were besieged for months, many dying of starvation or deprivation. The Northern Iraqi Peshmerga had retreated from the IS attack, leaving the Yazidi civilians behind. It was the Kurdish YPG (*Yekîneyên Parastina Gel*, The People’s Protection Units) from Syria, among them many women fighters, who finally came to the rescue of the Kurdish women. Supported by US airstrikes, they opened a safe corridor for the Yazidi women and children to be taken to Northern Syria in December 2014.⁹³

Iran

As mentioned earlier, the foundation of the Mahabad Kurdish Republic in 1946 in Iran resulted in a female branch of the founding Kurdish Democratic Party. Mojab points out that this women’s branch was a top-down male initiative rather than the result of a feminist

struggle. Her general criticism of Kurdish nationalist movements and parties everywhere has been that they have ignored class and gender inequalities.⁹⁴

There is comparatively little academic or journalistic coverage on Kurds in Iran, perhaps due to the fact that the country has always allowed certain linguistic and cultural rights.⁹⁵

Nevertheless, just as in the other countries discussed, Kurdish women face severe double discrimination in Iran. As Kurds, they are mostly Sunni Muslims (as opposed to the dominant Shi'a) and non-Persians. According to Yıldız and Taysi, "due to ongoing discriminatory state activities, the Kurds of Iran experience a lack of representation within political and military establishments, the denial of language rights and the underdevelopment of their region leading to economic marginalisation".⁹⁶ During the Iran-Iraq War, the Kurdish areas were attacked by both Iraqi and Iranian forces,⁹⁷ and the Iranian government still fears Kurds as both an internal and external threat to the country's unity.⁹⁸

As women, Kurdish women are first of all oppressed by legislation in wider Iran that discriminates against women systematically.⁹⁹ Such legislation then reinforces the traditional Kurdish gender regime, meaning that women have no legal resort to protest against their treatment. In addition, as seen in other examples earlier, the Kurdish nationalist movement glorifies women as embodiments of the "honour, culture and tradition" of family and nation.¹⁰⁰ There are many incidents of honour-based killings (which are condoned under Iranian law) and a disproportionately high number of female suicides in the Kurdish area of Iran. Like in Iraq, self-immolation is a common way of committing suicide.^{101,102,103}

Compared to the other countries mentioned, Kurdish women in Iran seem to have much less freedom to become active in the nongovernmental sector. A fact-finding mission to Iran by the Danish Refugee Council found that there are generally few NGOs in Iran; when "non-political activities, such as NGOs working on the environment, conditions for women etc. in the Kurdish area of Iran" are concerned, these NGOs are kept under close surveillance.¹⁰⁴

Pro-Kurdish political involvement is only possible in secret. All underground pro-Kurdish parties also recruit women as members, and there are also women among the Peshmerga.¹⁰⁵ In 1991, the clandestine Kurdish party Kurdistan Democratic Party of Iran (KDPI) announced that it would seek Kurdish autonomy within Iran but, while supportive of the Kurdish nationalist struggles in other countries, would reject violence.¹⁰⁶ In 2004, a new militant group with relations to the PKK was formed: the Party for a Free Life in Kurdistan (PJAK, *Partiya Jiyana Azadiye Kurdistanê*). It is said to have around 3,000 guerrilla fighters, with nearly 50% of them women.¹⁰⁷ The PJAK have trained in Iraqi Kurdistan and also have Kurds from other countries in their ranks.¹⁰⁸

Syria

The most strikingly radical politicisation of Kurdish women seems to have taken place in Northern Syria in the last six years, a dramatic change from the systematic oppression they faced in Syria before. In the past, many Kurds in Syria were accused of being illegal immigrants from Turkey; they were dispossessed and had their Syrian citizenship withdrawn in the 1960s. Even the descendants of these Kurds have been denied citizenship. Arab state nationalism viewed Kurds with suspicion and aimed at an Arabisation of the northern frontiers. Furthermore, Kurdish language activities were suppressed.¹⁰⁹ It is ironic that a country oppressing Kurds so much offered the PKK and its leader Abdullah Öcalan a safe haven from 1980 onwards,¹¹⁰ a sign that enmity with Turkey was great.

A recent book on Rojava, the Kurdish name for the three cantons in the North of Syria where democratic autonomy has been declared, argues that this presence of PKK fighters in

the country was an inspiration for Kurdish activism in Syria.¹¹¹ It has been estimated that by 1993, around a third of the PKK fighters were female,¹¹² meaning that Kurdish women in Syria were exposed to female guerrilla members; some Syrian Kurdish women also joined the PKK, crossed the border and fought in Turkey. Kurdish women in Syria, not unlike their counterparts in Turkey in the 1990s, also became more politicised when men were arrested for political activities between 2004 and 2012 and they took over.¹¹³

The revolution of Rojava was a reaction against both the Assad regime and its increasingly Islamist opposition. With neither side interested in offering Kurds more rights, the Rojava Kurds opted for a “third way”. In 2012, a mixed-gender Kurdish armed force, the YPG, took over in the north of Syria and expelled government forces from the region. Women with previous fighting experience in the PKK’s women’s units came back to the area to train what then became a separate women’s army, the “Women’s Protection Units”, YPJ (*Yekîneyên Parastina Jin*).¹¹⁴ Like the YJA Star in Turkey, they make up around a third of the fighting force.¹¹⁵

Szanto compares the Iraqi and Syrian Kurdish fighting forces, arguing that the relative poverty of Syrian Kurds is an incentive for women to join the YPJ, while the better-off Iraqi Kurds can “afford” gender conservatism and do not have as many women Peshmerga. She also criticises continuing patriarchal attitudes in Kurdish Syria, as the PYD (*Partiya Yekîtiya Demokrat*, Democratic Union Party) in Syria only allows unmarried women to join the YPJ.¹¹⁶ Another criticism leveled at both the YPG and the YPJ by the Human Rights Watch has been that these People’s Protection Units are “still not meeting [their] commitment to demobilize children and to stop using boys and girls under the age of 18 in combat”.¹¹⁷

It has been the female fighting units taking part in the defence of Kobanî against IS in 2015–2016 that have most caught the attention of the world. However, there have been less dramatic but nevertheless very important changes in Rojava (now re-named the “Federation of Northern Syria”, as this term is more inclusive of all ethnic groups). Women are becoming part of public life through gender quotas and the compulsory co-chair system, where a man and woman head committees and courts together. There are, for instance, peace committees with a 40% women’s quota that attend to disputes on the neighbourhood level. In addition, there are purely women’s peace committees meant to deal with cases of “patriarchal violence”.¹¹⁸

How deep the transformation of Kurdish society and gender relations really goes is unclear. In a series of Open Democracy articles on the “Rojava Revolution”, writers explore how far Kurdish women’s lives have changed. In one published interview, Hediye Yusuf, the female co-president of the Federation of Northern Syria, hints at the difficulties involved in working with a male co-president who was initially hostile to the co-chairing system.¹¹⁹

There is no doubt, however, that the federation has been working hard since 2014 to legislate against patriarchal practices.

Child marriage, forced marriage, dowry and polygamy have been banned; any attempt to stop a woman marrying of her own free will, will be prevented; honour killings, violence and discrimination against women have been criminalised; women, regardless of their marital status, have been given the right to custody of their children until the age of 15; a woman’s testimony is equal to a man’s; a woman has a right to equal inheritance; marriage contracts will be issued in civil courts.¹²⁰

It remains to be seen how far this legislation is implemented and if these civic rights are then developed to pave the way for a new Kurdish gender regime.

Future outlook

The lives of “Kurdish women” have been shaped by the states they live in; different states have meant interactions with different ethnic groups; differences in oppression; different experiences of strife, forced migration, war or even genocide; and different degrees of political representation or autonomy. The traditional Kurdish gender regime has often been reinforced by the discourses of other dominant ethnic groups and the state itself. Women have succeeded to varying degrees in challenging both the state and token gestures by the Kurdish nationalist movement and pushing for both civic and personal human rights for Kurdish women.

Transnational links between Kurdish communities are ever-strengthening, as evidenced, for instance, by the involvement of Kurdish diasporic organisations in Iraq’s KRG. Older-standing and new cooperation between fighting forces have also made borders between countries less rigid. Kurdish women from Turkey have trained and joined the YPJ in Syria. In 2014, the PKK and YPG/YPJ crossed the border to Iraq in order to create a safe corridor for Kurdish Yazidi women and children to escape from IS. Other YPJ fighters from Syria have been trained in Kurdish Northern Iraq and have begun to fight against IS in Mosul, Iraq.¹²¹ Newspapers have also reported on 200 Iranian PAK (Parti Azadî Kurdistan, Kurdistan Freedom Party) fighters in Mosul, Iraq.¹²²

Politically, the concept of gender equity and co-chairmanship has become established in Turkey’s pro-Kurdish parties and Northern Syria. This has attracted world attention and will, no doubt, inspire Kurdish women activists elsewhere to fight for similar rights. Whether or not the Kurdish movements in different countries move beyond token gestures in their gender politics depends also on the pressure these movements face from the state.

Notes

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PART VIII

The Kurdish situation in Turkey



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THE RISE OF THE PRO-KURDISH DEMOCRATIC MOVEMENT IN TURKEY

Cengiz Gunes

The political representation of the Kurds in Turkey has been a problematic issue ever since the foundation of the republic in 1923. The main barrier to Kurdish representation in Turkey stemmed from the fact that the Kurds are not recognised as a separate national group, and to claim or advocate the separate existence of a Kurdish nation in Turkey is interpreted as a threat to Turkey's national security, territorial integrity and unity of the nation. As a result, the articulation of Kurdish political demands or rights was criminalised, and individuals and political parties that demanded group-specific rights for the Kurds were prosecuted. With the establishment of the People's Labour Party (HEP) in 1990, the representation of Kurdish interests has taken a more organised form. Due to the nature of the political demands they have been raising – such as the constitutional recognition of Kurdish identity – and the institutional legal limitations in Turkey, they have been considered as 'outsiders'. Consequently, they have been subjected to numerous suppressive practices, broadly speaking, on the basis that they promote Kurdish separatism, and the following parties have been banned: the HEP in 1993, the Democracy Party (DEP) in 1994, the People's Democracy Party (HADEP) in 2003 and the Democratic Society Party (DTP) in 2009. In the past decade, the pro-Kurdish political parties Peace and Democracy Party (BDP) and Peoples' Democratic Party (HDP) have increased their influence and power in the local and national levels. The transformation in the Kurdish conflict since 1999 and the democratisation reforms carried out as part of Turkey's EU accession process throughout the 2000s have increased the political space for the pro-Kurdish political parties to participate in politics and become important political actors. However, Turkey's descent into authoritarianism in the past two years has undone the progress of the pro-Kurdish democratic movement and resulted in its increased repression, which is ongoing at the time of writing.

This chapter discusses the rise of the pro-Kurdish movement since 1990 and what factors have enabled its success in a number of local and national elections since 2014. I first provide an account of the organisational development and growth of the movement from its foundation in 1990 to end of 2012 when the current pro-Kurdish political party the HDP was established. This section also broadly discusses the political demands raised by the pro-Kurdish parties and their proposals to reform the existing political framework to recognise ethnic and cultural identities and difference in Turkey, and examines the attempts by the pro-Kurdish political parties to build a greater coalition of pro-democracy forces. The second section

discusses the formation of the HDP and highlights the key political demands it articulates and its notions of democracy and pluralism. The final section discusses the factors behind the HDP's electoral breakthrough in the 2015 general elections.

The origins of the pro-Kurdish democratic movement

The pro-Kurdish democratic movement came into existence with the establishment of the HEP on 7 June 1990. The HEP was established by the Kurdish and socialist MPs who were expelled from the Social Democratic Populist Party (SHP) for attending an international conference on the Kurdish question held in Paris in September 1989. The expulsion of MPs created turmoil in the SHP, with six other MPs and the local leaders of the 12 party branches in the majority Kurdish cities resigning from the party in protest.¹ Although, Kurdish MPs and other leading Kurdish activists constituted the majority of the HEP's members, many Turkish socialist politicians, including Aydın Güven Gürkan, Abdullah Baştürk, Cüneyt Canver, Fehmi Işıklar and Arif Sağ (popular musician and a leading Alevi community leader) also took a leading role in its activities.²

The HEP had two combined objectives: the democratisation of the state and society, and formulating a democratic and peaceful solution to the Kurdish conflict in Turkey.³ In the parliamentary elections held on 20 October 1991, the HEP and SHP cooperated with the HEP candidates contesting the elections on the SHP's list, 22 of whom won a seat in the parliament. The election of 22 pro-Kurdish MPs was a unique event in the history of Turkey because it was the first time the representatives of a party committed to the recognition of Kurdish rights and demands were in Turkey's parliament. Throughout its existence the HEP remained committed to extending its appeal to the wider Turkish society and become a party for the whole of Turkey.⁴

However, it did not take long before state authorities began scrutinising the HEP's activities. On 22 May 1992, the state Security Court prepared a case for stripping the HEP MP's parliamentary immunity in order to prepare a court case against them. On 3 July 1992, the Supreme Court's Attorney General filed a case at the Constitutional Court to close down the HEP, and on 14 July 1993 it was closed down. To prolong the existence of the pro-Kurdish parliamentary opposition and thwart the dangers that the closure of the HEP would create, the Democracy Party (DEP) was established on 7 May 1993. Similar to the HEP, the DEP's political programme had the democratisation of the state and society as its principal objective. Specifically, it proposed a peaceful and democratic solution to the Kurdish question and comprehensive constitutional reform to enable Turkey to institute a pluralist democratic regime.⁵

The Turkish government and the security establishment described both the HEP and the DEP as the 'political wing' of the Kurdistan Workers' Party (PKK). This meant that the repression of the pro-Kurdish movement was done with relatively little domestic opposition. Throughout the early 1990s numerous Kurdish activists connected with the pro-Kurdish political parties were persecuted, including the frequent arrests and torture of many activists, and the murder of some leading members and many grass-roots activists. Between 1991 and 1994 more than 50 members of the HEP and the DEP were murdered. The DEP's headquarters were bombed on 18 Feb 1994, which caused the death of one person and the injury of 16 people.⁶ On 2 March 1994, the parliament lifted the legal immunity of the DEP MPs, which enabled the State Security Court in Ankara to hear the case against them. The DEP was closed down on 16 June 1994. The reasons listed by the constitutional court for the closures of HEP and DEP included claiming the existence of the Kurds as a separate national entity in Turkey, advocating their rights such as education in the Kurdish language and claiming

that they were persecuted or subjected to forced assimilation.⁷ The trial ended on 8 August 1994, with MPs Hatip Dicle, Orhan Doğan, Leyla Zana and Selim Sadak receiving 15-year sentences. In addition, six DEP MPs left Turkey in order to avoid imprisonment.

The next decade or so following the closure of the DEP and the elimination of the Kurdish parliamentary opposition was spent attempting to rebuild the pro-Kurdish democratic movement. The HADEP, established on 11 May 1994, and its sister party the Democratic People's Party (DEHAP), established on 24 October 1997, were the representatives of the pro-Kurdish movement in that period. Due to the 10 per cent national election threshold restricting the parliamentary representation, neither the HADEP nor the DEHAP was able to gain a seat in parliament. However, they both enjoyed some level of success at the local level and more importantly managed to construct a grass-roots organisation and a wide ranging organisational network covering many of the cities in Turkey. The HADEP obtained 4.76 per cent and 3.82 per cent in the parliamentary and municipal elections held in 1999, respectively. In total, it managed to win the control of 37 towns and cities across the majority Kurdish regions, including the municipal councils of Ağrı, Batman, Diyarbakır, Hakkari, Siirt and Van. In the 2004 municipal elections, the DEHAP increased the number of the councils it held to 54, including the municipality councils of Batman, Diyarbakır, Hakkari, Şırnak and Tunceli.⁸

Throughout its existence, one of the key difficulties for the pro-Kurdish democratic movement has been the dominant perception in Turkey that they are a party for the Kurds and the political wing of the PKK. There are similarities between the political demands the two movements articulate and both movements draw from the same social base. It is impossible to establish with certainty the extent of the assumed and popularly believed connection, but the implications for the pro-Kurdish political movement have been massive. It meant that from the onset it found itself in an uneasy position whereby it had to balance the articulation of popular Kurdish political demands with being a legal political party working within the existing constitutional framework, which considered the expression of such demands as a crime and unacceptable. Being the focal point of Kurdish activism reinforced the view in Turkey that the pro-Kurdish democratic movement was solely for the Kurds and the socialist members who were not comfortable with the predominance of the Kurds or with the fact that the solution to the Kurdish conflict was one of the main issues that it campaigned on left the movement. In addition, a number of events, such as the pulling down of a Turkish flag during the second congress of the HADEP held in Ankara on 23 June 1996 and the organisation of a hunger strike to protest against PKK leader Abdullah Öcalan's arrest in Rome in 1998, caused a furore in Turkey and reinforced the view that the pro-Kurdish movement was an extension of the PKK.⁹

While the case to close down the DEHAP was being considered by the constitutional court, the formation of a new pro-Kurdish political party was on the agenda.¹⁰ The DTP was formally established on 9 November 2005. Although the personnel of the party included many members of the former pro-Kurdish political parties in Turkey and it certainly represented the pro-Kurdish tradition in Turkey, it was established to represent broader sections of the society and attract other political groups in Turkey that its predecessors were unable to connect with.¹¹ After the 22 July 2007 general election, the pro-Kurdish parliamentary opposition returned with the election of 21 DTP MPs who stood as independent candidates in order to avoid the 10 per cent national election threshold. The DTP remained active until it was closed down by the Constitutional Court on 12 December 2009.

From then onwards, the BDP, which was established on 3 May 2008, took the task of Kurdish representation in Turkey. In April 2011, the BDP in alliance with 17 other

political parties and non-governmental organisations formed the pro-democracy ‘the Labour, Peace and Democracy Block’ and supported independent candidates in the general elections scheduled for 12 June 2011. In addition to the leading members of the pro-Kurdish BDP, independent socialist and pro-democracy candidates were also included in the list, including the film director and columnist Sırrı Süreyya Önder for Istanbul, the leader of the Labour Party (EMEP) Abdullah Levent Tüzel for Istanbul and the socialist activist and journalist Ertuğrul Kürkçü for Mersin. Broad democratic demands, such as gender equality, better working conditions, comprehensive constitutional reform and political reconciliation, were the key demands articulated in the election campaigns. In total 35 pro-Kurdish MPs were elected as independent candidates. Bringing together Turkey’s progressive opposition groups, including the socialist, pro-Kurdish and feminist movements, has long been the aim of Turkey’s pro-Kurdish political movement, and steps were taken to form a political party that could be the vehicle to achieve the left’s unity, which ultimately led to the HDP’s establishment.

The formation of the HDP

The HDP was founded to bring together various political movements, parties and civil society organisations that represent different social and minority ethnic and religious groups in Turkey. It was a new attempt to build a stronger, pro-democracy, left-wing alternative to the existing mainstream parties in Turkey. The approach the pro-Kurdish parties took during the 1990s and early 2000s was to participate in elections within an electoral coalition with other left-wing and opposition political parties with the aim of constructing a wider democratic bloc. Such an approach indeed enabled the pro-Kurdish parties to build a wider political network and broaden its appeal and membership during the late 2000s and early 2010s as more political groups and actors became incorporated into its structures. Crucially, however, this approach fell short of forging a stronger unity among the different groups within the left in Turkey. As a way to overcome this difficulty and as a precursor to the HDP foundation, the Peoples’ Democratic Congress (HDK) was established as a representative body for the diverse oppositional social and political groups and parties in Turkey. The initial idea for the establishment of the HDK came from the PKK’s jailed leader Abdullah Öcalan and was suggested for overcoming the impasse and repetition experienced within the left in Turkey. Öcalan’s endorsement was significant because it meant that the PKK and its followers supported the HDP’s establishment and the political project it set out to build in Turkey.

Each political group or party that is part of the HDK is described as a component and maintains its independent existence. The HDP is the national-level parliamentary representative of the HDK, and in the Kurdish majority regions at the local level the Democratic Regions Party (DBP) is active, which is the continuation of the BDP, having changed its name and party symbol at the third congress on 11 July 2014, and one of the main components of the HDK. In addition, the EMEP; the Socialist Party of the Oppressed; the Green Left Party; and numerous organisations that represent women, the Alevi community, the Armenian community, the Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, and Transgender (LGBT) community and workers also participated in the establishment of the HDK. The non-hierarchical organisational structure of the HDK is seen as essential for ensuring that each of the components as well as the communities that have been marginalised in Turkey are able to participate in politics. Such a structure does not subordinate individual struggles for democracy and equality to one another but unites them as part of a wider counter-hegemonic block for democracy and equality in Turkey.

In terms of membership and the personnel holding its executive positions, the HDP has become more diverse and in addition to the members and activists of the aforementioned groups and political parties it has also attracted members from the independent Turkish socialist and feminist activists. In the main cities in Turkey's west, such as Istanbul and Izmir, the HDP is also quite popular among the university students and urban intelligentsia from the more affluent districts and neighbourhoods. The HDP has a wide organisational network that covers all provinces, and it has separate youth and women branches. The HDP's key political objective is to represent the demands of the section of the society that have been historically marginalised by the state and ignored by the mainstream political parties, which is expressed in the party programme in the following way:

We are a party for Turkey's working classes, labourers, peasants, trades people, pensioners, women, youth, intellectuals, artists, LGBT individuals, the disabled, the oppressed and the exploited of all nations, languages, cultures and faiths who joined forces to reach the goal of moving towards establishing people's democratic power and government.¹²

While the HDP aspires to bring about political change via parliamentary politics and constitutional change, it also advocates a form of participatory democracy:

The HDP does not perceive democracy within the limits of representative democracy. It defends and struggles to realise the removal of barriers preventing citizens from debating, organising and directly participating in the decision-making mechanisms, to establish public scrutiny on all levels and the public's right to express its will and make decisions.¹³

A new democratic constitution that strengthens the parliamentary system and guarantees the civil and political rights of citizens in Turkey is another key demand raised by the HDP. The new constitution should embody the ethos of pluralism and promote multiculturalism by recognising and protecting Turkey's ethnic, linguistic and religious diversity. At the same time the new constitution should incorporate features to resolve Turkey's long-standing Kurdish question and provide stronger safeguards for the rights of all minority groups in Turkey. The HDP proposes a decentralised political system for Turkey to break the domination of the centre over the regions and develop models of local self-governance to meet the needs of different minority groups to protect and develop their culture and identity. More specifically, it advocates the 'Democratic Autonomy' model for Turkey and proposes to decentralise power to autonomous and self-governing local and regional administrations.¹⁴ Such decentralisation of the state in Turkey is needed to empower local administrations, ensure citizens' direct participation in the decision-making processes at the local, regional and national levels and to develop socio-economic policies that address the needs of the whole of society.

Such a decentralised and democratic framework can address the demands of the Kurdish minority for autonomy and pave the way to a peaceful solution for the Kurdish conflict:

Our party believes that a fundamental solution to all identity and cultural problems is possible with the adoption of a new democratic and pluralistic constitution that promotes freedom and equality. Our party struggles for the realisation of the constitutional assurance of equality of rights of different identities, languages, beliefs and cultures, and the definition of a constitutional citizenship shaped on this understanding; education

in mother tongue and the application of the right of using mother tongue in every area of life including the public sphere; and democratic autonomy operating on the basis of local self-governance.¹⁵

In addition to the accommodation of popular Kurdish political demands in order to resolve the Kurdish conflict, such as the provision of education in the Kurdish language, the HDP calls for a widespread programme to achieve societal reconciliation and address the consequences of widespread state-sanctioned violence against civilians over the course of the conflict, including addressing the needs of the forcibly displaced Kurdish people as a result of the state's counter-insurgency operations during the 1990s.

The HDP also campaigns for Alevi-specific demands such as removing compulsory religious education from the national curriculum and officially recognising *Cemevis* (Alevi assembly houses) as places of worship. Instead of the strict application of republican laicism, it advocates the full separation of the state and religion and calls for rebuilding the relationship between the state and religious authorities according to a new model of *laïcité* that is pro-diversity and protects freedom of religion. It advocates the abolishment of Turkey's Religious Affairs Directorate on grounds that existence of such an institution leads to the domination of religion by the state. As mentioned earlier, the HDP puts strong emphasis on gender equality in its party programme, election manifesto and statements that its representatives make to the media. Furthermore, it calls for the application of positive discrimination to achieve gender equality in political representation and proposes to apply the co-presidency system to all the elected political positions in Turkey to promote the representation of women in public life.

The HDP is one of the consultative parties of the Socialist International and sees itself as part of an international alliance of progressive democratic forces. Rather than having the goal of creating a socialist economic system, as was the case with Turkey's socialist movement, the economic policies it advocates have a reformist orientation and aim to increase economic equality and eliminate absolute poverty in Turkey. Hence, demands for improving the working conditions and ensuring the health and safety standards at work are met by employers, ending insecure employment and the widespread practice of subcontracting, combating attempts at deunionisation and ending practices that prevent new workers from becoming trade union members. Also measures to empower workers, such as collective bargaining rights and the right to strike, and increasing the minimum wage to a level sufficient for individuals and families to meet their needs, are demanded.

Measures to increase women's employment opportunities and end child-labour are also advocated and seen as an essential step to address the deep-rooted forms of inequality. Bringing an end to widespread privatisation of state-held enterprises and assets, and commercialisation of public services is also emphasised in the party programme and the election manifesto. A comprehensive welfare state in Turkey is also proposed that would involve providing social security to all citizens. In addition, improving educational and employment opportunities for the youth, such as more vocational and on-the-job training facilities, and improving the living conditions of disabled people, are also included in the HDP's economic policies as are specific measures to encourage job creation and developing agriculture. A progressive taxation system and encouraging social enterprises such as cooperatives are also part of the HDP's economic policy. The HDP's socio-economic programme is framed around building a fairer economic system that addresses the needs of workers and ensures the country's natural resources are used for the benefit of the whole society and in a way that protects the environment. Overall, the HDP has managed to construct a more condensed democratic

discourse that can appeal to a broader section of Turkey's population and is reflective of their demands and values.¹⁶

The HDP's breakthrough in the June 2015 election

Judged by the electoral performance of its predecessors, the HDP's success is unprecedented in the history of Turkish democracy. The HDP draws from the experience and resources of the pro-Kurdish movement as well as the other left-wing and Alevi social and community organisations. As a result it was able to exploit the synergies among these movements and mobilise a significantly larger section of the voters. By choosing parliamentary candidates from a wider network and among the representatives of diverse political, social and cultural groups, the HDP managed to connect with a much larger portion of the electorate, win their support and establish itself as the voice of the left in Turkey. Overall, the HDP's support increased across Turkey, but the increase was higher in the traditional heartlands of the pro-Kurdish movement in the east and south-east regions of the country and in the big cities in the west of Turkey that have a significant Kurdish population.

Slightly more than half of the HDP's 6 million votes came from the majority Kurdish provinces of the east and south-east regions of Turkey. The HDP obtained 636,915 votes in Diyarbakır, 368,516 votes in Van, 276,920 votes in Mardin, 191,309 votes in Batman, 188,002 votes in Şırnak, 185,506 votes in Ağrı, 137,878 votes in Muş, 122,807 votes in Hakkari, 93,513 votes in Siirt, 93,263 votes in Bitlis, 64,315 votes in Kars, 53,844 votes in Iğdır and 32,241 votes in Tunceli.¹⁷ As summarised later, the pro-Kurdish political parties had performed strongly in these provinces for more than a decade, but the HDP increased its share of the vote significantly, and in the case of the provinces of Hakkari and Şırnak, it managed to gain 86.4 per cent and 85.36 per cent of the vote respectively (Figure 19.1).

The HDP also performed strongly and came second in the Kurdish majority provinces of Şanlıurfa, Adıyaman and Bingöl, where it obtained 293,841, 69,513 and 53,519 votes, respectively. Also there was a surge in support for the HDP in Istanbul where it gained

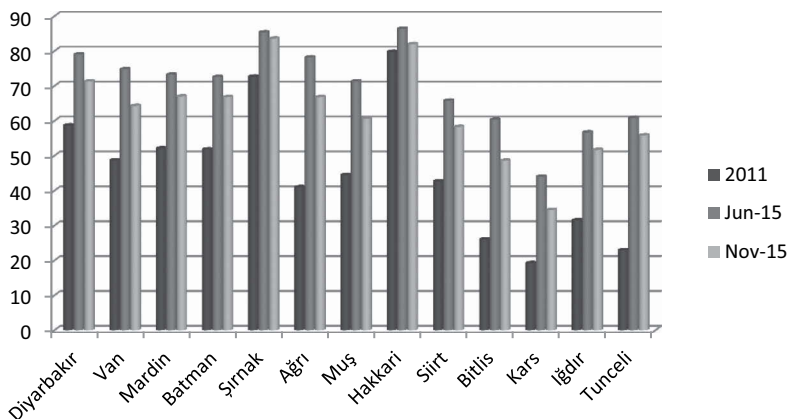


Figure 19.1 Percentage of votes the pro-Kurdish independent candidates obtained in the 2011 election and the percentage of votes the HDP obtained in the June 2015 and November 2015 elections in the Kurdish majority eastern and south-eastern provinces of Turkey.

Source: Compiled by author using Secim.Haberler.com (2015) 'Seçim Sonuçları' (<https://secim.haberler.com/>) (Accessed 15 September 2017).

1,030,761 votes to become the third party in the province and win 11 seats in the parliament. It performed well in Turkey's other provinces in the south and west of the country too. It gained 273,089 votes in Izmir, 183,934 votes in Mersin, 177,359 votes in Adana, 167,634 votes in Ankara, 138,678 votes in Gaziantep, 90,644 votes in Antalya and 96,513 votes in Bursa. In the previous election the pro-Kurdish independent candidates were fielded in only provinces where they had a realistic chance of winning. In contrast, participating in the elections as a party meant that the HDP fielded candidates in all of the provinces and gave its supporters across Turkey a chance to vote for its candidates. Also, the HDP ran a successful campaign abroad, especially in European countries that have a significant Kurdish and Turkish population and obtained 211,299 votes that were distributed among all the provinces (Figure 19.2).

A detailed report of the 7 June 2015 election results were provided by the Istanbul-based research consultancy company KONDA, and according to the report, the Kurds are the main supporters of the HDP and they make as much as 87 per cent of its voters (this figure includes the Zazas, who are generally considered to be another Kurdish ethnic group in Turkey but often counted separately). Only 9 per cent of the HDP voters are defined as Turkish, 1 per cent are estimated to be of Arab origin and in the case of 3 per cent of voters their ethnic background was not classified. Also, the report describes 87 per cent of the HDP voters as Sunni Muslims and only 7 per cent are estimated as Alevis.¹⁸

On a broader level, the transformation in Turkey's Kurdish conflict during the 2000s and the country's EU accession process since 2005 can be singled out as two most important developments that facilitated the HDP's rise in Turkish politics.¹⁹ The legal reforms the government carried out to meet the EU accession conditions have increased the democratic space for the pro-Kurdish political movement that it used to broaden its activities and become a more effective political actor. Reforms carried out in the subsequent years, such as in the area of Kurdish language broadcasting and tuition, enhanced the legitimacy of Kurdish demands in Turkey. The reform of the Associations Law (Law no.5253) in November 2004) also had a significant impact on Kurdish politics in Turkey as it made it

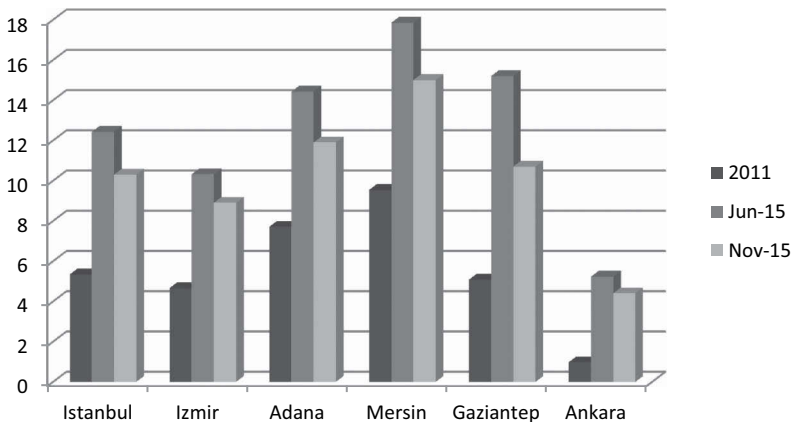


Figure 19.2 Percentage of votes the pro-Kurdish candidates obtained in the 2011 election and the percentage of votes the HDP obtained in the 7 June 2015 and 1 November 2015 elections in the western and southern provinces of Turkey.

Source: Compiled by author using Secim.Haberler.com (2015) 'Seçim Sonuçları' (<https://secim.haberler.com/>) (Accessed 15 September 2017).

easier to establish and manage charitable associations and in the subsequent decade led to a significant increase in the number of associations that were active in the Kurdish majority region of Turkey. This development facilitated the spread of democratic values and norms within the society and provided more avenues for Kurds to participate in politics and represent their interests.

The transformation of the conflict in the past two decades is also a significant factor in the rise of the HDP. The past two decades witnessed a significant reduction in the violent incidents between the PKK and the state security forces in Turkey, and although the violence returned after 2004, its intensity was far less than the violence of the 1990s. This transformation in the conflict created space for the pro-Kurdish political parties to promote reconciliation and a democratic solution to the Kurdish question. Their efforts received a significant impetus with the return of Kurdish representation to parliament in 2007. In the municipal elections held on 29 March 2009, the then pro-Kurdish DTP consolidated its position as the leading party of the Kurdish regions. Being represented in the national assembly and having the experience of running many of the local authorities in the majority Kurdish regions had enabled the pro-Kurdish movement to establish a strong regional and national presence. This allowed for the establishment and sustenance of links with various other social and political groups and foster better understanding and more cooperative relations between the different pro-democracy political groups in Turkey.

The HDP also played a key role in facilitating the communication between the state representatives and the PKK during the dialogue process that lasted from January 2013 to April 2015. The dialogue process involved regular meetings between government representatives, the HDP delegation, the jailed PKK leader Abdullah Öcalan and the PKK representatives, and produced some milestones, such as the ceasefire from March 2013 to July 2015 and a 10-point route map for the future negotiations that was made public on 28 February 2015 jointly by a HDP delegation and government representatives in Istanbul's Dolmabahçe Palace. Throughout the dialogue process, the HDP MPs involved in the dialogue process and its leaders had the opportunity to address the mainstream media, which gave more visibility to the HDP and provided it an opportunity to disseminate its political discourse to a much larger audience. Being one of the central actors of the dialogue process allowed the HDP to be seen by a greater number of people as a legitimate actor working towards the good of the whole of Turkish society. The performance of the HDP's co-leader Selahattin Demirtaş is another factor that needs to be highlighted. Demirtaş was a candidate in the presidential elections in August 2014 and subsequently became the public face of the HDP. The presidential election campaign gave Demirtaş and the HDP more visibility in the media and enabled them to reach out to a larger section of the society and disseminate the HDP's message across Turkey. Demirtaş proved to be a very strong media performer, and his confident and calm approach has won much praise.

The election strategy that the HDP followed also significantly contributed to its success. In western Turkey it selected candidates that represent and appeal to different sections of society and political movements. In Western Turkey, the HDP had a number of Alevi community leaders such as Turgut Öker and Ali Kenanoğlu in Istanbul, and Müslüm Doğan in Izmir. Well-known socialist activists, such as Ertuğrul Kürkçü and Sırrı Süreyya Önder, have been part of the HDP from the beginning and stood as candidates for Izmir and Ankara, respectively. Feminist activist Filiz Kerestecioğlu, Armenian rights activist Garo Paylan and Islamic feminist writer and journalist Hüda Kaya stood as candidates in Istanbul.

In the Kurdish majority areas, the HDP also incorporated candidates that would appeal to religious and tribal Kurds, such as Altan Tan for Diyarbakır and Mehmet Mir Dengir

Firat for Mersin, both of whom were active in Islamist-leaning political parties before. Nimettullah Erdoğan, who was the mufti of Diyarbakır, and Abdullah Zeydan, who is a member of the leading family of the Pinyanişi tribe, were selected as candidates for the Diyarbakır and Hakkari provinces, respectively. Similarly, Mahmut Celadet Gaydalı who is from the Gaydalı-İnan family that dominated the politics of Bitlis since the 1950s was selected for the Bitlis province. Another experienced politician changing his allegiance to the HDP in 2015 is Celal Doğan, who was previously active in the SHP and CHP was the mayor of Gaziantep province between 1989 and 2004. Additionally, candidates that could appeal to specific minorities such as the Arabs in Şanlıurfa and Mardin provinces were chosen as HDP parliamentary candidates. Consequently, by including diverse candidates, the HDP successfully mobilised a larger section of Turkey's population and managed to win votes from religious and tribal Kurds, ethnic Turks and Turkey's other ethnic or religious minorities.

Conclusion: the return of the state repression

The HDP thrived in the peaceful environment, and its political activism in the past four years has contributed to the shift in the public debate on the accommodation of Kurdish demands in Turkey. Many people in Turkey hoped that the success of the HDP in the June 2015 election would boost Turkey's search for peace and pave the way towards a negotiated end to the conflict with the PKK. However, the worsening security situation in Turkey and the Kurdish-majority regions since July 2015 presents major hurdles for the HDP's attempt to consolidate its gains and continue its growth as a political party. The intensification of violence in the conflict between the PKK and the state security forces in Turkey's majority Kurdish regions from summer 2015 onwards has led to an increase in instances of violent attacks by Turkish nationalists against the HDP. The anti-HDP fervour reached its height on 8 September 2015 when large-scale mob attacks targeted and vandalised the HDP's offices in many cities in western Turkey, including its headquarters in Ankara and many of the district offices in Istanbul. The IS (Islamic State) terror attacks targeting the HDP election rallies and those targeting Turkey's pro-Kurdish peace network in Suruç and Ankara, on 20 July 2015 and 10 October 2015, respectively, made running a campaign for the repeated November election very difficult for the HDP. As a result, there was a reduction in the HDP's vote in the November election, but despite that it still managed to obtain 5.15 million votes to win 10.75 per cent of the popular vote and 59 seats in the parliament.

The HDP is targeted because it is one of the main centres of opposition to the AKP's authoritarianism and the centralisation of power in the hands of Erdoğan. The AKP sees the HDP as a barrier to its objective of designing Turkish society in its Islamic conservative and Turkish nationalist image, and its accommodation of the Kurds is within the framework of Islamic unity.²⁰ The government aims to destroy the institutional base the HDP has managed to construct at the local and national levels. The oppressive practices that the state used to suppress the previous pro-Kurdish political parties during the 1990s and 2000s seem to have been reactivated once again against the HDP.

On 20 May 2016, the Turkish parliament passed legislation to lift the immunity of MPs, which is a measure designed by the government to end or at least significantly weaken the HDP representation in Turkey's parliament.²¹ Legal proceedings have already begun against a number of HDP deputies, including its co-presidents of the party Selahattin Demirtaş and Figen Yüksekdağ. The government passed a decree on 1 September 2016 to remove the elected pro-Kurdish mayors and replace them with appointed trustees. Currently 85

mayors of provinces and districts from its sister party the DBP are under arrest. Following the lifting of parliamentarian's immunity from prosecution in May 2016, many of the HDP MPs have been detained, and currently 10 remain under arrest, including the co-presidents of the party Selahattin Demirtaş and Figen Yüksekdağ. The MPs and co-presidents are charged with offences ranging from 'carrying out propaganda for a terror organisation' to 'being a member of an armed terror organisation', and the prosecutors are demanding long sentences for all of them. In February 2017, the parliament removed the status of MP from Figen Yüksekdağ, and in May 2017 from Nursel Aydoğan because of jail sentences they received in court cases dating back to 2013 and 2011, respectively.²² This is not the first time Turkey has taken such measure to eliminate the pro-Kurdish political representation, but the sheer numbers involved mark this occasion of political repression as unique in Turkey's recent history.

Notes

- 1 A. Osman Ölmez (1995) *Türkiye Siyasetinde DEP Depremi* (The DEP Earthquake in Turkish Politics), Ankara, pp. 88–90.
- 2 Eyyüp Demir (2005) *Yasal Kürtler* (Legal Kurds), Istanbul, pp. 92–93.
- 3 Halkın Emek Partisi (HEP), *Program* (Date and place of publications not mentioned).
- 4 Ahmet Türk (1994) *DEP Savunması* (The DEP Defence), Ankara, p. 7; Eyyüp Demir, *Yasal Kürtler*, Istanbul 2005, p. 116.
- 5 Demokrasi Partisi (DEP), *Program*, p. 9 (Date and place of publication not mentioned).
- 6 Ölmez, *Türkiye Siyasetinde DEP Depremi*, p. 465.
- 7 Derya Bayır (2013) *Minorities and Nationalism in Turkish Law* (Farnham: Ashgate), pp. 191–192.
- 8 Cengiz Gunes (2012) *The Kurdish National Movement in Turkey: From Protest to Resistance*, London and New York: Routledge, p. 167.
- 9 Ibid., p. 166.
- 10 'Eski Deplilerden Demokratik Toplum Hareketi', *Hürriyet*, 22 Oct. 2004.
- 11 The DTP continued to experience the problems that its predecessors experienced. For a more detailed discussion of the representation of the DTP in Turkish media, see: Derya Erdem (2014) 'The representation of the Democratic Society Party (DTP) in the mainstream Turkish Media' in C. Gunes and W. Zeydanlıoğlu (eds.) *The Kurdish Question in Turkey: New Perspectives on Violence, Representation and Reconciliation* (London and New York: Routledge), pp. 47–67.
- 12 HDP, Parti Programı, www.hdp.org.tr/parti/parti-programi/8, (accessed 30 August 2016, author's translation).
- 13 HDP, *Büyük İnsanlık-Bizler Medise* (Election Manifesto), Ankara 2015, p. 5 (author's translation).
- 14 HDP, *Büyük İnsanlık-Bizler Medise*, p. 10.
- 15 HDP, Parti Programı, www.hdp.org.tr/parti/parti-programi/8, (accessed 8 May 2017, author's translation).
- 16 Cengiz Gunes (2015) 'Radikal Demokrasi ile Gelen Yeni Yaşam: Bizler HDP', *Birikim*, No. 313, pp. 24–28.
- 17 The figures presented here are collated from the website <http://secim.haberler.com/>.
- 18 KONDA Araştırma ve Danışmanlık (2015) *7 Haziran Sandık ve Seçmen Analizi*, Istanbul, p. 67.
- 19 For a more detailed discussion, see Cengiz Gunes (2017) 'Turkey's new left', *New Left Review*, 107, pp. 9–30.
- 20 Derya Bayır (2014) 'The role of judicial system in the politicisation of the Kurdish opposition' in C. Gunes and W. Zeydanlıoğlu (eds.) *The Kurdish Question in Turkey: New Perspectives on Violence, Representation, and Reconciliation* (London and New York: Routledge), p. 23.
- 21 The Guardian (201) 'Erdoğan lifts Turkish MPs' immunity in bid to kick out pro-Kurdish parties', Online www.theguardian.com/world/2016/jun/08/erdogan-lifts-turkish-mps-immunity-in-bid-to-kick-out-pro-kurdish-parties, (accessed 4 July 2017).
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THE KURDISTAN WORKERS PARTY (PKK) AND KURDISH POLITICAL PARTIES IN THE 1970S

Joost Jongerden and Ahmet Hamdi Akkaya

Introduction

The Kurdistan Workers Party (*Partîya Karkêren Kurdistan*, PKK) was formally established on 26–27 November 1978, announcing its name and existence in July 1979 (Akkaya 2016: 220),¹ but it has often been looked upon as a latecomer in the family tree of parties politicising the Kurdish issue that emerged in the 1970s. In fact, a process of *group formation* had started years before, as early as 1972–73 (Jongerden and Akkaya 2011). By the time the PKK was established as a party in 1978, it already had a committed cadre with strong convictions. The process of group formation had started in Ankara after the 1971 coup and the elimination of the cadre of the revolutionary left²; its organisation was built throughout the Kurdistan region in Turkey from the end of 1975, with the 22 participants at the 1978 founding congress considered delegates, each responsible for a particular region.³

Over the course of the 1980s, the PKK would develop into the only Kurdish political party of significance in Turkey, attracting many who before had been members of or sympathisers with rival Kurdish political parties. Most of these Kurdish political parties, established and active in the 1970s, did not survive the coup of 1980. They either fell apart – like Tekoşîn, Kawa and Rizgarî/Ala Rizgarî – or were pushed into insignificance – like TKDP-KUK, TKDP-KÎP and TKSP-PSK. In fact, even though the coup and the severe repression unleashed by the military takeover in 1980 was an important factor, most of these parties were already weakened by a process of disintegration. Here, we look at the formation and disintegration of these Kurdish parties during the 1970s, in the context of the character of the re-politicisation that occurred after the coup of March 12, 1971.

This article presents an overview of the regrouping that took place after the 1971 coup, in which we see the development of a separation between the Turkish left and Kurdish organisations. Elsewhere we argued that although the PKK emerged from the left, it also transcended its orthodox character, referring here, by orthodox, to the adherence to a ‘correct’ socialist ideology (Jongerden and Akkaya 2011, 2012), as organised in accordance with the emerging international divisions between the Soviet Union and China as well as Albania. Here we will argue that other Kurdish parties, albeit not emerging from the revolutionary left, were nevertheless prone to similar divisions of orthodoxy, causing numerous splits and thus a multiplicity of relatively small political organisations. It was as a result of

this process that these parties had either collapsed before the 1980 coup or were significantly weakened and an easy target for the security forces.

Defeat and regrouping

The spirit of the revolutionary left could not be curtailed for long after the 1971 coup, even following the deaths of its leaders in 1972–73.⁴ After the elections of 1973 and a general amnesty in 1974, the left started to reorganise itself, during which period one can witness a separation between the left and the Kurds. Although the Turkey Kurdistan Democratic Party (*Türkiye Kurdistan Demokratik Partisi*, TKDP) was established in 1965 – clandestinely – together with the Eastern Revolutionary Cultural Hearths (*Devrimci Doğu Kültür Ocakları*, DDKO) in 1969 – as a legal progressive platform for Kurds – many structures had organised in the 1960s around the Workers' Party of Turkey (*Türkiye İşçi Partisi*, TİP), a socialist party established by the unions in 1961 and banned by the military in 1971. When the military yoke was released, two associations were established in Ankara. The first, established in November 1973, was the Ankara Democratic Higher Education Association (*Ankara Demokratik Yüksek Öğrenim Öğrenci Derneği*, ADYÖD), in which various leftist circles came together. The second, established in 1975, was the Revolutionary Democratic Culture Association (*Devrimci Doğu Kültür Derneği*, DDKD), in which various Kurdish circles came together, most of whom had previously been active within the left in Turkey. A former member of the DDKD and cadre of the Kurdish Maoist organisation Kawa, which developed from within the DDKD, commented on this regrouping thus:

I visited ADYÖD a couple of times. It was there that I met Abdullah Öcalan for the first time. We did not talk with each other then, but I saw him there, sitting with others. It amazed me that a Kurd wanted to be part of the left. He was far away from Kurds and close to the left. Apart from the group around Abdullah Öcalan, all Kurdish organisations were in the DDKD.

(İbrahim Keruken, personal communication, February 3, 2017)

The difference between the Kurdistan Revolutionaries, as the group led by Abdullah Öcalan called themselves before they changed their name to the PKK, and the other Kurdish organisations was further emphasised in terms of class. The Kurdistan Revolutionaries referred to the circles active in the DDKD as bourgeois, elitist and reformist, while those circles referred to the Kurdistan Revolutionaries as lumpen and violent.⁵ Although the PKK emerged from the left, and many of its initial cadre were former sympathisers of two of the revolutionary organisations crushed by the military (the THKO and THKP-C), the Kurdish circles active in the DDKD were prone to the same dynamics of orthodoxy that characterised the left in general and which the PKK sought to transcend through the development of a distinctive ideology and political organisation.

Thus, we argue, while the PKK did emerge from the revolutionary left and adhered to its spirit of revolutionary change, the Kurdish organisations discussed in this article more closely resembled the (Turkish) left in general regarding individual make-up and ideological orthodoxy. In addition, it will be argued, these Kurdish organisations, again like the left, typically organised themselves around journals and associations, which were more identity instruments for distinguishing themselves and polemics than means to organise (Akkaya 2013). The breaking up and becoming irrelevant of these Kurdish organisations, one may

say, was as much a result of an orthodox sectarianism and the way they organised themselves politically as it was of oppression. They were already severely weakened and falling apart before the shock wave of the 1980 coup and the brutal violence it unleashed against the left and Kurds.

Kurdish organisations in the 1970s

The most important Kurdish political parties in the 1970s were the Kurdistan Workers Party (*Kürdistan İşçi Partisi*, KİP)⁶ and the National Liberators of Kurdistan (*Kurdistan Ulusal Kurtuluşçuları*, KUK), successors of different wings of the TKDP (which would splinter further during the 1980s), *Kawa* (which also split into several fractions), *Rizgarî* and its break-away faction *Ala Rizgarî*, the Socialist Party of Kurdistan Turkey (*Türkiye Kürdistan Sosyalist Partisi*, TKSP) and the PKK. Among the smaller groupings to emerge in breakaways from Kurdish parties and the revolutionary left in Turkey were *Tekoşîn* (Struggle) and *Stêrka Sor* (Red Star). All these Kurdish political parties were illegal; in Turkey it was not possible for a political party to be organised on the issue of the status of Kurds or Kurdistan. Although these parties were illegal, however, this did not prevent them from establishing legal platforms for political action. *Kawa*, *Rizgarî* and *Ala Rizgarî* published journals under the same name, while the TKSP was more widely known by the name of its journal, 'Path of Freedom' (*Özgürlük Yolu*).⁷ The journals were both programmatic platforms, expressing the political position of the group or party behind it, and also the means for strong polemics.

Another way of organising themselves was legally, through the establishment of associations. The most important of these associations was the Revolutionary Cultural Associations of the East (*Devrimci Doğu Kültür Derneği*, DDKD), with the word 'Kurdistan' carefully omitted. In Ankara, the founders of *Rizgarî* played an important role in the establishment of the DDKD, but the *Şivancılar* became the dominant group (see below). Following this development, *Rizgarî* would later found the Anti-Colonial Cultural Association (*Anti-Sömürgeci Kültür Derneği*, ASKD), while the TKSP had already established the Revolutionary People's Cultural Association (*Devrimci Halk Kültür Derneği*, DHKD). These associations established by political parties as legal extensions, or front-offices, were the scene of a struggle for control (Aslan 2006; Gündoğan 2007). The PKK, it should be noted, did not establish journals or associations when it was organising in the 1970s, partly because its members were convinced that colonialism could not be fought with journals and associations and did not consider these to be the right type of political organisation, but also because they considered them a risk. As the 1971 coup had shown, organising legally was dangerous.

If we look to the backgrounds of these Kurdish political parties, we may classify them in different ways. First, they can be grouped in relation to the main cleavages in the socialist world, and in particular the ideological position taken or attributed to the Soviet Union, China and Albania. With socialism as the dominant frame of reference for organisations seeking liberation and struggling against inequalities, most of the Kurdish organisations recognised the Soviet Union as the guardian of national liberation struggles, except for *Kawa*, which considered the Soviet Union as 'social imperialist' and positioned itself in the Maoist camp, and close to the Maoist current in the Turkish left, the group around the controversial leader of the nationalist-left *Doğu Perincek*. Second, the organisations can be distinguished from one another in relation to the main cleavage in the Kurdish movement in Iraq, which went back to the 1960s and finally resulted in a split in 1975, when the Patriotic Union of Kurdistan (PUK)⁸ broke off from the Kurdistan Democratic Party (KDP) (Stansfield 2006: 196–197).⁹ The TKDP was established under the hegemony of or inspired by the KDP

from Iraq, with KUK and KÎP as continuations of different currents within the TKDP. Ala Rizgarî, a break-off from Rizgarî, oriented itself to the PUK, with those orienting themselves to the KDP remaining in Rizgarî.

TKDP

The oldest of the Kurdish-oriented political parties active in the 1970s, the TKDP, established in 1965, was probably alone until the beginning of the 1970s; certainly, it was the most influential.¹⁰ However, it had to cope with a series of serious setbacks. It received its first blow in 1966, when its leader, Faik Bucak, was killed (by unknown assailants, allegedly a Turkish death squad) (Ballı 1993). Under its new leader, Sait Elçi, the TKDP devoted itself to supporting the KDP in Iraq. Some within the party did not consider a supportive role to the KDP sufficient and wanted to organise the struggle in Turkey as well (Çelik 2000: 35). This resulted in considerable tension. The KDP wanted a quiet hinterland, so its support could be well organised from Turkey and political action in Turkey could transform the hinterland in the geography of open conflict. Together with TÎP, which was sympathetic to Kurdish demands, TKDP cadres organised the Eastern Meetings (*Doğu Mitingler*).¹¹ Taking place between 1967 and 1969, these meetings turned out mass-mobilisations protesting cultural oppression and economic backwardness (Firat 2006; Gunes 2012; Gundogan 2007; Karadogan 2006).¹² The meetings gave expression to an alternative political agenda ‘by the Kurdish contenders who imagined and reconstructed a different “East” in their protests and actions against ethno-nationalist suppression and exploitation by the Turkish state elite and dominant classes’; thus, Kurds ‘reclaimed their right to participate centrally in the production of the East’ (Gundogan 2007: 27, 50).

In 1969, rising tensions between the supportive wing of the KDP and an activist wing inclined to organise the struggle in Turkey that had relations with TÎP came to a breaking point. Heading the activist wing, Sait Kırmızıtoprak (Dr Şivan) announced the establishment of a new party. Its name was the Kurdistan Democratic Party in Turkey (*Türkiye’de Kurdistan Demokratik Partî*, T-KDP).¹³ In 1971, the leaders of the two parties/fractions met in Iraq, but a (re)unification was not discussed; rather, two leaders of the TKDP, including Sait Elçi, the secretary-general, were killed. In retaliation, Mollah Mustafa Barzani, founder and long-time leader of the KDP in Iraq, ordered the execution of three leaders of the T-KDP, among them Dr Şivan.

The killing opened the way to a crisis in both parties (or wings). The TKDP stayed without a leader for about four years. In 1975, it elected a new leader, but split when a section of the party’s young cadre established the KUK. This division followed upon a break within the Iraqi-Kurdish KDP, which split into wings led by the Barzanis and by Sami Abdulrahman, who harnessed himself to a leftist image. The KUK fraction felt sympathetic to Sami Abdulrahman’s KDP-Temporary Committee (Çelik 2000: 35), which over time became a new party, the Kurdistan Democratic People’s Party (Partî Gel), which in the 1990s merged back with the KDP. Regarding the T-KDP, meanwhile, initially people close to Dr Şivan announced its abolition, but in 1975 it was re-established; it was this that became the KÎP, when, in 1977, it changed its name.

In 1978, however, the prestige of the parties associated with the KDP was heavily damaged when, with the help of Kurds in Turkey, the KDP ambushed a PUK unit and killed hundreds of its fighters and cadres, detaining others (Ballı 1993; Çelik 2000; Gündoğan 2007; İbrahim Güclü, personal communication, June 19, 2008). Similarly, however, the defeat of the Kurdish movement in Iraq in 1975 also meant that ‘the conservative autonomist brand of Kurdish nationalism that the TKDP represented lost its credibility’.

TKSP

Also referred to as *Özgürlük Yolu/Rîya Azadî*, after the name of its journal, the TKSP was established in 1974 and grew rapidly under former TİP member Kemal Burkey. In 1977, however, it became affected by internal struggles and subject to disintegration. A rift arose within the party involving a group around İhsan Aksoy, who then broke away and established the political group Pêkanîn in 1979. Another group that separated from the TKSP formed the Kurdistan People's Party (Ballı 1993; Gunes 2012). A sign of the internal problems was the cessation of publication of the journal – but worse was to come the following year as, in March 1980, it became clear that the police had unravelled part of the party's illegal structures when they arrested a number of cadres, among them members of the central committee and regional party officials.

Within the party, conflicts continued between so-called moderates, who gathered around the party leader, Kemal Burkey, and so-called radicals, of whom the most outspoken proponent was Zeki Adsız. This contributed to a further deepening of the crisis in the party. In 1982, the group around Adsız broke away from the main party after a meeting of the central committee, where he criticised it for a lack of leadership and a related inability to organise opposition in Turkey. He also rejected the party's antagonistic position towards the PKK. Burkey and his followers in the party considered Adsız as 'extreme left', and referred to his 'lumpen' background.¹⁴ Following this critique and the lack of a positive reception in the party, Adsız and his followers left in 1984 to establish a new political party, the TKSP-Roja Welat (Ballı 1993; Gündoğan 2007). Their main point of contention with the TKSP was its inability to organise resistance against the military coup and its preference of a 'refugee' position in Europe over active opposition. In 1986, the TKSP-Roja Welat merged with two factions of the KİP to form the Kurdistan Socialist Unity (*Tevgera Sosyalîsta Kurdistan*, TSK).¹⁵ This new formation started to prepare for an armed struggle, aiming to become the second military force among the Kurds in Turkey and struggle alongside the PKK against the state. However, the organisation dissolved after the death of Zeki Adsız in 1990.

The TKSP defined itself as pro-Soviet. It considered Kurdistan a colony, semi-feudal and pre-capitalist, looked upon Turkey as semi-capitalist and aimed at 'a revolutionary, democratic, anti-fascist, national and anti-colonialist struggle' (Orhan 2016). It had an ambiguous, not to say confusing political strategy, which on the one hand prioritised the struggle against feudalism in Kurdistan as part of a national liberation strategy in need of a national democratic revolution, and on the other hand argued for a coalition with progressive forces in Turkey as part of a broader struggle for socialism. While the liberation of Kurdistan had to be accomplished by the population itself, independent from the revolutionary movement in Turkey, the party also defended a joint struggle between the working classes of Kurdistan and Turkey for the overthrow of reactionary forces and a democratic republic. In practice, this translated into an inclination to close collaboration with the left in Turkey on the basis of an anti-imperialist and anti-fascist front but without being able 'to clearly represent Kurdish national demands' (Gunes 2012: 94).

Rizgarî/Ala Rizgarî

After the 1971 military takeover, Kurdish political activists had been detained. DDKO detainees in Diyarbakir prison, forming the so-called 'commune', discussed the need for the establishment of a new political movement; among them were Mümtaz Kotan, İbrahim Güclü, Hatice Yaşar and İsmail Beşikçi. Their main legal front office and activity became

a publishing house named *Komal* and the journal *Rizgarî* (Liberation). The group rejected the division into different international socialist currents, refrained from sectarian criticism of either the Soviet Union or China and did not align itself with either. Its main focus was the national liberation of Kurdistan, which was considered an international colony. With the emphasis on national liberation and a struggle against the state, the feudal structures and associated relations of exploitation many Kurds were subject to were regarded as of lesser importance. After all, the main political contradiction was seen as that between the people of Kurdistan and the Turkish state, making the issue of national liberation more important than a struggle against feudal lords. Moreover, Rizgarî argued that capitalism was developing in Kurdistan and the development of the capitalist mode of production would end the hegemony of the feudal class. Since history would end feudalism, the issue of feudal oppressive relations should not be considered important in the political struggle. Only after criticism by other parties did Rizgarî accept the struggle against feudalism as an important political objective (Bora 2017: 847).

Some of Rizgarî's founding members had been close to Dr Şivan's T-KDP. Hatice Yaşar, one of the founders of Rizgarî and the editor-in-chief of its journal, had been a member of this faction before. In 1978, Rizgarî split into Rizgarî and Ala Rizgarî (Flag of Liberation), with different views on party strategy said to have played a role. Rizgarî reportedly wanted to focus on organisation-building in the big cities, while Ala Rizgarî proposed some kind of *narodniki* style of working among the people in the countryside (İbrahim Güclü, personal communication, June 19, 2008) and an orientation towards armed struggle (Bora 2017). Also important in the split were their relations to the Kurdish movement in Iraq, with discussions reaching a breaking point in 1978, with the KDP killing PUK cadres and fighters. Some within Rizgarî defended or even approved of the armed attack; those who did not, allegedly the majority of the cadres and sympathisers, left Rizgarî and established a new party, Ala Rizgarî, and its journal of the same name (Ballı 1993).

At the end of 1979, Ala Rizgarî decided to investigate the possibility of establishing centres for political and military training in Lebanon and the Kurdistan regions of Iraq and Iran. In Lebanon, contacts were made with several groups, the closest being established with the People's Front for the Liberation of Palestine (PFLP) of George Habash; in Iraq, contacts were made with the PUK and the Communist Party of Iraq, and in Iran with Komala, a Kurdish political party inspired by Maoism. In August 1980, the central committee of Ala Rizgarî decided at a meeting organised in Syria that it would start with the political-military training and to send three groups of 30 people to receive training from the PFLP in Lebanon, the PUK in Kurdistan Iraq and Komala in Iran. Ala Rizgarî had reached an agreement with all the three parties, but its plans were frustrated by the coup of September 12. Now that many of its cadres and activists were wanted, the party decided to take its people (around 150–200) to PUK territory and establish a training camp there. The training was provided by PUK instructors, but Ala Rizgarî had to organise the logistics, including the purchase of weapons, which, by itself, was a heavy task for a party in exile working to reorganise (İbrahim Güclü, personal communication, June 19, 2008).

Since there was a war going on between the PUK and Iraqi troops in the area, Ala Rizgarî also became involved in fights with the Iraqi army. Additionally, the region was a battlefield of in-fighting between the PUK and KDP and their respective allies. Although Ala Rizgarî had agreed with the PUK to stay out of these fights, it found itself occasionally drawn into them, causing tensions within the party. Moreover, a tactical alliance between the PUK and Iran was heavily criticised within Ala Rizgarî. The Kurdish in-fighting they witnessed in the region and the tactical alliance of the PUK with Iran, which was fighting the I-KDP and

Komala, a party with which Rizgarî had close contacts, paved the way to demoralisation. In 1982, most of the militants and cadres decided to give up and leave for Europe (predominantly Sweden and Germany), where they applied for political asylum. Abroad, new parties were established, including the Socialist Union of Kurdistan (*Yekitiya Sosyalista Kurdistan*), later renamed the Ala Rizgarî-Unity Platform (Ibrahim Güclü, personal communication, June 19, 2008), but their influence remained limited.

Kawa

The illegal political party Kawa – and its journal – was named after an important figure in Kurdish mythology commemorated at the Kurdish New Year (*Newroz*) festivities and turned into a symbol of resistance. The party was established in 1976 by Maoist members of the DDKD in Ankara and Istanbul together with Kurdish cadre and sympathisers of the illegal Maoist Workers and Peasants' Liberation Army of Turkey (*Türkiye İşçi Köylü Kurtuluş Ordusu*, TIKKO); some of the founding members had also had relations with Dr Şivan's T-KDP (Buran 2007). In 1977, the party split into two factions, *Denge Kawa* and *Kawa-Red*. The reason for the separation was the Three Worlds Theory, as developed by Mao Zedong. This basically distinguished three worlds – the First World, composed of the two superpowers, the imperialist United States of America (USA) and social-imperialist Union of Soviet Socialist Republics (USSR); the Second World, composed of Europe, Japan and other developed countries; and the Third World, assembling the underdeveloped – and called for solidarity within the Third World, against the threat(s) of the First (and Second) World. This implied that Maoist parties in the Third World had to focus on the major contradiction – between their country and the USA/USSR – and, if necessary, put aside the minor contradictions within their country. In Turkey, this would imply for Kurdish parties collaboration with the Kemalist elite. Renaming itself *Denge Kawa*, one part of the party accepted the theory and its implications. A struggle against the Turkish state, it was thought, would weaken the anti-imperialist struggle: 'Our objective changed. Our ideology changed. According to us, the main contradiction [for] the Kurds was not the Turkish state, but the contradiction with the United States and Soviet imperialism' (Keruken 2014: 114).

The other part of Kawa, *Kawa-Red*, rejected this ('red' is derived from 'reddet', meaning 'reject'). *Kawa-Red* still considered itself Maoist, but politically disassociated itself from Mao and associated instead with the political position of Enver Hoca (aligned with Albanian Socialism), a former ally of China who also rejected the Three Worlds Theory (Gündoğan 2007).

In the autumn of 1978, *Denge-Kawa* organised a meeting in one of its main centres, Siverek, in the south-eastern province of Urfa, at which it elected a new central committee. The party continued to suffer from internal splits and marginalisation, however, crucially as a result of growing support for the PKK in Siverek. It was in Siverek also that one of its leaders, Ferit Uzun, was killed. Mehmet Celal Bucak, a tribal leader and collaborator with the Turkish state, was held responsible.¹⁶ Bucak was a high-ranking member of the conservative Justice Party (*Adalet Partisi*, AP) and exploitive landlord, who owned thousands of hectares of land with more than 20 villages and had the town and district of Siverek in his pocket. While this resulted in further resistance against the Bucak family, *Denge Kawa* refrained from retaliation, and its leaders, moreover, met with Mehmet Celal Bucak on several occasions. In accordance with the Three Worlds Theory, *Denge-Kawa* considered the PKK as a main problem (Keruken 2014: 113) because it did not organise its struggle on the basis of the main contradiction between Third World countries and the (social) imperialist powers but

on the basis of what the PKK considered secondary contradictions, namely those between the Kurdish population and the Kemalist state, and between a comprador feudal class and the peasant population.

The Bucaks were regarded by the PKK as representative of an oppressive feudal class, a view shared, based on their experience, by many peasants and inhabitants of the Siverek region. The struggle against the family reached a climax on July 30, 1979, when the PKK attempted to kill Mehmet Celal Bucak, which, together with the assault, announced the existence of the party to the world. Bucak was not only targeted for what he represented – an exploitative landlord class and a repressive state – but also for what he did. Mehmet Celal Bucak was the co-founder of a society for the struggle against communism. He had announced that he would not allow leftists to gain support in Siverek and boasted he already had drawn up a black list of leftists who would be killed (Büyükkaya 2008). His position as a landlord and ally of the state, and his reputation as an anti-leftist roughneck made him the right target for the PKK. However, the assault failed. Mehmet Celal Bucak was wounded, but his son of eight was killed, and the PKK lost one of its prominent cadres in the Siverek-Hilvan region, Salih Kandal.

As Siverek became the scene of an armed struggle between the PKK and the Bucaks' armed militia, Denge Kawa became increasingly marginalised. Eventually, it would merge into Aydınlık, a Turkish Maoist currently headed by Doğu Perinçek, who defended a 'national front' with the Kemalist left in the bureaucracy and military. In January 1978, Perinçek had established the Turkey Workers' and Peasants' Party (*Türkiye İşçi ve Köylü Partisi*, TİKP). Denge-Kawa followed a similar path, as did some other Maoist parties on the left, such as People's Way (*Halkın Yolu*), a party which came from the THKO tradition. While People's Liberation (*Halkın Kurtuluşu*), a Turkish Maoist party, like Kawa-Red, rejected the Three Worlds Theory, and followed the political position of Albania after its rejection and break with China, Halkın Yolu accepted the theory, and its leadership also merged into Doğu Perinçek's TİKP (Bora 2017: 666–667). Not everyone in Denge-Kawa accepted the dissolution into the TİKP, and some members sought to collaborate with the TKDP or to make a rapprochement with Kawa-Red. However, Kawa-Red was also prone to further internal divisions.

The most important split occurred in 1979, when Kawa-Red split into two factions: *Kawa-Merkez* (Centre) and *Kawa-Muhalefet* (Opposition), with the latter faction proposing a more activist strategy (armed struggle). Their stance was taken against the background of the growth of the PKK, which seemed to have success with its strategy of armed struggle (Gundogan 2007). Kawa-Muhalefet successfully established contacts with Syria, and after the coup the leaders of the party settled in Qamislo, on the border with Turkey. The party, however, did not survive the killing of its leaders, among them the general-secretary Huseyin Aslan, in a cross-border raid by Turkish Special Forces on the house in Qamislo where they were staying on December 12, 1980 (Çelik 2000; Gündoğan 2007).

Another organisation that had emerged was Stêrka Sor, established in 1977. The founders of this party had a background in People's Liberation/*Halkın Kurtuluşu* (Orhan 2015: 57), yet others came from Kawa (Keruken 2014: 142). Stêrka Sor was also referred to as supporters of the Five Parts thesis (*Beş Parçacilar*) since the organisation defended the thesis that Kurdistan was divided and colonised by five countries: Turkey, Iraq, Iran, Syria and the Soviet Union. Stêrka Sor evaluated the Soviet Union according to the Maoist tradition, as 'social imperialist', and this was also the main way in which it tried to differentiate itself from other parties. Stêrka Sor disintegrated over the course of 1978, however. One of its leaders, Ali Rıza Koşar, was killed in Elazığ, allegedly by the Turkish left-wing organisation Dev-Sol (Orhan 2015:

57). In the period preceding his killing, shortly before the split in Denge-Kawa and Kawa-Red, Koşar was allegedly in negotiations with Kawa about a merger, and after his death, part of Stêrka Sor integrated into Kawa (in particular the activists of the Stêrka Sor branches in Elazığ, Bingöl, Nusaybin and Adana). By that time, however, Stêrka Sor was under heavy attack from the Kurdish Revolutionaries, the predecessor of the PKK, who held Stêrka Sor responsible for the death of one of its main cadres, Haki Karer (Aksu 2006, 2008; Gündoğan 2007; Jongerden and Akkaya, 2012; Öcalan 1994: 92, 11–22).

Discussion

Looking back on the history of these parties, there were two main causes for their various histories of disintegration. First, there was their orthodox sectarianism, based on discussions about who or what represented ‘true socialism’ and the dogmatic adoptions of theorem produced in these centres. The case of Kawa and the split over Mao Zedong’s Three Worlds Theory exemplifies this well. More generally, competition and sectarian conflicts between those following Moscow and those following Beijing were manifold. This was related also to theoretical discussions about the character of Turkey, as feudal, an Asiatic mode of production or capitalist, which had an important impact on the definition of the objectives for the political struggle. While the Three Worlds Theory and its identification of primary and secondary contradictions led Kawa to consider an ‘anti-imperialist coalition’ with the very same Kemalist regime that was responsible for a denialist and repressive politics towards the Kurds in Turkey, others overlooked the internal contradiction between peasants and landlords by declaring that the advance of capitalism indicated that economic progress would make this contradiction obsolete, making the main political struggle, therefore, one against the state. As a result, and from the positions they took, these parties were not very well able to link their politics to the daily lives and struggles of people. When the struggle with feudal landlords started to gain depth, these parties either met with Bucak to discuss the problem of the PKK (in the case of Kawa) or declared the contradiction between the people and the feudal landlords as of minor importance on theoretical grounds, given the advance of capitalism in the region (Rizgarî).

Although some parties did not define their position on the basis of references to who represented true socialism, such as Rizgarî, they did develop close and dependent relations with one of the two main Kurdish political actors in Iraq. This relationship of dependency had a negative effect on the organisation and morale of these parties, resulting in the elimination of the T-KDP by the KDP, the Rizgarî/Ala Rizgarî break and the effects of the PUK on Ala Rizgarî. In short, the parties were committed to strong ideological convictions (regarding the Three Worlds Theory, the capitalist character of Turkey and Kurdistan), or political positions (KDP, PUK) that were not produced and maintained by themselves and which did not reflect the problems people experienced in their daily lives in the region.

A second reason for disintegration concerned geographical decisions about where to engage in party-building. On the one hand, being active in or close to the territorial zone of war, the actual area of conflict, proved to be dangerous. After the military coup, Tekoşin tried to reorganise itself even as it actively committed to the armed struggle and was defeated within two years. The leaders of Kawa-Muhalefet stayed near the border of Turkey and were killed by a Turkish special unit. Ala Rizgarî tried to reorganise in PUK territory but fell apart over the course of events there. Being far away from the contested territory, on the other hand, implied a loss of agency. The parties become powerless, and they were not able to intervene over the course of events in Turkey/Kurdistan. Those who left for Europe, such as the TKSP, could not do much more than a symbolic politics.

If we look at the PKK, the party distinguished (and still distinguishes) itself on all points. The Kurdish Revolutionaries did not bother too much about who or what represented the true form of socialism and were more concerned with understanding the socialist struggle under the conditions in which they lived (Cemil Bayik, personal communication, October 30, 2014; Riza Altun, personal communication, October 30, 2014). This implied the development of an understanding of the lived reality in Turkey and Kurdistan and rendered the party immune from orthodox and sectarian divisions on the relative merits of the positions of different countries and systems that led to so many splits and divisions among and within leftist parties in the 1970s. Instead, the PKK (1) discussed how the leftist movement had been eradicated with such apparent ease – since public space was securitised, it built a party from a network of private spaces, aiming to stay under the radar – and (2) developed its own distinct ideology (*Apoculuk*), its own understanding of socialism – with its main ideologue being Abdullah Öcalan.

After the coup in 1980, the PKK reorganised the party at some distance from the geography of war. It established contacts with Palestinian organisations, which agreed to provide training in Lebanon (Akkaya 2015). Later, in the mid-1980s, the PKK took over a former training camp of a Palestinian organisation in Lebanon's Beka'a valley.¹⁷ This too comprised a 'political geography of war', one may argue, but it was not the PKK's. In the Beka'a valley the PKK could organise and prepare itself. It did not have to fear an assault by Turkey (as Kawa had experienced) but was close enough to Turkey to prepare and organise its return.

Conclusions

This article has considered the formation and disintegration of Kurdish national political parties in the period between two coups in Turkey, the March 12, 1971 coup and the September 12, 1980 coup. After the coup of 1971, a re-grouping took place, in which we can see a (first) separation between the Turkish left and Kurdish organisations, with the PKK emerging from a grouping within the left (ADYÖD), and other Kurdish organisations emerging from a Kurdish grouping outside the left (DDKD). However, the Kurdish organisations were prone to mirror the tensions and conflicts of orthodoxy and resulting sectarianism of the left in Turkey, with splits over the question of who represented the true path to socialism, the Soviet Union or China (or Albania), which were further deepened by various splits within these currents, notably the split over the Three Worlds Theory, leading to a division within the Maoist movement between those adhering to Mao and those following the Albanian leader Enver Hoca.

Theoretical questions, for example about the character of the mode of production (feudal, Asiatic or capitalist), had profound consequences for the political positions of parties, as shown in the case of Rizgarî. On the basis of the idea that capitalism was advancing, having a modernising effect on social relations, the party tended to ignore the contradiction between feudal landlords and the rural and peasant population, while, in fact, the struggle with feudal landlords became one of the focal points in the second half of the 1970s. In addition, the question of an adherence, not to say submission, to the parties in the Kurdish movement in Iraq resulted in further splits and in-fighting within Kurdish parties, while their physical positioning in relation to the geography of war tended to leave them either vulnerable or disconnected. As a result, these Kurdish parties had become seriously weakened by the end of the 1970s. The 1980 coup may have been their final blow, but the main reasons for their marginalisation were political-ideological and organisational.

Notes

- 1 The decision on the name was made in April 1979 by the Central Committee; the public announcement of the name and existence of the organisation was made in the Bucak attack that July.
- 2 The revolutionary left refers here to the People's Liberation Army of Turkey (*Türkiye Halk Kurtuluş Ordusu*, THKO), established in 1970; People's Liberation Party-Front of Turkey (*Türkiye Halk Kurtuluş Ordusu-Cephesi*, THKP-C), established in 1970; and the Communist Party of Turkey/Marxist-Leninist (*Türkiye Komünist Partisi/Marksist-Leninist*, TKP/ML), established in 1972.
- 3 Twenty-four people had been called to the congress, but two members could not attend; Kemal Pir was arrested and in prison, and Mehmet Karasungur was responsible for the Hilvan-Siverek region, where the organisation was already involved in an armed struggle with tribes and local leaders supporting the state (Jongerden and Akkaya 2011; Akkaya 2016).
- 4 Mahir Çayan (THKP-C), Hüdaî Arıkan, Cihan Alptekin (THKO), Nihat Yılmaz, Ertan Saruhan (THKP-C), Ahmet Atasoy (THKP-C), Sinan Kazım Özüdoğru (THKP-C), Sabahattin Kurt (THKP-C), Ömer Ayna (THKO) and Saffet Alp (THKP-C) were either killed in shoot-outs with the military or executed on March 30, 1972; the THKO leaders, Deniz Gezmis, Hüseyin İnan and Yusuf Aslan, were executed on May 6, 1972; TKP-ML leader Ibrahim Kaypakkaya was tortured to death and died in Diyarbakir prison on May 18, 1973.
- 5 Ibrahim Kerukan, personal communication, February 3, 2017.
- 6 Not to be confused with the Kurdistan Workers Party PKK. Though KİP claimed they were the first to assume the name Kurdistan Workers Party, they took the Turkish abbreviation in order to distinguish themselves from the PKK.
- 7 Kurdish: *Rîya Azadî*.
- 8 Kurdish: *Yekêtiy Nîştîmanîy Kurdistan*, YNK.
- 9 Kurdish: *Partiya Demokrat a Kurdistanê*, PDK.
- 10 Cengiz Gunes (2012) also refers to an organisation called the Group of Freedom Advocates of Kurdistan (Koma Azadixwazên Kurdistan, KAK).
- 11 TİP was the first legal political party in Turkey to recognise the Kurdish issue. At its Fourth Congress, held in 1970, a resolution was accepted, including statements, among others, that 'The Kurdish nation inhabits the East of Turkey', and 'In respect of the Kurdish nation a policy of repression, terror and assimilation is pursued' (Lipovsky 1992: 78).
- 12 The meetings took place at the following places and times: Silvan, August 13, 1967; Diyarbakir, September 3, 1967; Siverek, September 24, 1967; Batman, October 8, 1967; Tunceli, October 15, 1967; Ağrı, October 22, 1967; Ankara, November 18, 1967; Diyarbakir, April 13, 1969; Suruç, July 17, 1969; Hilvan, July 27, 1969; Varto, August 2, 1969; Siverek, August 2, 1969; Lice, August 24, 1969; and Diyarbakir, September 3, 1969 (Firat 2006; Karadogan 2006).
- 13 For a long time, T-KDP has been evaluated as a (left-wing) part of the TKDP; as recently published memories and research monographs show, however, it is clear that the T-KDP was a separate organisation rooted in the personal initiative of its leader (Dr Şivan) and in close collaboration and also competition with the TKDP. Contrary to the traditionalist and conservative outlook of the latter, the T-KDP was influenced by radical movements (Akkaya 2016), for which the role of the Turkish left was important: 'The radicalization of the Turkish left influenced the young nationalist Kurdish university students who constituted an important component of the new Kurdish elite. All these factors expressed themselves in Sait Kırmızıtoprak's [Dr Şivan's] leftist, radical line' (Gündoğan, 2002: 26).
- 14 <http://zuexpayic.blogspot.nl/2011/11/zeki-adsizin-kek-saleh-anisina-2bolum.html>
- 15 <http://zekiadsiz.com/hayati.htm>
- 16 A PKK repentant was later to claim that it was the PKK who had killed Uzun.
- 17 In Syria, the PKK had a network of houses at its disposal that belonged to sympathising Kurds. Öcalan also stayed in such houses, together with 5–10 cadres. Officially, the PKK did not have an office in Syria. In January 1994, following the closure of the PKK camp in the Beka'a valley in Lebanon in autumn 1992, the PKK opened a new education camp in a farm house in a district very close to Damascus. Referred to as the Party Central School (Parti Merkez Okulu), this was open until the end of 1998, when Öcalan left Syria. In 1997–98, there was a place called the Presidential Bureau (Başkanlık Bürosu), which was an office in an apartment block.

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TURKEY'S KURDISH COMPLEXES AND ITS SYRIAN QUAGMIRE

Bill Park

Heading towards a Syrian quagmire?

Many of today's Syrian Kurds are descendants of Kurds who fled Turkish repression of Kurdish unrest during the 1920s. In addition, the arbitrary nature of the Turkish-Syrian border, which cut Kurdish-inhabited areas in two, left many Syrian Kurds with relatives and long-established connections on the Turkish side of the border. Consequently, locals often treated the border as if it barely existed, interacting across it almost at will. These circumstances also meant that such Kurdish nationalist sentiment as existed in Syria typically identified Turks rather than Arabs as the adversary. In 1996, even the leader of the Turkey-based PKK (*Partiya Karkeren Kurdistanê* or Kurdish Workers Party), Abdullah Ocalan, declared that most of Syria's Kurds remained rooted in Turkey rather than Syria, while the Damascus regime was content to allow Kurds to join the PKK to fight against their Turkish oppressors.¹ Furthermore, 'Arabisation', combined with clan and tribal loyalties, dispersed settlement, and the existence of Kurdish populations in towns such as Damascus and Aleppo that were a legacy of Ottoman times or of the tendency of the French mandate authorities to use Kurdish and other non-Arab minorities as agents of colonial rule, added to the fragmentation of Syria's Kurds. The fact that, on the eve of the 2011 uprising against the regime, around 300,000 Syrian Kurds were 'stateless' as a result of a decree issued by Damascus in the 1960s which identified them as non-Syrian refugees, and which rendered them propertyless, jobless, impoverished and without rights or documentation, deepened their invisibility still further. Syria's Kurds had long been politically weak.² Unsurprisingly, far greater regional and global attention has been paid to the Kurds of Turkey and Iraq than those of Syria.

Turkey became actively engaged in the unfolding Syrian drama from its inception in 2011. Having previously made Damascus a centrepiece of its 'zero problems in the neighbourhood' approach to regional relationships, Turkey nevertheless reacted angrily to the failure of Bashar Al-Assad's government to adopt a more inclusive stance towards the burgeoning opposition and began lobbying early and hard for Assad's overthrow. Ankara sponsored the formation in August 2011 of the Syrian National Council (SNC), while the opposition Free Syrian Army (FSA) was initially headquartered in Turkey, where it received training and arms. Ankara was critical of the relative unwillingness of its Western allies, and most

especially Washington, to follow suit, although some elements of the Syrian opposition did obtain Western-supplied arms, while its calls to establish a no-fly zone and 'humanitarian corridor' in northern Syria, which could serve as a safe haven for refugees but also as a base for the FSA, similarly received a cool reception.³

Ankara's concerns were understandable. Turkey was subjected to a flood of refugees from Syria, numbering over three million by early 2017, and potentially posing a threat to the country's social cohesion. Bombings on Turkish soil that were associated with the Syrian turmoil, cross-border fire resulting in the deaths of Turkish civilians, and the shooting down of a Turkish fighter jet in June 2012, all further demonstrated Turkey's vulnerability to events in neighbouring Syria. Few had expected the Ba'athist regime to hold onto office for so long, and as the conflict in Syria evolved it became increasingly evident that the ramifications of the Syrian war impacted profoundly on Turkey's diplomatic and political relationships, both with its regional neighbours and with external actors, such as its Western allies and Russia.

Yet in its encouragement of opposition to Damascus Ankara initially failed to anticipate the seriousness of the Kurdish dimension of the Syrian crisis, no doubt because – as with most other observers – it did not anticipate the emergence of the PYD (*Partiya Yekitiya Demokrat* or Democratic Union Party) as the lead element in the Kurdish response to the Syrian crisis. Turkey regards the PYD and its armed wing, the YPG (*Yekineyen Parastina Gel* or People's Protection Units), as umbilically tied to the PKK. The PYD was formed by the PKK in 2003. Both are affiliated to the KCK (*Koma Civaken Kurdistan* or Kurdish Communities Union), an umbrella organisation that incorporates a range of political parties, media outlets, cultural groups, civil society organisations and the like, all of whom express allegiance to Abdullah Ocalan. Indeed, up to one-third of the PKK membership may be of Syrian Kurdish origin.⁴

The PYD's chief spokesman, Salih Muslim, spent time with PKK units in northern Iraq's Kandil mountains until he returned to Syria in 2011 to help shape the Kurdish response there. The PYD/YPG soon, and surprisingly, emerged as the best organised and militarily most effective of Syria's disparate Kurdish groups.⁵ It undoubtedly prospered from its seamless military relationship with the PKK, which provided numerous fighters and arms. The PYD's establishment in early 2013 of Rojava, consisting of three geographically discontinuous self-governing Kurdish cantons along Syria's border with Turkey, seriously rattled Ankara. It implied the establishment of PKK-controlled havens on its southern border, which could herald similar initiatives in Turkey's south-east.⁶ Turkey believed it was now confronting an existential crisis to its borders and its territorial integrity.

The Syrian regime's military withdrawal from the Kurdish areas soon after the uprising began – although its political presence remained in place – effectively handed them over to PYD control. This gesture could yet prove to have consequences as far-reaching as Saddam Hussein's February 1991 withdrawal of the Iraqi state's presence in Kurdish Iraq. Ankara sought unsuccessfully to persuade the PYD to join the SNC,⁷ notwithstanding the fact that most of the SNC's constituent elements were opposed to Kurdish self-rule. The PYD's position was that its struggle focussed primarily on Kurdish self-determination, or 'democratic autonomy', rather than on the overthrow of the government in Damascus as such. In March 2016 Rojava and additional territories that had since been captured by the YPG and its Arab allies were renamed the Democratic System of Rojava/Northern Syria.⁸ This reflected the fact that the YPG was now fighting as part – albeit the lead component – of a largely Kurdish and Arab force known as the Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF), and that the territory it controlled incorporated many non-Kurds. It also indicated the aspiration that in time the

unitary Syrian state should be replaced by a federation, which, in turn, is an expression of the concept of ‘democratic autonomy’, a concept central to the thinking of the PKK and its founder, Abdullah Ocalan.⁹

With the emergence of the PYD/YPG in northern Syria, Ankara now worked towards both the overthrow of the Assad regime and the obstruction of Kurdish autonomy there. In its pursuit of these objectives, Ankara was widely suspected of at least turning a blind eye to *jihadi* groups, even including the Islamic State (IS), in their fight with Assad and their attacks on Syria’s Kurdish enclaves. This suspicion never quite evaporated.¹⁰ It dragged its feet for almost a year before it followed the United States in proscribing *Jahbat al-Nusra*, the Syrian al-Qaeda affiliate.¹¹ Turkey initially held aloof from an anti-IS global coalition of Arab and Western countries that Washington assembled in September 2014¹² and refused to permit access to the NATO air base at Incirlik to US bombers engaged in the campaign. Washington was obliged to airdrop military supplies to the PYD defenders of the Syrian Kurdish town of Kobane, which was besieged by IS forces, and to use more distant military bases from which to conduct air strikes against Kobane’s IS attackers while the Turkish military looked on from just across the border and Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdogan loudly criticised Washington’s action.¹³ IS was eventually expelled from Kobane in early 2015. When in June 2015 Syrian Kurdish forces captured – with the United States’ help – the border town of Tal Abyad, Erdogan chose to express his concern about the possible ‘creation of a structure that threatens our borders’,¹⁴ a concern he had not expressed during the previous two years during which the town had been under IS control. Erdogan opposed Washington’s air drops to the PYD, fearing the arms might fall into the PKK’s hands. Although the PKK had been listed by Washington as a terrorist organisation since 1997, after the siege of Kobane the United States now insisted, somewhat implausibly, that it did not regard the PYD/YPG as simply the Syrian offshoot of the PKK.

However, in the wake of the allegedly IS suicide bombing in the Turkish border town of Suruc on 20 July 2015, Ankara finally seemed to commit itself to the US-led fight against IS in Syria. It now gave the green light to the United States to attack IS targets from Incirlik,¹⁵ and within days of the Suruc attack Turkish forces also retaliated against an IS base in Syria from where cross-border fire had killed a Turkish soldier. Furthermore, Ankara now embarked on successive rounds of detentions of alleged IS activists throughout Turkey. However, most were subsequently released, and the crackdown was in any case overshadowed by that against the PKK and its alleged affiliates with the breakdown of Turkey’s own ‘peace process’ during the second half of 2015. Inside Syria too, Ankara seemed more focussed on obstructing Syrian Kurdish forces from extending their control westwards, and continued to assist, along with Saudi Arabia and Qatar, an alliance of *jihadi* groups known as *Jaish al-Islam*.¹⁶ Although such groups were increasingly ready to position themselves against IS, their memberships and ideologies overlapped with those of IS, and the relationships between them were fluid and frequently cooperative. From Ankara’s perspective, the chief advantages of a *jihadi*-controlled zone were twofold. It would serve to prevent PYD/YPG control of the entire border with Syria and might also contribute to the overthrow of the Damascus regime.

By now, however, the United States had tired of its failure to train and equip a viable moderate Syrian force to fight IS, and of Ankara’s curmudgeonliness, and elected instead to ramp up its support for the significantly more effective Kurdish-Arab SDF, formed in October 2015.¹⁷ Although generally regarded as being controlled and largely manned by YPG fighters, the SDF offered Washington some cover against Ankara’s insistence that the United States was in effect training and arming the PKK, a proscribed terrorist organisation

that was a NATO ally's sworn enemy.¹⁸ While conceding that it shared the PKK's fidelity to Abdullah Ocalan and to his thinking, the PYD/YPG leadership nevertheless professed its more purely Syrian agenda.¹⁹ It also repeatedly accused Turkey of backing various jihadi groups in Syria, including IS.²⁰

With Russia's September 2015 military entry into the Syrian theatre in support of Assad, it appeared both that the prospects of Turkey's Syrian allies had dimmed, and that those of its Kurdish and regime foes had risen. In the wake of Turkey's shooting down of a Russian air force jet in November 2015, ostensibly because it intruded into Turkish air space, Russia too stepped up its support for Syria's Kurds.²¹ Ankara even saw fit to warn both Moscow and Washington against support for the PYD.²² Ankara's game plan with respect to Syria's Kurds was clearly in trouble, as was its influence over events in Syria more generally.²³ Whatever the legitimacy of Ankara's fears, among the consequences of developments in northern Syria was a rise in the status of the PYD/YPG amongst many Kurds, Turkey's Western allies and Russia; the establishment of Kurdish-controlled cantons just across its border in northern Syria; the continued survival of the regime in Damascus; and widespread suspicions regarding Ankara's relationships with radical Islamic groups.

Ankara's leap into the dark

Unsettled by the YPG's military advances, in August 2016 Turkey sent forces into northern Syria, ostensibly to fight IS but in fact to prevent Syria's Kurds from connecting their three autonomous cantons, which they now threatened to do with their capture of the hitherto IS-held town of Manbij. Named Operation Euphrates Shield, Turkish forces and a variety of FSA-affiliated groups that fought alongside them soon 'liberated' Jarablus from IS without a fight in contrast to the resistance IS continued to put up against SDF advances. Its capture served to block the SDF path westwards. Washington and Moscow welcomed Ankara's victories over IS, although the United States in particular expressed unhappiness with the skirmishes that broke out between the FSA and the SDF.²⁴ By February 2017 Operation Euphrates Shield had also captured al-Bab, this time in the face of fierce IS resistance and with the assistance of Russian airpower.²⁵

Ankara had now created its long-desired 'safe zone' – in effect a Turkish protectorate – where FSA forces could be based and to where refugees could return from Turkey. However, Moscow's onslaught against opposition forces intensified, and it appeared that, in return for Moscow's acquiescence to Euphrates Shield, Ankara had now downgraded its support for the opposition and its commitment to the downfall of the Syrian regime. Then quite abruptly, at the end of March 2017 Ankara announced the end of the operation. Major clashes with Syrian Kurdish, US, Russian or Syrian forces had at least been avoided, and a 'safe zone' of sorts was now in place, but it was hard to see what else had been achieved.²⁶

Erdogan accompanied the abrupt termination of Operation Euphrates Shield with a warning that Turkey remain committed to mounting similar operations, and, true to his word, on 25 April Turkey launched air strikes against YPG targets in north-eastern Syria. Agencies of the US government were vocal in their criticism of Turkey's actions. With respect to the attack in Syria a US Central Command tweet drew attention to the fact that a number of Syrian Kurdish personnel that had been central to the fight against IS had been killed in the Turkish strikes.

Amid calls from the PYD for protection from Turkish aggression, US ground forces interposed themselves between Turkish and SDF forces. Indeed, US military personnel had been close to Turkey's targets, and the entire incident again raised the prospect of direct

clashes between US and Turkish forces. Russia too denounced Turkey's Syrian attack as 'un-acceptable', which applied too to Turkey's intensified cross-border artillery attacks against Kurdish-controlled Afrin, across the border from Hatay. Washington and Moscow, having disapproved of Turkey's proposed action, had received little warning notice of the air attacks, and the State Department lamented this lack of coordination.²⁷ In any case, in May 2017, despite intense lobbying from Ankara, the White House decided to openly and directly arm the SDF, including its Kurdish elements, in their bid to wrest control of Raqqa from IS.²⁸

The Iraqi Kurdish dimension

Simultaneously with its bombing raid against YPG targets in north-eastern Syria, Ankara also bombed a base in Sinjar, northern Iraq, used by Yazidi units affiliated with the PKK. Ankara asserted that it was not prepared to allow Sinjar to replicate the Qandil Mountains, in nominally Iraqi Kurdish-controlled territory, as a base from which the PKK and its affiliates could threaten Turkey. Five Iraqi Peshmerga fighters were killed. The Iraqi Kurdish authorities had evidently been taken by surprise by Turkey's action, and Masoud Barzani, the president of the Kurdistan Regional Government (KRG) and long-time leader of the Kurdistan Democratic Party (KDP), expressed his disappointment. However, Erbil also insisted – not for the first time – that the PKK/YPG presence in the region should be ended as it served only to provoke Turkey. However, the other major Iraqi Kurdish factions, the Patriotic Union of Kurdistan (PUK) and Gorran, condemned Turkey's action.²⁹ Baghdad also condemned the Turkish raids,³⁰ and with Erbil, it was also critical of the presence and behaviour of the PKK/YPG on Iraqi territory.

Barzani had long shared Ankara's unease about the influence of the PKK and its affiliates, seeing them as rivals for the leadership of Kurdish nationalism and as a threat both directly to his position in Iraqi Kurdistan and to his relationship with Ankara. The PYD had resisted Barzani's attempts to subordinate it to the Kurdish National Council, a coalition of Syrian Kurdish groups that was formed in 2011 under Barzani's sponsorship.³¹ Indeed, the KRG, like Turkey, had closed its border with Syria border even as the PYD was battling jihadi elements.³² With Ankara, Erbil refused to recognise the Federation of Northern Syria-Rojava. The role played by PKK and PYD fighters in defending Sinjar and Makhmur in Iraqi Kurdistan against the IS attack of June 2014, and which gained them a foothold in the region which they have yet to relinquish, intensified Barzani's concerns. His peshmerga had fled from IS. For the PKK/PYD, however, the Sinjar area offered an alternative to Turkey as a route into northern Syria. This intra-Kurdish rivalry delayed a campaign to liberate Sinjar from IS³³ and persisted during and subsequent to their cooperation in Sinjar's eventual liberation in November 2015.³⁴ The PKK/YPG had formed an affiliated armed Yazidi unit, the Sinjar Resistance Unit (*Yekineyen Berxwedana Şengale* or YBS), which rivalled groups loyal to Barzani, and which the PKK/YPG insisted should be granted authority in the region. There were occasional skirmishes between the two Kurdish forces,³⁵ and Barzani even formed a Syrian Kurdish unit, the Rojava peshmerga, in a bid to rival the YPG in northern Iraq.³⁶ Although both Ankara and Erbil repeatedly called on the PKK/PYD to leave Sinjar, and both had threatened to use force to expel it if necessary, it is possible that Turkey's April 2017 bombing raid in Sinjar was also an expression of frustration with Erbil's inaction.

Ankara had initially been hostile to the KRG following its establishment in 1992, largely because it feared the impact of Iraqi Kurdish self-rule on the aspirations of its own Kurds.³⁷ However, with Ahmet Davutoglu's appointment as foreign minister in 2009, the relationship

transformed. Notwithstanding the fact that it had emerged as a quasi-Kurdish state, with its own government, laws, language, flag, security forces, border controls and foreign and energy policies, Ankara now forged a close relationship, especially with President Masoud Barzani and his KDP. In Barzani, Turkey saw a socially conservative political leader, one who appreciated the necessity of Ankara's goodwill for the security of his quasi-state, and who shared its distaste for the secular and leftist PKK as well as for what both saw as the increasingly Shia-dominated and Iranian influenced government in Baghdad. In November 2013 Barzani and Erdogan even shared a platform in Turkey's overwhelmingly Kurdish city of Diyarbakir, where Barzani expressed his support for Turkey's Kurdish peace process and acclaimed the brotherhood between Turks and Kurds.³⁸

Expanding trade, and a burgeoning energy relationship even more so,³⁹ became increasingly central to this relationship. In early 2014 independently produced and marketed Kurdish oil began flowing through a pipeline for export from the Turkish port of Ceyhan, despite the disapproval of both Baghdad and Washington.⁴⁰ The whereabouts of the proceeds from the sale of this oil is shrouded in murkiness, but there seems little doubt that political figures in both Ankara and Erbil have directly benefitted. In the longer term, the KRG's oil reserves should be enough to finance any eventual independence it might achieve; indeed, Kurdish autonomy implied eventual independence, a basis for Baghdad's and Washington's opposition to the arrangement. Ankara even adopted a relatively passive posture towards Barzani's occasional pronouncements that Iraqi Kurdish independence was inevitable, and towards the KRG's extension of full control over the territories it disputes with Baghdad – including oil-rich Kirkuk – in the wake of Mosul's fall to IS in June 2014.⁴¹ It seemed possible that Turkey was positioning itself in the event of a total collapse of the Iraqi state or of a sectarian and/or Iranian takeover.

On the other hand, Ankara did little to help – in contrast to Tehran – when, a few months later, Erbil found itself under threat from an IS advance. Erbil's disappointment was palpable, and the 'strategic' relationship shaken.⁴² That, early in 2017, Ankara also expressed its displeasure at the decision to raise the Kurdish flag over the disputed city of Kirkuk, suggested that Turkey's alliance with the KRG was not unconditional.⁴³ On balance, however, Erbil and Ankara remain wedded, as was indicated by the augmentation, in late 2015, of the Turkish military presence in Bashiqa, near to Mosul.⁴⁴ The area is under the control of Barzani's Peshmerga, and he – along with Sunni Arab leaders in the region – insisted both that the deployment was in keeping with a prior agreement with Baghdad – notwithstanding Baghdad's insistence that the Turkish deployment violated Iraq's sovereignty and that the force should be removed – and that the base was used by Turkey to train peshmerga and Sunni militias in readiness for the forthcoming fight to liberate Mosul. It was also likely that the Turkish military presence offered reassurance to Erbil in the face of the PKK/YPG presence and the increasing role of Shia militias in the region. Combined with the establishment of a 'safe zone' in Syria, Ankara's behaviour in northern Iraq could look like that of an expansionist, irredentist, state, driven by its Kurdish preoccupations.⁴⁵

No peace abroad, because no peace at home?

Yet these preoccupations are ultimately rooted in Turkey's domestic Kurdish travails. The Turkish Republic that was established in 1923 has been characterised by an intense Turkish nationalism, in which at various times not only the Kurdish language but even Kurdishness itself has been denied. Its political evolution is replete with the banning of Kurdish political parties and journals, and the detention of Kurdish activists.⁴⁶

Unsurprisingly, the republic's history has from the outset been punctuated by Kurdish revolts, unrest and alienation. In 1978 the PKK emerged under the leadership of Abdullah Ocalan. Its ideology is both Kurdish and leftist, although over the years it has come to demand 'democratic autonomy' rather than complete independence. The PKK embarked on its armed campaign in 1984, the Turkish state responded with its characteristic repressiveness and a 'dirty war' ensued. Turkey's south-east was in effect under military occupation, with at least one-third of Turkey's substantial army located there at any one time. The fighting was at its most intense during the 1990s, and martial law was not finally lifted across the whole of Turkey's south-east until 2002.⁴⁷

However, the AKP (*Adelet ve Kalkinma* or Justice and Development Party) government that came to power in 2002 appeared to signal a new approach to Turkey's politically and economically costly Kurdish conflict. In a speech in Diyarbakir in August 2005 Prime Minister Erdogan conceded that Turkey had a 'Kurdish issue' and that 'mistakes' had been made in the handling of it. His motivations were several but included a desire to draw Turkey's Kurdish voters away from pro-Kurdish parties and towards the AKP. Having won a stunning election victory in 2007, the way was paved both for the marginalisation of Turkey's General Staff's (TGS) political influence over Turkey's Kurdish issue and for the so-called Oslo Process, a series of secret talks with Kurdish elements.⁴⁸ This appeared to represent a sea-change from Ankara's hitherto heavily securitised approach to its Kurdish and PKK problem.

The government's approach took on a more substantive flavour with the 2009 launch of the so-called 'Kurdish opening'. Welcome though the AKP government's 2009 'Kurdish opening' was, it ended in acrimony, and 2011 saw an intensification of the PKK's resort to violence. It was estimated that more than 700 people were killed in the 14 months up to August 2012 – the highest level of PKK-related violence for 13 years.⁴⁹ However, having already brought a hunger strike on the part of hundreds of Kurdish activists to an end,⁵⁰ in March 2013 Ocalan issued a message from his prison cell that referred to the common past of Turks and Kurds, which asserted that they live together under the 'flag of Islam' and that they need to create a common future.⁵¹ PKK fighters soon began to withdraw into Iraq in order to implement a ceasefire, although they remained armed. This looked like progress.

However, with respect to the substance of any agreement the two sides remained far apart.⁵² Although some reforms were introduced,⁵³ the government appeared inactive and increasingly insincere. It was also evident that there were divisions on the Kurdish side. Many PKK fighters and activists were sceptical from the beginning.⁵⁴ Kurdish demands were extensive and included Ocalan's release or transfer to house arrest; the winding down of the so-called 'village guard' system of government-sponsored and armed Kurdish citizens; the right to maintain a local self-defence force; an amnesty for Kurdish fighters and imprisoned activists; a reform of Turkey's notorious and wide-ranging antiterror laws; education in Kurdish; establishing Kurdish as coequal with Turkish as an official language of the Republic; the replacement of the current ethnic definition of citizenship with a civic one; an end to the ten-per cent electoral hurdle for parliamentary representation; and, above all, some kind of devolution, self-determination or 'democratic autonomy' that would, in effect, introduce something tantamount to a federal political system in Turkey.⁵⁵

In fact there were few indications that Erdogan, his party or the opposition parties were ever at all ready to concede many, if any, of these demands. Indeed, a case can be made that neither side was in desperate need of a settlement.⁵⁶ The PKK possibly sensed that time was on its side in light of wider developments in Syria, and refused to meet the government's

demand that it disarm before a peace deal could be agreed.⁵⁷ Erdogan appeared to think only in terms of an Islamic ‘brotherhood’ between Turkey’s Turkish and Kurdish citizens, and did not really appreciate the necessity to adopt a pluralistic approach to Turkey’s ethnic makeup.⁵⁸

Although the ceasefire partially held, sporadic violent incidents still occurred. Turkish security forces in the region were increased and their infrastructure improved.⁵⁹ Meanwhile the Kurdish HDP (*Halkların Demokratik Partisi* or People’s Democratic Party) and PKK strengthened their grip on the south-east’s local government infrastructure. In part through the activities of a youth wing, PKK elements began digging trenches, building barricades, conducting street patrols and even declaring local ‘self-rule’ in what amounted to a shift towards a more urban guerrilla campaign.

As the June 2015 elections approached, and the AKP needed both to reassure its nationalistic supporters and try to keep the HDP vote below the ten-per cent threshold, the rift between the two sides became starker. Clashes in Turkey’s south-east between the PKK and Kurdish Islamist groups immediately before and after the election were widely suspected of having been initiated by provocateurs.⁶⁰ Clearly Turkey’s Kurdish voters had become mistrustful and disillusioned. Developments in Syria, notably the siege of Kobane by IS, and Ankara’s reactions also angered Turkey’s Kurds. In the national elections for the Turkish Grand National Assembly (TGNA), on 7 June 2015, socially conservative Kurdish voters in Turkey’s south-east deserted the AKP in droves, lifting the HDP share of the national vote to 13.1 per cent⁶¹ and causing the AKP to lose its parliamentary majority. Erdogan called a ‘repeat election’ for 1 November, in which the HDP votes dropped but nevertheless exceeded the ten per cent hurdle, while the concomitant increase in the AKP vote enabled it to once again form a single party government.

Erdogan had learned that a ‘peace process’ might benefit the Kurdish party, but that he might gain from a return to violence. In the run-up to the November election, and commencing with the July 2015 Suruc bombing, Turkey’s security forces engaged in a resumption of fighting against the PKK – far more intense than their more loudly proclaimed campaign against IS – which involved enforced curfews, bombing of PKK targets in both Turkey and KRG territory, the flattening of Kurdish towns and cities, attacks on soldiers and the like. Casualties on all sides rocketed, and up to half a million Kurds were displaced from their homes.⁶² Turkish state violence in the south-east intensified further in the wake of the July 2016 failed coup attempt and the subsequent state of emergency, and then again in the wake of the April 2017 referendum on constitutional amendments which further secured Erdogan’s grip on power. The national and regional leaderships of the HDP and its affiliated parties were arrested, hitherto Kurdish-run councils were taken over by the state, academics and journalists deemed sympathetic to the Kurdish struggle were detained and media outlets closed down.⁶³ This was hard to square with a belief that Erdogan had ever been much committed to a genuine resolution of Turkey’s Kurdish problem.

Conclusion

The Turkish state’s struggle with its own Kurdish problem has always been impacted by, and has impacted on, regional circumstances. With the establishment of the allied no-fly zone over northern Iraq in the wake of the 1991 war with Iraq, the PKK made increasing use of the Kandil Mountains in Iraqi Kurdistan, basing up to half their fighters there. This prompted around 30 Turkish military incursions and air attacks against PKK bases in northern Iraq during the 1990s. Turkish forces were often aided by the KDP and the other

leading Iraqi Kurdish political party, the PUK. Even so, PKK units remain there to this day, and are now present in and around Sinjar too. The support Damascus afforded to the PKK led in 1998 to intense Turkish military and political pressure on Syria, which, in turn, led to Syria's expulsion of Ocalan and his capture in Nairobi, Kenya.⁶⁴ The involvement of Greece in Ocalan's flight led to tension with Athens. Tehran too may have manipulated Ankara's struggle against the PKK from time to time, although there has also been cooperation between these two states. However, it would be wrong to assume this is a problem that emerged with the formation of the PKK. We have noted that many of Syria's Kurds are descendants of Kurds that fled across the border into French-mandated Syria during the 1920s, and French musings about the possibility of forming statelets on the territory it controlled or establishing a federalised Syrian entity unsettled Turkey, as did the activities of Kurds on the Syrian side of the border during this period. In the 1930s Iran's Shah permitted Turkish forces to enter Iranian territory in order to encircle rebel Kurds that had sought sanctuary there.⁶⁵

Many states have complicated ethnic demographics. Canada, the UK, Belgium, Spain and India are examples of states that, in their various ways, have adopted federal arrangements to take account of this, and have even embraced their linguistic and cultural diversity. Such arrangements cannot be guaranteed to satisfy separatist inclinations for all time and under all circumstances, but they have generally enabled these states to avoid or at least minimise the internal violence that has been such a persisting feature in the life of the Turkish Republic, and also to better manage their regional politics. At no time can it be said that Ankara has seriously considered any kind of federal arrangement or demonstrated the capacity to fully embrace and champion its Kurdish cultural dimension. Notwithstanding the relatively harmonious relationships Ankara has eventually been able to develop with at least part of the KRG leadership, Turkey has generally chosen to present itself as opposed to Kurdish demands for self-determination throughout the region, largely because of its own sense of vulnerability deriving from the failure to constructively approach its own Kurdish problem. Given the generally harmonious relationships that existed between Turks and Kurds up to the very formation of the Republic, it did not have to be this way. Turkey could have evolved as the champion of Kurdish rights throughout the region or at least as willing to accommodate them. Instead it is now doomed to oppose federal arrangements in Syria, and perhaps in Iraq too, that surely represent the best way forward for these two troubled neighbours. The 'problem' is at least as much a Turkish one as a Kurdish one.

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PART IX

The Kurdish situation in Iraq



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THE STATE WE'RE IN

Postcolonial sequestration and the Kurdish quest for independence since the First World War

Francis Owtram

Introduction

Since the 2011 Arab Spring revolutions and ongoing conflicts sent a seismic shock through the Middle East, the plight of the Kurds as a 'stateless nation' and the suffering they have endured has grabbed the world's attention with a number of related developments: First, the attempt by Kurds and others to flee across the Mediterranean to find safe haven from the civil wars in Syria and Iraq culminated in harrowing images of drowned people, most notably the toddler Alan Kurdi, and second, the role of Kurdish fighters in resisting the Islamic State (IS) onslaught and siege of Kobani, and then in expelling the IS forces bent on genocide in the ancestral home of the Yazidis around Mount Sinjar.

On the liberation of Sinjar from the IS, Masoud Barzani, the President of the Kurdistan Region of Iraq, called for the international community to move beyond the 'Sykes-Picot borders' (Chulov 2016) – a shorthand for the artificial and arbitrary frontiers which, since the collapse of the Ottoman Empire, have locked the Kurds into the Turkish, Syrian and Iraqi states. Throughout the 20th century the Kurds experienced in these states sustained attempts by these states at assimilation and denial of identity, genocidal attack and negation of any human and democratic rights (see Entessar 2010).

To emphasize the intent to break out of this situation Masoud Barzani subsequently instigated a referendum on independence for the Kurdistan Region of Iraq to take place in September 2017, one that ended in a traumatic denouement in which the Kurds once again found their aspirations crushed.

How did it come about that such suffering should befall the Kurds in the states they found themselves shoe-horned into and what are the prospects for a Kurdish independent state now? This chapter aims to shed light on these questions by developing a historical narrative and policy imperative using the analytical framework of 'the syndrome of post-colonial sequestration' (Halliday 2008, 2011) so that we might better comprehend the legitimate and poignant question posed by many Kurds, both in Kurdistan and the diaspora: 'why are we in the state we're in?' This is, in essence, the Kurdish question as originally formulated (see Rabar 2017). Specifically, how was it that the Kurds did not have an independent state in their mountainous homeland and 'remained marginalised, suppressed, and oppressed in every state in which they found themselves' (Stansfield and Shareef 2017: xviii)? In British colloquial parlance the Kurds have found themselves 'in a right state' (meaning a difficult,

upsetting situation); in a sort of paradoxical echo, from any objective standpoint few would assert that the Middle East state system, which emerged from the collapse of the Ottoman Empire, was right for the Kurds.

I advance my argument in several stages. First, I outline the key tenets of Halliday's concept, including the significance of moments of momentous historical change and his injunction to explore and embed democratic rights, including federalism, as a way of overcoming the syndrome of postcolonial sequestration. These key features of the concept provide the framework for a historical narrative, which analyzes the Kurds relationship with the state since the First World War. My main focus is on the Kurds in Iraq, but I refer briefly, where necessary, to the Kurdish experience in all Middle Eastern states as I explore the theme of Kurdish resistance to assimilation and bids for autonomy. I turn first to some necessary scene-setting in terms of geographical and historical context along with definitional ground-clearing and conceptual outlining.

The Kurds and their ancestral homeland: the mountains where empires meet

The Kurds' quest for independence is partly the product of geography: their ancestral homeland, around the Taurus Mountains, occupies a peripheral border region at the intersection of the historic empires of the Turks, Persians and Arabs (see Griffiths 2017: 126–127). Under these empires the Kurds exploited their position on the edge of empire to carve out high levels of autonomy. Their autonomous place in the latter stages of the Ottoman and Qajar dynastic empires was documented in an important archival source on the Kurds – the reports compiled by British military and political officers tasked with gathering intelligence both prior to the end of the Ottoman Empire and Qajar Persia and the decades thereafter. Naturally, these reports were written from a British perspective; the British considered Kurdistan a geographical area rather than a legal or political identity, and the Kurds were perceived as rebellious tribes hostile to control and centralized authority (see the British report 'Kurdistan and the Kurds'¹ and the map 'Kurdistan and the Kurdish Tribes'²) and habitually engaged in internecine conflict with each other. However, as Ofra Bengio points out, in this they were not that dissimilar from other societies – Arabs, Jews, Turks – who carved out a state from the ruins of the Ottoman Empire (Bengio 2017).

The dismemberment of the Ottoman Empire and the creation of the Kurdish question

Following the demise of the Ottoman Empire at the end of the First World War, the Kurds in the Ottoman Empire found themselves divided between three successor states, namely, Iraq, Syria and Turkey, where they became regionally concentrated 'non-assimilating minorities' (Entessar 2010: 217). In the same period of post-First World War state upheaval, following the demise of the Qajar dynasty, the Kurds of Iran found themselves encased in the Pahlavi dynasty's state building with similar deleterious consequences (see Yildiz and Taysi 2007).

This underlying sense of malaise finds conceptual framing in the 'syndrome of post-colonial sequestration', a term coined by the late Professor Fred Halliday in a succinct and incisive article (2008; reproduced in Halliday 2011) in which he briefly mentioned the Kurds as a relevant case. I expand his brief reference into a more detailed analysis and synthesize with other relevant literature: namely, the role of conflicts and competition over oil and the impact on patterns of state formation, regional conflict and external intervention (Hinnebusch 2007; Davidson 2016).

Stateless nations and nation states: a misnomer in search of resolution

It has become almost a commonplace assertion, but it still needs to be stated that the Kurds are the 'largest territorially concentrated ethnic group in the world without its own nation-state' (Jüde 2017: 847). From the viewpoint of the powerful 19th-century ideology of nationalism this is deemed problematic as the state exists to protect the nation. It is therefore worth reminding ourselves of a key point, lucidly expressed by Ephraim Nimni, that 'nations that have states are only a small fraction of all nations, but we insist in associating nations with states and in regarding the majority of nations that are stateless as problematic or lacking something' (2011: 55). Nimni goes on to outline the many ways in which thinking on sovereignty, self-determination, cultural recognition and modes of governance has developed since the inception of the nation state model (2010: 55–66). As we will see, it is these new forms of governance which Halliday held forth as a possible solution to the problems experienced by stateless nations.

The concept of postcolonial sequestration

Halliday's concept analyzes and explains the fates of the Palestinians, Tibetans and the Kurds, to name but a few, of the ethnic groups, which have been unable to form an independent state following periods of momentous historical change (MHC). Thereafter, they find themselves 'sequestered' or legally possessed by another. It is not an over-exaggeration to say that these groups have found themselves imprisoned in a state not of their own making. Escape from this situation, Halliday contends, is only possible at the juncture of another moment of momentous historical change. A resulting corollary of this 'failure' to achieve an independent nation state at these junctures is that these peoples have often suffered great repression by the repeated attempts to incorporate them into states deeply hostile to any expression of their cultural identity, let alone amenable to the granting of any form of autonomy.

Thus, the syndrome of postcolonial sequestration denotes the phenomenon 'where countries or peoples have – at a decisive moment of international change, amid the retreat of imperial or hegemonic powers – failed (through bad timing, and/ or bad leadership) to establish their independence' (Halliday 2011: 238). In contrast, Halliday argues, are states that were able to obtain independence 'in time' and which were therefore often sustained through crises of state survival by the international recognition they had been accorded. For example, Kuwait, although more artificial than many states, drew support from the 'international community' (derived from its status as a sovereign member of the United Nations) when it was invaded by Saddam Hussein's military forces in 1990. Halliday notes that 'the victims of "post-colonial sequestration", by contrast, failed to make it past the hurdle of independence and obtainment of international recognition' (2011: 238; Owtram 2011). Halliday contends that if this syndrome is to be understood 'internally' – by the peoples experiencing its dreadful consequences and also 'externally' by the outside world – it is necessary to abandon the idea that the states existing in the world are based on any rational reasons, historical entitlement or even principles of natural justice. Rather, Halliday argues, state formation is arbitrary and contingent – a result of power politics; accidents; wars; state crises; hegemonic power, colonial occupation or ideology (2011: 239).

Halliday notes that in the aftermath of the Great War of 1914–1918, the Ottoman withdrawal and decline led to a number of putative states claiming sovereignty. The rival claims of rulers seeking independent statehood and recognition were accompanied by the emergence of various states, *de facto* states and movements claiming independence. The Kurds of

Turkey and Iraq were promised consultation on independence in the Treaty of Sèvres (1920). But other newly founded states and nationalist state-building projects – Turkey galvanized by Atatürk, the British-backed Hashemite monarchy in Iraq and French colonial forces in Syria – annexed the lands being claimed.

Thus, the Ottoman successor states of Iraq, Turkey and Syria took legal possession of the Kurdish lands. Of vital importance for the explanatory potential of the concept is Halliday's contention that the Kurds (as with other peoples in similar situations – the Palestinians, for example) subsequently became locked into the system with little prospect of redress or remedy of their condition until another similar momentous historical change in the international system and its intersection with the regional system occurs. However, Halliday proffers some advice and an approach to managing this situation – namely that peoples suffering postcolonial sequestration should concentrate on securing human and democratic rights, including federalist provisions, in the sovereign states in which they find themselves. Such rights, if they can be achieved, would allow all issues to be meaningfully considered, including, in time, aspirations and claims for independence.

The First World War and its aftermath: the Kurds in the state system of the modern Middle East

The Middle East, as a constituent part of the international system, and as a significant regional system, has witnessed a number of defining moments of momentous historical change in which the global great powers, regional empires and states impacted each other: namely, the First World War, the Second World War and the 2003 Iraq War and subsequent occupation and withdrawal (Halliday 2005). All of these wars have enabled and ushered in massive social change (Heydemann 2000). It was the First World War which most shaped the current Middle East state system even up to current times. As Kristian Coates-Ulrichsen lucidly summarizes,

Exposure to, and participation in, the First World War and its turbulent aftermath thus contributed to the making of the modern Middle East. This was most visible in the decline of the Ottoman Empire and the emergence of the modern states-system (albeit under mandatory rule). This radically altered the political landscape of the region, but other forms of reordering also took place, ranging from the rise of a new type of nationalism that was able to mobilise a wider coalition of support and integrate economic and industrial components, the splintering and fragmentation of wartime alliances and agreements that still trigger bitter memories a century on, to the interjection of oil as a 'Western' policy objective with its geostrategic consequences, and a set of policy decisions that continue to reverberate across the region a century later. After a decade that has seen renewed Western intervention in Iraq as well as the Arab Spring upheaval which threatens to unravel the post-1918 political settlement, it is apparent that major issues of contention trace their roots to the decisions taken between 1914 and 1922.

(Coates-Ulrichsen and Held 2011: 174)

The key outcome for the Kurds during this period is that they were in David McDowall's phrase, 'incorporated' into the Ottoman successor states (McDowall 2004); a similar process took place in Persia, renamed Iran, under the Pahlavi dynasty who replaced the Qajar rulers in 1926. This created deeply divided societies on which to build the successor states.

However, with the collapse of the Ottoman Empire after the First World War and the occupation of the former Ottoman territories by Britain and France, the Kurds seemed poised

to obtain a homeland, as stated in the Treaty of Sèvres (1920). However, with Turkey resurgent a few years later under the leadership of Kemal Atatürk and a string of military victories and accompanying land gains strengthening his hand, the subsequent Treaty of Lausanne (1923) omitted any reference to a Kurdish homeland. Instead the Kurds became constituted as a concentrated geographic minority in the three successor states of Turkey, Iraq and Syria. As such, they came to be seen as a population to be viewed with suspicion as it was perceived that with their strong Kurdish identity they would be inherently lukewarm in their loyalties to the new states and the 'nation-building' efforts their elites adopted. Michael Gunter notes how Turkey followed the 'Russification' model of amalgamating difference (2017).

Following failed uprisings in Turkey in 1920, many Kurds were forced to leave for Syria, where some of them were rendered stateless. The Turkish origins of some Kurds in Syria allowed them to be denied citizenship, even though they had been resident in the French mandate, and this, according to the precepts of international law, should have been carried over into the successor state. Cruelly, the status of *ajanib* could be inherited, making it impossible to own property or for their marriage to be legally recognized (see Gunter 2017). It is hardly surprising then, that the Kurds have resisted at every occasion their confinement to the shackles of the state system foisted upon them.

Indeed, the Kurds were resistant to the state-building policies of the new states and found themselves the focus of escalating repression which increased Kurdish ethno-nationalism. As Entessar (2010) notes,

The upsurge of ethnonationalism is a clear reaction to the inability of territorial states in the modern Middle East to respond to marginalization. In response to the challenge of ethnonationalism, governments have adopted policies to destroy cultural identities and values. Such policies have been implemented with regard to the Kurds in Iran, Iraq and Turkey.

To this statement can be added without equivocation the Kurds in Syria (see Gunter 2014, 2017; Allsopp 2014).

The imposition of the European nation state system on the Middle East led to deeply divided societies as direct consequences of the straight lines drawn on the 1916 Sykes-Picot map which was enclosed with the Asia Minor Agreement signed between Britain and France, 16 May 1916. This ushered in the Sykes-Picot era, when the Middle East was divided by drawing 'a line from the "e" in Acre to the last "k" in Kirkuk'. As Charles Tilley noted, these borders were drawn up 'without regard to the distribution of peoples, became defended frontiers of postcolonial states; only rarely did the new states accommodate to their cultural heterogeneity by partition or by reordering of administrative subdivisions' (1991: 39).

Oil, the Middle Eastern state system and the partition of the Kurdish lands

Without doubt therefore, external involvement has critically shaped the state system of the modern Middle East and the place of the Kurds in it. It was the potential presence of oil which attracted the attention of external powers and brought their involvement in the politics of the region in order to pursue and protect their own interests (Luciani 2009). Anderson and Stansfield contend that in the absence of the discovery of oil in Kirkuk the British might have supported the creation of a Kurdish state:

To emphasize the importance of oil in the story of Kirkuk, it is worth briefly reconsidering Kirkuk's modern political history by imagining a scenario without oil. If the underlying geology of the province had contained water aquifers instead of oil fields, it

is unlikely that the enforced population movements caused by the policy of Arabization would have taken place, while the democratic issues that are now so problematic to resolve would have been of a different, lesser magnitude. This counterfactual “Kirkuk without oil” scenario warrants developing a little more deeply. It is possible, for example, that in the aftermath of World War I and the occupation of Kirkuk following the signing of the Mudros Armistice in 1918 that the British would have supported the creation of a Kurdish state – even extending northward of the current Iraqi border to Lake Van, deep into Anatolia. However, as it became more apparent that unknown but probably vast amounts of oil lay underneath Kirkuk, the British position toward the Mosul vilayet changed, which is one of the reasons it was incorporated into the Kingdom of Iraq.

(Anderson and Stansfield 2009: 23)

In 1916 the British Navy converted from coal to oil, immediately elevating the Middle East into new strategic perspective. Oil had been discovered in Persia in 1909 by the Anglo-Persian Oil Company, and it was thought that the lands of Turkish Arabia also held promise (Yergin 2009). Following the invasion of Basra, occupation of Baghdad and demise of the Ottoman Empire, the British took on the League of Nations Mandate for Iraq. British imperial officials on the ground such as Gertrude Bell and Arnold T. Wilson sought to fashion a state and create new administrative machinery to facilitate their rule through façade institutions (Cammack et al. 1993; Eskander 2012). In January 1924 the British High Commissioner for Iraq wrote to the Secretary of State for the Colonies,

At the beginning of the year 1923 the country had barely recovered from the crisis of the beginning of August, when the agitation among the Arab extremists against the British Mandate for Iraq had culminated on the anniversary of King Faisal’s accession in a public insult to the High Commissioner. The belief was still prevalent that Great Britain designed to make a second Egypt of Iraq and rule behind an Arab façade, and the twenty years’ period of tutelage prescribed by the Treaty of Alliance between Great Britain and Iraq, signed in October 1922, confirmed this belief. The cry of the extremists was that the real masters of the country were still the British officials and that the Arab Government was a sham.

(see Burdett 2016: 340)

This informal control would allow the development of the natural resources, particularly the now strategically vital resource of oil (Bromley 1990). This strategy was shown not to be misplaced with the discovery of the massive Kirkuk oil dome in 1927 – the British had created their client Hashemite Iraqi monarchy and co-opted the Sunni landowning elite who thus maintained their dominance over the Shia and the Kurds. Working with the British-owned Iraq Petroleum Company, ‘independent’ Iraq was launched in 1932. The British had cobbled together an artificial state as a means to exploit the vast quantity of the resource that was to become the life blood of the global economy for the next century: oil.

All states are artificial to some extent, but the salient point to be made here is that whereas state formation in Europe took place over hundreds of years and was forged through wars and dynastic marriage, in the Middle East most of the current states are the result of external imposition following the collapse of the Ottoman Empire (Bromley 1993). The artificial state of Iraq thus created, inevitably pitted the Kurds in their north against the government in Baghdad (Stansfield 2007). It set up a recurring pattern, or what could perhaps be better classified as a recurring nightmare for the Kurds. When the government in Baghdad is weak, concessions are offered to the Kurds; when the government in Baghdad is strong, it withdraws

those concessions and seeks to resolve the underlying tension by force. A similar dynamic has also occurred within Turkey, Iran and Syria. Indeed, Gunter (2017) categorizes the experience of the Kurds in the Ottoman successor states of Iraq and Syria as a form of 'triple colonialism': under the Turks, British or French and then the Arabs, driven in the 20th century by the thirst for oil which was located in the Kurdish populated regions of Iraq and Syria.

Tribes, Kurdish nationalism and resistance to incorporation

The British encountered major resistance to their Iraq project from the Kurds. The Kurdish tribes had long fought each other or indeed any central authority. Mahmud Barzanji rejected incorporation into the new Iraqi state and proclaimed the Kingdom of Kurdistan to contrast with Faisal I, King of Iraq. The 1930 Anglo-Iraqi Treaty provided for Britain to maintain air bases and transit the country for maintenance of British strategic interest. During the Second World War when Mustafa Barzani gained control of large parts of Erbil, British Royal Air Force (RAF) bombers were deployed from RAF Habbaniyah in an attempt to crush this resistance, causing the rebels to flee over the border into Iran.

An insight into this development and the British attitude towards it is given by a memorandum, 'Unrest in Kurdistan', from the British Consul, Kermanshah (J. R. Vaughan-Russell), to HM Minister, British Legation, Tehran (Sir Reader W Bullard), dated 19 September 1941, relaying news that supporters of Shaikh Mahmud had crossed the border. In this, Vaughan-Russell reported that

large numbers (about 1, 000) of Iraqi Kurds had crossed the frontier and that with about 1,000 Iranian Kurds who had rallied to their support, they were attacking several military posts. The telegram mentioned that the Iraqi attackers had called upon the Commander of the Garrison to surrender 'in the name of the King of the Kurds'.

(London, British Library, 'Persia – General Situation (Sept. & Oct. 1941)' IOR/L/PS/12/553 ff 5–6)

The Barzani clan and Kurdish rebellion

As an infant Mustafa Barzani (1903–1979) was imprisoned with his mother by Ottoman Turkish forces. He went on to spend most of his life fighting the various governments partitioning Kurdistan (Barzani 2003). Following the Anglo-Soviet invasion and occupation of Iran in 1941 to remove the pro-German Shah, the Soviet Union delayed withdrawal from northern Iran at the war's end. The Iran Crisis of 1946 gave the opportunity for the Kurdistan Democratic Party of Iran to launch the Mahabad Republic in which Mustafa Barzani was a prominent general. His son Masoud Barzani and, until his resignation on 1 November 2017, the present-day President of the Kurdistan Regional Government (KRG) was thus born under the Kurdish flag of the Mahabad Republic. The Shah moved to crush the nascent Kurdish republic, and lacking Soviet support it was quickly overwhelmed. Mustafa Barzani and his loyal followers retreated from fighting over snow-covered mountains to the Soviet Union, where they found sanctuary.

The brutal overthrow of the Iraqi monarchy in the revolution of 1958 marked the end of the British-organized Baghdad Pact designed to contain the Soviet Union and ushered in a new phase of nation- and identity building in Iraq (see Kirmanj 2013). Mustafa Barzani returned to Iraq, but there was to be no real sustained improvement of Kurdish rights or recognition.

The Kurds in Baathist Iraq

It is unfortunate to have to note that under the Ba'ath party regime led by Saddam Hussein, nearly every macro-method of 'ethnic conflict regulation' was used against the Kurds: genocide, forced mass population transfers and attempts at integration and assimilation (see McGarry and O'Leary 1993). Mustafa Barzani led the Kurds in resistance to this from 1961 to 1970.

The development of Iraq as a regional power under the Baath party controlled by Saddam Hussein (with his inner circle from Tikrit) and using the oil revenues from the nationalization of the Iraq Petroleum Company in 1972 proceeded apace in the 1970s (Tripp 2007). The 1970 Iraqi-Kurdish Autonomy Agreement on paper offered meaningful autonomy, but it was not possible to find a solution on how to share oil revenues and the status of Kirkuk, and so it was never implemented. Instead, an Arabization programme of Kurdish areas was implemented, and the Kurds and their *peshmerga* under Mustafa Barzani took up armed rebellion again against the Baghdad government.

The Kurdish card in Middle Eastern politics

A further aspect of the dynamic set in motion by postcolonial sequestration is that the state system created by external powers after the First World War provides ample opportunity for the regional states to play the Kurds in neighbouring states as a card against the state in which they reside (on this see Owtram 2017a; Bengio 2017). The Kurds also try and play one regional state off against each other. Furthermore, the Kurds are used as a pawn in the game of the external powers as they attempt to manipulate the Middle East to their advantage (Davidson 2016).

A prime example of this occurred in the mid-1970s when the Kurds were given safe haven by the Shah (in connivance with the United States) to launch attacks against the Iraqi army but were then literally 'sold down the river' as part of a deal. In order to cut off this Iranian support for Barzani and his forces, Saddam made concessions to the Shah on the border line between Iraq and Iran on the Shatt al Arab waterway which was codified in the 1975 Algiers agreements (see Gibson 2015). Having played his Kurdish card Saddam then proceeded to easily crush his Kurdish rebellion in the north of Iraq.

During this time, based on differences in ideology and strategy, Jalal Talabani split off from Mustafa Barzani's Kurdistan Democratic Party (KDP) and eventually formed along with others the Patriotic Union of Kurdistan (PUK) in 1975. Thus, an intense and sometimes blood rivalry was inaugurated within the Kurds of Iraq, with rival *peshmerga* forces bidding for exclusive control of territory in order to establish and maintain networks of patronage (see Natali 2005). After the collapse of the 1974–1975 rebellion Mustafa Barzani fled to the United States, his dreams of leading the Kurds to national independence shattered. Michael Gunter assesses that 'even to his dying day Barzani never fully exceeded the bounds of tribal chieftain. In part, this explains his bitter disputes with Ibrahim Ahmad and Ahmad's son-in-law, Jalal Talabani' (2016: 68).

Another significant Kurdish rebellion took place when the Shah's *rentier* state was overthrown in the 1979 Iranian revolution (see Halliday 1979, 1999). As the broad-based revolution narrowed into the establishment of the Islamic Republic of Iran under Ayatollah Khomeini, a Kurdish rebellion in Iran led by the Kurdish Democratic Party of Iran ensued, an uprising which was brutally repressed by the military forces of the Islamic Republic (Gunter 2017).

During this time of turmoil, Saddam could not resist the opportunity to attack his Iranian neighbour to try to press home his advantage and obtain boundaries more favourable for Iraq (see Hinnebusch 2003). In December 1979 the Soviets had intervened in Afghanistan prompting the enunciation of the Carter doctrine: the oil resources of the Gulf constituted a vital US national interest and any threat to them would be met by any means, including military force if necessary. After Iraq's invasion of Iran, a bloody war of First World War proportions ensued, in which Saddam was seen as an Arab bulwark against the export of Iranian and Shi'a revolution. The Iraqi Kurds again found support in Iran under Khomeini to attack the Iraqi military forces of the Baathist regime.

This paved the way for Saddam's genocidal Anfal campaign, in which thousands of Kurdish villages were destroyed and 'Chemical Ali' inflicted a gruesome death on men, women and children of Halabja. The United States turned a blind eye to this use of chemical weapons of mass destruction as at this time Saddam's regime fitted American strategic interests. Accordingly, Saddam Hussein was supported by the Arab Gulf states, notably Kuwait and Saudi Arabia, and intermittently by the US, UK and France in his battle with Iran (Tripp 2002). The Iran-Iraq War left Saddam's regime bankrupt and expecting to be forgiven debts by the ruling Kuwaiti al-Sabah family who had bankrolled his war; he found instead, to his bitter disappointment, that repayment was expected. Misreading American intentions, Republican Guard forces rolled into Kuwait City in a clear threat to dominate the oil resources of Kuwait and potentially Saudi Arabia (see Halliday 1996: 79; Tripp 2002). The United States and the UK, along with other nations and the Arab Gulf states, implemented the Rapid Deployment Force capabilities they had been developing since the early 1980s, to evict Saddam from Kuwait under unambiguous United Nations authorization.

There was, however, no authorization for regime change and an awareness in George H.W. Bush's administration (for example, expressed by Dick Cheney) that removing Saddam Hussein from power could open up a can of worms of inter-communal conflicts. Instead, George H.W. Bush encouraged the brutally suppressed Shia in the south and the Kurds in the north to rise up. When they did so, Saddam Hussein initiated new repressive measures including the draining of the southern marshes and dispatching of helicopter gunships to cut down the opposition; once again the Kurds fled to the highest points of the peaks of the Zagros in affirmation of their enduring refrain, 'no friends but the mountains'.

No fly zones, *de facto* autonomy and the Iraqi-Kurdish civil war

Images in Western media of Kurdish families huddled in the winter snows of the high Zagros range seeking shelter from the helicopter gunships of Saddam Hussein led to an international uproar (the CNN effect, see Robinson 2013). These reports compelled the leaders of the Western liberal democracies to put before the United Nations proposals for the creation of 'no fly zones' in the northern and southern parts of Iraq. In retaliation, Baghdad withdrew all governmental services from the Kurdistan Region and erected a blockade.

This erosion of the sovereignty of the Iraqi state emboldened the Kurds to take their opportunity, and out of necessity led to the creation of two Kurdistan Regional Governments formed by the KDP in Erbil and the PUK in Sulaymaniyah. This mirrored the dominance of the two families and associated political parties: the Barzanis and KDP in Erbil and Dohuk, the Talibani and PUK in Sulaymaniyah and Kirkuk. The intense rivalry between these

two families, associated political parties and accompanying patronage networks led to the Iraqi-Kurdish Civil War in the mid-1990s; the intensity of this conflict partly concerned the control of millions of US dollars of aid derived from Iraqi oil sales under the UN 'oil-for-food' plan (see Natali 2010). In a shocking version of the 'Kurdish card' the KDP invited the Saddam regime forces to enter Erbil to evict the militias of the PUK. Iraqi army tanks rolled in, the PUK *peshmerga* fled, and in a couple of hours the Iraqi opposition which had been taking refuge there was eliminated.

Convened under US auspices, the signing of the 1998 Washington Agreement committed Kurdish political parties to resolve their differences, act in a unified manner against the threat of Saddam and work together for his overthrow (see Charountaki 2014). Following the election of George W. Bush in 2000, a neo-conservative agenda was firmly on the table (articulated most clearly in the Project for a New American Century), which sought to go beyond Clinton's 'dual containment' of Iraq and Iran, to bring about regime change.

US informal empire and the Kurds: the invasion, occupation and withdrawal from Iraq

The September 11 attacks led to a swift response against the Taliban in Afghanistan and their 'guest' Osama bin Laden, but also the perfect opportunity to implement regime change in Iraq, a long desired neo-con objective (see Halliday 2010; Hinnebusch 2007, Shareef 2014). Just as the British had 80 years earlier, the Americans then faced the task of building a political system and administration that would cope with the centrifugal forces and fissiparous tendencies of Iraq's deeply divided society (see Choudhry 2008) in order to facilitate the exploration of the vast oil resources of Iraq (see Wearden 2011).

Further measures to give Iraqis a say in their governance saw the creation of the Iraq Governing Council, the Iraq Interim Government and the Iraq Transitional Government (see Zedalis 2012) culminating in the referendum in October 2005 that approved the draft constitution which thus replaced the Transitional Administrative Law. Iraq was shattered as a country and as a state, and the efforts to reconstruct it in a new federal form certainly resemble a fragile state; many would argue that as it lurches from one crisis to another, it can best be described as a failed state.

For the Kurds, the US-led invasion was undoubtedly a liberation as it sent their oppressor Saddam Hussein to the gallows and provided an opportunity to further develop their autonomy as a constitutionally enshrined federal region (see Stansfield 2007) with opportunities to conduct its own paradiplomacy (on KRG foreign relations, see Mohammed and Owtram 2014; Danilovich 2014). A key question for the place of Kurdistan in federal Iraq is that posed by the 'paradox of federalism', that is, the various measures of federal systems designed to alleviate tensions in deeply divided societies through allowing autonomy, at the same time can also increase the probability of secession (see Danilovich and Owtram 2014; Danilovich 2014; Owtram 2017b).

The Iraqi Constitution contained a number of articles which addressed the highly contentious issue of the management of oil, many of which were contradictory and deliberately vague or ambiguous (for further detail, see Mills 2013, 2016; Zedalis 2012; Owtram 2014; Shakir 2017; Voller 2013: 70) in order to allow the fractious negotiating parties to sign it. This included the Articles 140 and 143 on Kirkuk, which allowed for a referendum on its place in the new federal Iraq as well as including a mechanism to handle the process of Arabization that had taken place there. However, not all issues concerned

Arab-Kurd ethnic conflict; there were many intra-Kurdish tensions particularly over the allocation of finance.

Oil revenues, corruption and the Kurdish spring

A feature of the Middle East states prior to the revolutions, conflicts and wars of the Arab Spring in 2011 was the high proportion of unemployed young men who were struggling to make a living and establish a family (see Sadiki 2014; Profanter and Owtram 2013: 1). The strictures of the neo-liberal prescriptions for the ills of the region defined the medicine: the removal of government services. However, this only made them further vulnerable to poverty and motivated to find some means of social welfare. Time and again, we see across the Middle East that the populace looks to a group that can provide them with basic services: electricity, water and foodstuffs. The inability to procure these basics of life despite great industry potentially can lead to various extreme forms of behaviour, including acts of resistance and subversion as occurred in the Kurdistan Region of Iraq in 2011 against the apparent dynastic nature of the ruling families (Sadiki 2009; Owtram 2012).

Until November 2017 the President of the KRI, notwithstanding some controversy, was Masoud Barzani (see Stansfield 2015). His son, Masrur, is head of the Kurdistan security service. Masud Barzani's nephew, Nechervan Barzani, is the deputy head of the KDP and has been Prime Minister of the Kurdistan Regional Government (KRG) in 2006 and again in 2012. Jalal Talabani was for many years head of the PUK and President of federal Iraq. His son, Qubad Talabani, is now the Deputy Prime Minister of the KRG. Qubad's brother, Pavel, is head of the security service in the Sulaimaniyah region.

To appreciate how dynastic republicanism operates in Iraqi Kurdistan, one has to understand what has been termed the 'hidden force' of Middle Eastern society (Cunningham and Yasin 1993): the Arabic term *wasta*. To have *wasta* means to be well connected and to be able to use those connections to achieve access to useful resources. Iraq is one of the most corrupt countries in the world and while there may be official regulations and procedures, the unofficial law of *wasta* cuts across all this and in nearly all cases trumps qualifications and ability. The KDP and PUK, whilst they in origin could be distinguished by some difference in ideological perspective, can now be regarded as competing networks of patronage with the Barzani and Talabani families at their apex. A key refrain emanating from the KDP and PUK is that the Kurds should remain united in order to best promote Kurdistan's interests in federal Iraq, a unity that fractured as the shockwaves of the Arab Spring rippled into the Kurdistan region and again over the independence referendum (see Natali 2015b, 2016a). Yet it was concern over the effects of corruption and lack of accountability that led to the success at the ballot box for Gorran (change) movement in 2009.

In February 2011 demonstrations broke out in Sulaimaniyah in the Kurdish case of the Middle Eastern spring, reflecting demonstrations also taking place in Baghdad, Basra and other parts of Iraq. In some sense Iraq had a form of democracy that was delivering free and fair elections at the ballot box. What these demonstrators were demanding was that their elected representatives delivered improvements in their quality of life in the form of basic services of electricity and water supply, rather than lining their pockets with the trappings of office. Thus, in the context of rapid political change in the Middle East, if reforms are not implemented to address these existential concerns of daily life in the Kurdistan Region, it is not inconceivable a new period of Kurdish autonomy in Iraq could develop without the two hitherto dominant families and related political parties at the helm (Owtram 2017b).

The competition for Kurdish leadership and legitimacy

This need to gain pan-Kurdish leadership and legitimacy is a recurring feature of patterns of Kurdish politics resulting from partition. In Turkey there appeared to be a ‘Kurdish Opening’ under Erdogan when it was hoped that a policy of Kurdish autonomy would be instigated as part of a peace process with the *Partiya Karkerên Kurdistanê* (PKK) which had fought the Turkish state since the 1980s (see Cerny 2017).

However, there was never really a peace process as commonly understood in terms of negotiations; it was little more than a ceasefire. Following the success of the pro-Kurdish Halkların Demokratik Partisi (HDP) and attempted coup on 15 July 2016, President Erdogan instituted a policy of purging of any possible opponents to his policy of concentrating power and authority in his hands; Turkey is now well down the path to Erdogan’s desired presidential dictatorship. The Kurdish Opening which had tantalizingly opened up seemed to be slammed firmly shut as the bombardment of Kurdish towns and cities intensified.

Instead the outcome was the continuation of the policy of denial and assimilation. A poignant example of this is the deliberate burning of the forests of Dersim in 2017, which fits into a pattern of the counterinsurgency strategy used by the Turkish Army from the early 1990s onward (Jongerden et al. 2007). The ceasefire between the PKK and the Turkish state was over, and competition between Kurdish groups continued sometimes even in the fight against an intransigent foe to Kurdish secular forces: the branch of radical Islam that morphed into the IS.

The Kurds and the fight against the IS

One beneficiary of the challenge to the old order posed by the Arab Spring (see Sadiki 2014) was the Islamic State of Iraq and Syria (BBC 2015; Natali 2015c), which subsequently declared itself to be simply IS as it received declarations of allegiance from Libya to Afghanistan (Owtram 2017a). Two fatal mistakes made by the Bush presidency and Paul Bremer shortly after the US-led 2003 invasion laid the basis for the eventual rise of IS. First, the ruling that no member of the Baath party could be involved in the government even at junior levels led to chaos and anarchy: the Americans had removed the one group which could have provided some kind of administrative stability and continuity. Second, the entire Sunni-dominated army was disbanded, throwing one million men onto the streets with their guns but no way of supporting themselves. These two decisions, combined with the Sunni disenchantment with the post-2003 order, spawned the Sunni insurgency which subsequently morphed into IS.

The United States placed the early insurgents in Camp Bucca, including one Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi. At the time he seemed inconsequential, and they allowed him to lead seminars with his fellow prisoners, in which he disseminated his radical interpretation of Islam. A decade later Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi re-emerged, this time as the Caliph of the Islamic State of Iraq and Syria. The creation of this organization used a deep-rooted Baathist networks, techniques of surveillance and the use of extreme brutality (see Natali 2015a; 2015d). As they stormed back into Iraq from Syria in August 2014 to occupy Mosul, Iraq’s second city, IS celebrated their removal of the Sykes-Picot borders by dismantling the frontier checkpoints and allowing the Sunni tribesmen on each side of the former border to visit their cousins. A US document obtained under the Freedom of Information Act notes that the United States anticipated the emergence of a Salafist principality in eastern Syria and that there could be some benefits in terms of exerting pressure on the Assad regime. There would also be benefits for

the United States and Israel from the central lands becoming a patchwork of mini ethno-religious statelets (Salt 2015). However, the new forms of governance being instigated in the areas of Syria free of the tyranny of the Assad regime or the IS claimed to have transcended ethnicity, religion, sect and tribe in what purports to be a new form of self-government.

Revolution in Rojava

In 2014, Kurds in Syria declared the cantons of Cizire, Kobane and Efrin to be parts of autonomous Syrian Kurdistan. In an apparent repeat of the Iraqi Kurdish experience the withdrawal of the Assad government from the Kurdish areas of Syria at the beginning of the Syrian civil war mirrored that of Saddam Hussein in 1991; it has similarly led to the creation of a new political space which undoubtedly has provided opportunities for Kurdish self-rule in Syria and democratic experiment, in a somewhat similar fashion to that that happened in the Kurdish regions of Iraq in 1991.

That said, it is in Syria that the most radical experiments in new forms of democracy are being rolled out in the Kurdish-controlled area known as Rojava, which ostensibly aim to go beyond ethnicity and nation states. In these areas, under the crucible of conflict with the so-called IS, there has emerged an experiment in democracy which claims to offer a model for a federalized Syria and possibly many states in the Middle East: a form of grass-roots democracy termed 'democratic confederalism' (Ocalan 2011). In its most recent constitutional formulation the Democratic Federation of Northern Syria removed all reference to Rojava, with its Kurdish undertones. This revolution has been characterized by the prominent participation of women both on the battlefield and within the newly formed political system, a form of grass-roots democracy based on local assemblies.

The PKK and its affiliates in Syria the *Partiya Yekîtiya Demokratî* (PYD) have ostensibly embraced a radical new politics embracing gender equality and environmentalism which they believe could be a model for the Middle East, another path from the current forms of governance: autocratic monarchy, authoritarian republics and theocratic regimes of varying degrees. This they contrast with the KDP under the leadership of the Barzani family which they characterize as based on family ties and patronage networks, *wasta*, crony capitalism, something very much akin to the 'dynastic republicanism' which was overthrown in Tunisia, Libya and Egypt. One charge leveled against Barzani measures to promote independence was that these mooted exercises in self-determination were driven by a desire to distract voters from the growing problems in the Kurdistan Region of Iraq (Natali 2017). Whatever the case, in the first part of 2017 the KDP and President Barzani seemed on the face of it to be an ascendant force and on the verge of redrawing the Middle Eastern boundaries created after the First World War.

Remaking of the Sykes-Picot borders and the KRI referendum on independence

At this juncture it is useful to note Ari Mamshae's correlation of the incidence of war with new forms of Kurdish autonomy. He notes that in the modern era war has consistently occasioned the creation of some form of Kurdish entity: after the First World War the Kurdistan Kingdom of Sheikh Mahmoud around Sulaimaniyah; after the Second World War, the Kurdish Republic around Mahabad; the 1991 Gulf War led to the *de facto* autonomous Kurdistan region in Iraq under the KRG(s); the 2003 Iraq War led to the constitutionally recognized Kurdistan Region in federal Iraq; the 2011 Syrian civil war has led to the development

of the Democratic Confederation of North Syria. Finally, writing shortly prior to the 2017 independence referendum Mamshae contended that the war against the IS in Iraq and Syria could finally lead to an independent Kurdish state (Mamshae 2017).

In a symbolic move the berm which defined the Syrian–Iraqi border which the IS had bulldozed through to denote the establishment of the Caliphate was refilled by Iraqi government troops (Bulos 2017). The question was would this be the closing of the opportunity for the Kurds of Iraq to redraw the Sykes–Picot borders (see Stansfield 2013)? With the end of the war against the IS in sight (see Natali 2016b), the announcement by Masoud Barzani of a referendum on 25 September 2017 made clear that there was no intention to redraw all the border lines, merely to define a border within the state of Iraq.

However, unsurprisingly it did not win much in the way of overt international support or support from the government of Iraq in Baghdad. The Iraqi Prime Minister, Haider al-Abadi, argued that it was not the time for a referendum on independence, and the Iranian government expressed similar sentiments. No support was forthcoming from Turkey, and the US Secretary of State, Rex Tillerson, called President Barzani to ask him to postpone the referendum, which he declined to do. Furthermore, the United Nations and the European Union made it clear that they were not supporting the referendum. Denise Natali outlined the obstacles to Kurdish statehood and contended that there was little prospect that the referendum would lead to a declaration of independence. Instead, she argued,

The independence referendum, if conducted, has several functions – to distract local and external populations from the Kurdistan Region’s deep-seated problems, to enhance the credibility of Barzani and authenticity as a Kurdish nationalist leader, to unify Iraqi Kurdish political parties, and to attempt to leverage Baghdad and other groups after IS. There is no chance that these results will lead to Kurdish statehood. No regional actor will acknowledge it, the Kurdistan Region is not self-sustaining, and the internal boundaries of what is considered ‘Kurdistan’ are highly contentious among other Iraqis.

(Natali 2017)

Barzani seemed to address these kinds of points in an interview with Foreign Policy where he maintained that despite the obstacles he was determined to hold the referendum (MacDiarmid 2017) and he also clarified that from his perspective the referendum was binding: he was born under the Kurdish flag of the Mahabad Republic and reiterated his pledge that he would die under the Kurdish flag. Furthermore, he maintained that if need be the Kurds would rather die of hunger and isolation rather than continue under duress in ‘compulsory co-existence’.

There are two main obstacles to Kurdish independence, both of which relate to the long-hand of the Sykes–Picot borders: first, its boundaries with Iraq and issues of international recognition, and second, issues of internal sovereignty within the Kurdistan Region of Iraq: can the KRG become more than the two areas administered by the KDP and the PUK and associated family and patronage networks (see Greaves 2017) in which ordinary people struggle to meet their daily needs?

Given the complete absence of support for the referendum from international states (except Israel), neighbouring states or the ‘parent’ state (the federal government in Baghdad), the most likely outcome of the referendum was that a yes vote would be used by the KRG in an attempt to leverage further autonomy and greater control of oil revenues. This was certainly the case: Fuad Hussein, the KRG President’s Chief of Staff, declared that this was

'the new reality' which had to be taken into account. However, forces inimical to Kurdish independence had a different version of reality in mind and their own leverage which they subsequently brought to bear.

Aftermath

The promised reaction to the referendum came a few days after, with the announcement by Baghdad of an international flight ban to the Kurdistan Region's airports starting on 29 September. There followed further measures including coordinated Iraqi/Turkish military exercises, a parliamentary authorization of the use of force and ultimatums to hand over control of border posts and Kirkuk. On 16 October, the Iraqi Armed Forces, federal police and the Hashd al Shaabi Shiite militias took control of Kirkuk. The KDP and PUK ordered their *peshmerga* forces to retreat, engaging in a war on social media instead. Bitter acrimony between the various Kurdish factions ensued, with labels of 'traitor' being exchanged on twitter. In a short time all the 'disputed territories' and the oil fields located there were under the control of the Iraqi central government; the swathe of territory controlled by the Kurds since 2014 had been lost. The Kurdish political parties had been shown to be hopelessly divided on strategy even if the Kurdish citizenry were almost unanimous in their support for the idea of an independent Kurdistan.

The outcome is that the negotiating position of the KRG as a nominally unified actor is much weaker than before the referendum. The oil fields which provided most of their independent income since 2014 are under central government control again. Despite his statement that the vote had not been in vain, it seems fair to say that Masoud Barzani's risky referendum gamble spectacularly failed in its stated aim. The limitations of a polity organized around family-dominated politics and militias were cruelly exposed. The referendum and the circumstances in which it was held, both hardened the divisions between the KRI's political parties and within one of these parties. Divided, the Kurds lacked the necessary unity to counter the inevitable moves of those opposed to their independence. For most in the Kurdistan Region it must be the bitterest pill to swallow that their aspirations for an independent state – which in September 2017 seemed well within grasp – should only a few weeks later seem out of reach for the foreseeable future (Park et al. 2017).

Conclusion

This chapter has analyzed the pattern of Kurdish resistance to the states they have found themselves in in the modern Middle East since the First World War in the framework of the concept of 'the syndrome of post-colonial sequestration'. It has synthesized this with relevant literature on the role of oil in driving conflict in the region and the correlation of war with Kurdish bids for increased autonomy. It has advanced Halliday's analysis concerning recommendations for resolving such issues in the Kurdish case by increasing opportunities for democratic participation and innovative constitutional design to mitigate the political consequences of deeply divided societies.

Until now the Kurdish experience of the state in the modern Middle East has been largely one of authoritarianism, genocide and repression. It is hardly surprising then that the Kurds, who have been the victims of repression and attempted cultural assimilation in the states of Turkey, Iraq, Syria and Iran, should be at the forefront of exploring new forms of democratic experiment, including ones which seek to transcend or circumvent the unitary, centralized model which has hitherto been dominant in the modern Middle East (see Romano and

Gurnes 2014). The Kurds have without doubt suffered the pernicious effects of the syndrome of ‘post-colonial sequestration’. Perhaps the silver lining is that, if the concept has analytical weight, then in the current period of momentous regional and international change, the Kurds have the best opportunity for a long time to seek out some remedy, either in new forms of autonomy or perhaps eventually as an independent sovereign state, and thereby attest to the world and other sequestered stateless nations that the ‘syndrome of post-colonial sequestration’ is not after all incurable. However, bearing in mind recent events in Iraq and Turkey – and their impact on prospects for a meaningful resolution of Kurdish aspirations to autonomy and statehood – one can perhaps unfortunately concur with Halliday that ‘the time for a realistic optimism, for [Kurdistan] ..., is not yet at hand’.

Notes

- 1 ‘Kurdistan and the Kurds’, British Library: India Office Records and Private Papers, IOR/L/MIL/17/15/22, in Qatar Digital Library www.qdl.qa/archive/81055/vdc_100000000239.0x00013c [accessed 16 June 2017].
- 2 “Kurdistan and the Kurdish Tribes,” British Library: India Office Records and Private Papers, IOR/L/MIL/17/15/22, f 61, in Qatar Digital Library www.qdl.qa/archive/81055/vdc_100036703908.0x000001 [accessed 18 June 2017].

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THE DISPUTED TERRITORIES OF NORTHERN IRAQ

ISIS and beyond

Liam Anderson

Introduction

Iraq's disputed territories—a broad swathe of resource-rich land stretching across northern Iraq from Sinjar on the Syrian border, down to Mandali on the Iranian border—is where Iraq's Arab, Kurdish, and Turkmen populations coincide. At the heart of the territories, both geographically and symbolically, lies the contested, oil-rich governorate (and city) of Kirkuk. Though claimed as the “heart of Kurdistan” by Kurdish President Masoud Barzani, it is clear that Kirkuk's sizable Arab and Turkmen populations reject these claims and are opposed to being (as they see it) annexed to the Kurdistan Region. The political process for resolving the future status of Kirkuk and other disputed territories, as outlined in Articles 58 of the interim constitution and 140 of the permanent constitution, ground to a halt in late 2007. In the absence of a recognized process in place to resolve the status of these territories, Kurdish military forces remained deployed along one side of the so-called “trigger line” to protect Kurdish populations situated outside the recognized Kurdistan Region, while Iraqi armed forces (IAF) confronted them from the other side in a tense standoff. The rise of Islamic State of Iraq and Syria (ISIS) and the consequent disintegration of the IAF changed the dynamics of the disputed territories in subtle, but important ways. Most notably, the campaign to oust ISIS has seen Kurdish forces advance to the point where they now control almost all the territory the Kurds consider disputed. This new reality on the ground gives the Kurds the upper hand in negotiations with the Iraqi government over the final status of the disputed territories and may, in fact, make a final resolution easier to come by.

The historical context: why the dispute?

The presence of significant reserves of hydrocarbons coupled with a volatile mix of ethnicities and minority groups has made the disputed territories of northern Iraq a locus of serious tension and violence since the 1960s. The various techniques employed by the Iraqi government to establish and maintain Arab control over this region, collectively referred to as “Arabization,” have been exhaustively described and detailed elsewhere.¹ The basic principles of the Arabization process, which kicked into high gear in the late 1960s, when the Ba'ath seized power for the second time, involved manipulating territory, people, and

identities to increase the concentration of Arabs at the expense of other groups at strategic locations throughout the region. The success of these measures in asserting Arab control over key strategic resources can be seen from the census data on Kirkuk. In 1957, Arabs comprised just 28 percent of the governorate's population, with Kurds on the cusp of majority status; by 1977, the percentage of Arabs had increased to 45 (with Kurds at 38 percent), and by 1997, Kirkuk was 72 percent Arab and 21 percent Kurdish (Anderson and Stanfield, 2009: 43).

Throughout most of the disputed territories, populations of Kurds, Turkmens, and other minorities, such as Yazidis,² were subjected to similar systematic assaults; the main difference between Kirkuk and elsewhere was one of degree – in general, the more strategic a territory, the more intensely the campaign of Arabization was pursued. The goals of Arabization varied depending on location. In Kirkuk governorate, the most obvious goal was to safeguard oil reserves and associated infrastructure in Arab hands; in Zummar subdistrict (Tal Afar district), meanwhile, Kurds were deported to collective towns and settlements in order to make way for the construction of the Mosul Dam. The clearest rationale for the forcible relocation of non-Arabs, and their replacement with Arabs, often Shi'a Arabs from southern Iraq, was to create a buffer zone of Arab populations to provide a security cordon to the immediate south of the Green Line and along the Iranian border.

This systematic program of demographic manipulation imparted deeper symbolic importance to the struggle for ownership of the disputed territories and especially for Kirkuk. For the Kurds, Kirkuk is a powerful symbol of past oppression, and Kurds cannot comfortably participate in the state of Iraq until the effects of Saddam Hussein's brutal Arabization campaign have been reversed and Kirkuk restored to its rightful place (as the Kurds see it) at the heart of Kurdistan.³ For Turkmens, Kirkuk symbolizes the past glories of Ottoman rule, when they, rather than Kurds or Arabs, dominated the social, political, and economic life of the city. More dubiously, Kirkuk sits at the heart of a recently imagined community stretching from Sinjar in the west to Khanaqin in the east. The "Turkmeneli" (Turkmen homeland) dreamt up in the 1990s and projected onto maps in 2002, optimistically includes most of northern Iraq's major population centers – Mosul, Erbil, and Kirkuk – as well as almost all the region's oil fields. The loss of Kirkuk to the Kurds would destroy what little coherence this vision possesses and, as the Turkmens see it, threaten the viability of the Turkmens as a distinctive "nation" in Iraq. For most Arabs, Kirkuk does not carry the same symbolic weight. Although the Arabization campaign successfully engineered an Arab majority in both city and governorate, most Arabs are relatively recent arrivals, and few would claim that Kirkuk has a distinctively Arab identity. Rather, most Arab political leaders speak of Kirkuk as an Iraqi city, a status that appears to be incompatible with its location inside the Kurdistan Region. From this perspective, to yield control over Kirkuk to Kurds is to threaten the territorial integrity of Iraq.

What is disputed?

There is no accepted definition of the term "disputed territories" and the Kurds' own list of territories claimed has changed over time. If we take the 2009 draft constitution of Kurdistan as the definitive statement of the Kurds' perspective on which territories are disputed, then the status of at least two territories, Badra in Wasit governorate and Tal Afar district in Ninewa, are, apparently, no longer in dispute.⁴ Alongside the existing Kurdish governorates—Dohuk, Erbil, and Sulaimaniya—the Kurds claim one disputed governorate in its entirety (Kirkuk), five districts (Akre, Sinjar, Tilkaef, Sheikhan, and Hamdaniya) and three subdistricts (Zummar, Bashiqa, and Kelek) in Ninewa, and two districts (Khanaqin

and Mandali) in Diyala. Some of these territories, such as Akre, are heavily Kurdish and located behind the Green Line, but are still technically part of a governorate that is not one of the three Kurdish-dominated governorates;⁵ other territories are located beyond the Green Line but recognized as being part of one of the three Kurdish-dominated governorates. Makhmour, a district that is still technically attached to Erbil governorate but which lies almost entirely beyond the Green Line, is the most prominent example here. Beyond this are districts and subdistricts that lie either in large part or entirely beyond the Green Line and are part of a non-Kurdish governorate (the districts of Tilkaef, Sheikhan, and Hamdaniya in Ninewa, and Khanaqin and Mandali in Diyala, and the subdistricts of Zummar [Tal Afar district], Bashiqa [Mosul district], and Kelek, all of which are located in Ninewa governorate). A separate category of territory consists of those districts detached from Kirkuk and added to other governorates. Of these four territories, two (Chamchamal and Kalar) were attached to Sulaimaniya, one (Tuz) was appended to Salahadin, and the fourth (Kifri) was joined to Diyala. Although part of the same basic category, these territories are diverse with respect to their ethnic composition and geographical relationship to the Green Line. Tuz is entirely beyond the Green Line, while Chamchamal and Kalar are mostly behind. Kifri is bisected by the Line, but the district's capital, Kifri, lies behind and is administered by the Kurdistan Regional Government (KRG).

As the one piece of disputed territory that is noncontiguous with the Kurdistan Region, Sinjar belongs in a category of its own. Now that the KRG has dropped its claim to Tal Afar district, the incorporation of Sinjar into the Kurdistan Region would probably entail governing a district that is entirely detached from the rest of Kurdish-controlled territory.⁶ Kirkuk, an entire governorate beyond the Green Line, is the final category of territory in dispute. Kirkuk is by far the most contentious of the territories in dispute because of its ethnically mixed population and its still substantial reserves of hydrocarbons. Consequently, it is also the best-known and most studied of the disputed territories.⁷ Kirkuk, both city and governorate, also suffered disproportionately from the Arabization process. As discussed earlier, Kirkuk's boundaries, internal and external, have been relentlessly manipulated for the purpose of maximizing its Arab population at the expense of Kurds and Turkmens. Tens, perhaps hundreds of thousands of Kurds and Turkmens were also forcibly removed from Kirkuk, to be replaced by mainly Shi'a Arabs from southern Iraq. This process was so successful that by 1997, the Iraqi census indicated that Kirkuk governorate was over three-quarters Arab. Subsequent to the overthrow of the regime in 2003, a large, but unknown, number of Kurds have returned to Kirkuk and many thousands of Arabs have left. The result is a population that is finely balanced between Kurds and non-Kurds, though an exact demographic breakdown cannot be known until a census is held.

Resolving the dispute?

The overthrow of Saddam Hussein's regime in April 2003 bought the issue of Kirkuk and the disputed territories to the front-burner. The Turkish Parliament's decision to deny US forces access to Turkey's bases had left plans for a northern front in tatters and forced the United States to rely on Kurdish military forces (*peshmerga*) to spearhead the assault on Iraqi government forces in the north. As a consequence, when the dust settled in the aftermath of Operation Iraqi Freedom (OIF), *peshmerga* occupied the region's two main cities, Mosul and Kirkuk, and were arrayed in force throughout the disputed territories. As the only indigenous members of the "coalition of the willing" and the only reliable security partners for the United States in the northern region, Kurdish leaders were well placed politically to

translate their demands regarding Kirkuk and other disputed territories into concrete action in the immediate aftermath of the war.

Specifically, Kurdish leaders were able to negotiate the terms of Article 58 of Iraq's Interim Constitution: the "Transitional Administrative Law" (TAL), which dealt with the disputed territories. The TAL's Article 58 required the Iraqi government (along with other relevant bodies) to "act expeditiously to...remedy the injustices caused by the previous regime's practices in altering the demographic character of certain regions, including Kirkuk."⁸ This required the "normalization" of the disputed territories, in effect a blueprint for the reversal of Arabization. Those Arabs introduced under Ba'athist rule were to return to their place of origin with compensation, displaced residents (Kurds, Christians, Turkmens, and other minority groups) were to be allowed to return, again, with compensation, a mechanism was set up to handle the myriad property disputes of Kirkuk and the disputed territories, and a formal procedure was established for restoring gerrymandered boundaries to their pre-Ba'athist status.⁹ As part of a compromise deal, and under pressure from US authorities, the Kurds agreed to defer a final resolution on the status of all disputed territories, including Kirkuk, until after the ratification of a permanent constitution.

By the time the permanent constitution was drafted in 2005, the government had failed to make any discernable progress on normalization. Hence, Article 140 of the permanent constitution incorporated all parts of Article 58 but made an additional three key stipulations. First, it assigned explicit responsibility to the "executive authority" to implement all parts of Article 58; second, it specified a three-stage process for resolving the status of Kirkuk and other disputed territories (normalization, census, and referendum); and third, it established a deadline of 31 December 2007 for completion of all three stages. The overwhelming approval of the constitution by popular vote in October 2005, including in Kirkuk province, appeared to signify an important victory for the Kurds on the disputed territories issue.

The failure of the government to fulfill its constitutional obligation to implement all stages of the Article 140 process can, in part, be attributed to the sheer complexity of the process.¹⁰ At the same time, it was clear that the strength of opposition to implementing Article 140 among Turkmens (and Turkey) and most Arab political factions provided few incentives for Iraq's beleaguered post-war governments of Ibrahim al-Jafaari and Nuri al-Maliki to move expeditiously on the Kirkuk issue. Moreover, those seeking to thwart Kurdish ambitions had ample opportunity to disrupt the process. To take just one example, to return Arabs to their governorates of origin required the active cooperation of bureaucrats at multiple levels of government to change ration cards and identification documents. More often than not, those in charge of implementing these procedures were deeply hostile to the entire process and did everything possible to obstruct progress.¹¹

The political price to pay for the failure to move forward on the disputed territories issue has been high; Baghdad has remained mired in almost total gridlock on some of the core issues that divide Iraqi communities for more than a decade. Central to this is the need to amend (and complete) the constitution, which was drafted in haste and without the serious input of Sunni Arab leaders. The result was a finished article that was overwhelmingly endorsed by Shi'a and Kurdish communities in an October 2005 referendum, but comprehensively rejected by Sunni Arabs.

To address the concerns of those excluded (or, rather, those who chose to exclude themselves) from the drafting process, Article 142, a last-minute inclusion, detailed a temporary procedure for amending the constitution that was less onerous than the regular procedure outlined in Article 126.¹² The only caveat was a provision inserted by the Kurds that allowed

two-thirds majorities in three or more governorates to reject the package. This gave the Kurds *de facto* veto power over the amendment package. At issue were some of the most divisive elements of the constitution – notably the powers of the president relative to the prime minister, the balance of power between regions/governorates and the federal government, and, critically, control over Iraq's hydrocarbons sector. Also at stake was the design of two key political institutions—the upper house of parliament (the Federation Council) and the Federal Constitutional Court—that had been identified but left undefined in the constitution.

Despite some initial progress, when the Constitutional Review Committee (CRC) issued its “final” report in July 2008, members appeared to be further apart on key issues than ever. The key obstacle to concluding a deal that would finally leave Iraq with a finished constitution was the Article 140 process. Bluntly put, the Kurds were unwilling to compromise on issues that cut against their own best interests without obtaining a satisfactory resolution to the disputed territories issue.

This leaves Iraq without a consensual document that can serve as a foundation for ethnic and sectarian reconciliation; worse, the country lacks a basic set of “rules of the game” for the conduct of political relations both in Baghdad, and between Baghdad and the regions. This absence of legal and constitutional constraints helped fuel Prime Minister Nuri al-Maliki's drive to accumulate power in his own hands, a process that angered Kurdish leaders and deeply alienated the Sunni community. In turn, this provided fertile ground for the dramatic rise of ISIS in 2014.

Tensions along the trigger line

The collapse of the Article 140 process left the issue of disputed territories in a state of suspended animation. Kurdish military and security forces continued to police large swathes of the territories, and the day-to-day governance and administration of many of these was provided by either one of the two main Kurdish parties (generally, the KDP in areas west of Erbil and the PUK in areas east). At the same time, the legality of the Kurds' *de facto* control over territory beyond the recognized boundaries of the Kurdistan Region did not go unchallenged. Tense confrontations between peshmerga and Iraqi government troops in Khan-aqin (August 2008), and between Kurdish security forces and those of Ninewa Governor, Attheel al-Najafi (January 2010), underlined the potential for violence to erupt along the trigger line. In August 2009, General Ray Odierno, the commander of the remaining US forces in Iraq, proposed the creation of joint US-Kurdish-Iraqi checkpoints and patrols along lines of separation in Nineva, Kirkuk, and Diyala. These began in January 2010 and helped preserve a fragile peace until the departure of all US troops at the end of 2011. The United States was also instrumental in negotiating a compromise between Baghdad and Erbil over the provision of security in the city of Kirkuk.¹³

For as long as US troops remained, therefore, large-scale military Kurd-Arab confrontations could be avoided, but the underlying issues went unresolved. These included not just the constitutional status of disputed territories, but also the status of the oil and gas fields that lay therein. Here again, the existing constitution was unhelpful. The text of Article 112 of the Iraqi constitution states that the power to manage oil and gas is shared between the federal government and “producing governorates and regional governments.” This power is, therefore, outside the exclusive powers of the federal government, which are listed in Article 110. Taken together with Article 115, which gives priority to regional law in the event of conflict with federal law in an area not listed as exclusive to the federal government, and

Article 121(2), which allows regions to amend federal laws that contradict regional laws in nonexclusive areas, the most straightforward and logical reading of the constitution is that regional laws trump federal law with respect to the management of oil and gas. To complicate matters, Article 112 appears to limit the federal government's involvement in oil and gas management to "present" fields, leaving open the question of how to define the terms "present" and "field," and laying the groundwork for serious disputes over the status of oil reserves, such as the Khurmala Dome, which is attached to the main Kirkuk oil field, but is mostly located in Erbil governorate.

According to Knights and Ali (2010: 11), the Ba'ath regime allowed the drilling of 60 wells in the Khurmala Dome, but did not construct the infrastructure necessary to develop the Dome.¹⁴ The two key questions – is this a "present" field? and, whose law governs the development of fields located in disputed territories? – are symptomatic of the legal chaos that will continue to characterize Iraq's oil and gas sector until the constitution is amended to clarify who has the power to manage what, and until there is a court with constitutional standing to arbitrate competing claims.

In November 2011, the volatile interaction of hydrocarbons and disputed territories was brought into sharp relief when the KRG signed a number of contracts with US oil giant ExxonMobil to explore and develop a number of fields, three of which were located beyond the Green Line in disputed areas of Nineva and Kirkuk. Then in May 2014, the KRG, in collaboration with Turkish oil company General Energy, began exporting oil from the TaqTaq and Tawke fields via a newly constructed pipeline that bypassed the existing Iraqi government-controlled pipeline network. The KRG's capacity to develop and export from oil fields within the Kurdistan Region *independently* of Baghdad deprived the Iraqi government of an important source of leverage over the Kurds.

However, the KRG's growing independence with respect to hydrocarbons was, and remains, sharply undercut by its continued dependence on Baghdad for the lion's share of the region's budget. The implications of this vulnerability became evident in early 2014, when Prime Minister al-Maliki froze payment of the KRG's 17 percent share of the national budget in protest at the KRG-Turkey oil deal, a move described by President Barzani "as bad as the gassing of Halabja."¹⁵ The termination of funding from Baghdad, coupled with the increasing financial burden of hosting large numbers of refugees and Internally Displaced Persons (IDPs), and the depressed price of oil combined to plunge the KRG into an economic tailspin that left the Region ill-prepared to cope with the magnitude of the ISIS threat that emerged dramatically in summer 2014 (Frantzman 2016).

The impact of ISIS

The dramatic expansion of ISIS back into Iraq from its Syrian base in June 2014 has substantially shifted the terms of debate over the disputed territories. The precipitous collapse of the Iraqi Armed Forces (IAF) throughout northern Iraq in the face of a lightning advance by an expeditionary force of ISIS troops allowed the group to conquer Mosul in short order, and from there, to seize control over large areas of northern and western Iraq over successive months.

At the height of its power, ISIS controlled a self-proclaimed Caliphate that encompassed a large triangle of territory in Iraq, stretching from Mosul, down to Ramadi, across to al-Qaim on the Syrian border, and posed a direct threat to both Baghdad and Erbil. With respect to the disputed territories issue, the rise and rapid spread of ISIS has had three main repercussions.

First, the disintegration of the IAF left a security vacuum in some disputed territories that the *peshmerga* advanced to fill. As the campaign to oust ISIS from Iraq progressed over the following years, the areas under direct Kurdish control expanded southward, and districts ceded early on by *peshmerga* to ISIS, such as Sinjar, were reclaimed. By 2017, therefore, most of the territory claimed by the Kurds as “disputed” was under Kurdish military control; critically, this included roughly two-thirds of Kirkuk governorate and hence both the governorate’s oil infrastructure and the city of Kirkuk itself.

Second, the imminence of the threat posed by ISIS to two Iraqi capitals, however fleeting, was sufficient to galvanize the international community into action. The reluctance of Western powers to commit ground troops to the fight against ISIS meant that air power and funding and arming capable proxy forces were the only politically viable options available. Of the two indigenous forces that were willing and able to stand and fight, the Iranian-backed Popular Mobilization Force (PMF), an umbrella organization of diverse Iraqi Shi’a militias, was a non-option for obvious reasons. This left the Kurds as the logical beneficiaries of Western aid. Hence, an important side effect of the struggle to defeat ISIS in Iraq has been the strengthening of Kurdish military power at the expense of other indigenous forces, and the consolidation, even legitimization, of Kurdish control over the disputed territories.

The unseating of Nuri al-Maliki as prime minister was the third important development to result for the dramatic rise of ISIS. The April 2014 national election left the al-Maliki-headed State of Law Coalition as comfortably the largest party in parliament, but also revealed the extent to which Iraq remained divided along ethnosectarian lines. Many observers, the United States included, viewed al-Maliki as a dangerously divisive figure, whose overtly sectarian agenda had helped pave the way for ISIS’s successes in Sunni Arab areas. As a result, the United States refused to aid in the fight against ISIS unless and until al-Maliki stepped down. The United States’ position, coupled with pressure on al-Maliki from Iran, and a solid wall of internal opposition from the Kurds and Sunni Arabs (and also many Shi’a political leaders) to al-Maliki’s continued tenure, were sufficient to convince members of the State of Law of the need to replace al-Maliki with the new Prime Minister Haidar al-Abadi.

Al-Abadi’s more inclusive, less confrontational style of politics was a welcome relief from the poisonous atmosphere that had prevailed in Baghdad during al-Maliki’s tenure. With respect to the disputed territories, a negotiated, consensual solution is no closer under al-Abadi than it had been under al-Maliki, but the inflammatory rhetoric on both sides has de-escalated, and the potential for a large-scale Kurd-Arab military confrontation along the line of control has diminished in the short term.

The net effect of these three developments has been to strengthen the Kurds, both militarily and in terms of international reputation, at the expense of the Baghdad government. As one observer puts it, the Kurds have come to be seen as a “trusted standard-bearer of secular Western values battling the obscurantist ideology and spectacular violence of an extreme form of Islamic Fundamentalism” (ICG, 2015: 4). Over the longer term, predicting the trajectory of future developments in Iraq, especially with respect to the status of the disputed territories, is a fool’s errand; nonetheless, a few straightforward observations on the likely nature of post-ISIS Iraq are in order.

After ISIS: the disputed territories going forward

The Kurds appear to have “won” the disputed territories, at least in the short term. Kurdish security forces now control more or less all of the territories claimed by Kurdish leaders as disputed, and they are highly unlikely to give this up without a fight. As one Peshmerga

commander put it, “lands that have been liberated by blood, we have no intention to give them back to the federal government” (Rohan and Szlanko, 2016). In fact, as early as June 2014, as the Iraqi army disintegrated and Kurdish forces moved in to fill the security void, President Barzani had declared the Article 140 process “dead,” stating “the problem is solved. There will be no more conversation about it.”¹⁶

Meanwhile, Iraqi government forces will likely lack the will and the capacity to confront the *peshmerga* militarily in the immediate future;¹⁷ indeed, it is not entirely clear which of the various forces aligned against ISIS are even under the control of the central government nor what will become of these forces in a post-ISIS Iraq. Further, the defeat of ISIS does not eliminate the threat posed by Sunni militants going forward, and government security forces will have enough to deal with just keeping the peace in troubled post-conflict towns and cities such as Tal Afar, Mosul, and Hawija. For the time being, therefore, the prevailing status quo favors the Kurds, perhaps for the first time since 2005.

The Kurds’ advantageous strategic position, however temporary, coupled with the repeated declarations of intent on the part of President Barzani to stage an independence referendum within the region has led many Western observers to conclude that an independent Kurdish state is both inevitable and imminent. A Kurdish declaration of independence would certainly offer a dramatic, albeit unilateral, “solution” to the disputed territories issue, but the prospects of this occurring are remote. To date, only two countries – Israel and Hungary – have expressed any level of support for an independent Iraqi Kurdistan, and all of the region’s major players, including Iran and the United States, oppose it. Hence, it matters little that the Kurds now control territory that contains more than enough oil and gas reserves to make an independent state economically viable or that they have an army capable of defending their self-determined boundary; as a landlocked entity, the Kurdistan Region is entirely dependent on the goodwill (or self-interest) of neighboring powers to access markets, and it is highly unlikely that a unilateral declaration of independence will be met with much in the way of regional goodwill.

Moreover, enthusiasm for Kurdish independence tends to overlook the depth of divisions that exist within the Kurdistan Region on a number of critical issues, including the wisdom of staging an independence referendum.¹⁸ For Kurdish leaders to trade what they have now – a high degree of autonomy *vis-à-vis* Baghdad; *de facto* control over most of the disputed territories (including Kirkuk); the moral support of the international community; and the relative protection of clearly defined, internationally recognized borders – for the uncertainties of unrecognized independence would be risky in the extreme.

This means that a negotiated solution to the status of disputed territories remains the most likely (and sensible) outcome. In some ways, the situation is now less complicated than it was pre-ISIS; with some exceptions, the Kurds’ present “line of control” broadly reflects the distribution of Kurdish populations (or those supportive of Kurdish parties) on the ground. Some disputed districts, Akre, for example, fall entirely behind this line and can really no longer be considered “disputed”; likewise for districts that fall entirely beyond the line (such as Mandali in Diyala). Other districts/subdistricts, such as Khanaqin, Kifri, and Makhmour, are bisected by the line, reflecting prevailing demographic realities on the ground.

To date, there have been several proposed solutions to the problem of the disputed territories. These include proposals to separate the future status of Kirkuk procedurally from the resolution of other disputed territories; the “grand bargain” type approach, of which the ICG’s “oil for soil” deal is probably the best known;¹⁹ and variations on the three-stage Article 140 process. Invariably, proposed solutions conceptualize the problem as one of piecing together the boundary using existing administrative units, with referenda then used

to gauge the will of the people. The reliance on referenda is understandable, but misguided. It is the referenda requirement that ties the process to existing administrative units, thereby precluding a more flexible approach to boundary delimitation. There is no inherent reason why a Kurdish regional boundary should coincide with existing administrative boundaries, and it probably makes more sense to draw the line around demographic realities rather than on the basis of existing administrative units that have little substantive meaning.

In other ways, the situation remains as complex as ever. There are difficult issues to be resolved in districts north of Mosul, such as Hamdaniya, where Kurds are not a numerical majority and coexist with substantial minority populations, and in northwestern Ninewa, where Kurdish/Yazidi populations in Zummar and Sinjar are geographically separated by Arab- or Turkmen-populated subdistricts of Tal Afar district, and the glaring problem of resolving the final status of Kirkuk (city and governorate) will not go away. Moreover, negotiations over delimiting the boundary of the Kurdistan Region cannot be divorced from larger constitutional issues, such as the oil and gas issue, the division of powers between the central government and the regions, and the separation of powers within the central government; a resolution to these broader issues will require a willingness to bargain and compromise among Iraq's political leaders that has been sorely lacking since 2005. Much depends on the outcome of the 2018 national election. If prominent leaders of the Popular Mobilization Forces (PMF), such as the Badr Organization's Hadi al-Ameri, can translate their success on the battlefield into votes at the ballot box, the outcome could well be a government dominated by hardliners who are unwilling to contemplate any compromise with the Kurds over territory.

More optimistically, the post-ISIS shift in the balance of power with respect to the disputed territories, whereby the Kurds now control almost all of what they want, means that the prevailing status quo no longer favors the Iraqi government, and political leaders in Baghdad no longer have an incentive to delay a resolution indefinitely. The longer the Iraqi government prevaricates, the more the Kurds can create facts on the ground that will be difficult to undo at a later date. A deal that reflects this new reality, whereby the Kurds continue to govern over the territory they now control in return for their commitment to remain part of Iraq (as long as the deal is respected) is a sensible starting point for discussion. The only realistic alternative to the status quo or a negotiated solution is a major Arab-Kurd military confrontation at some point in the future, and all sides, hopefully, have a powerful incentive to avoid a conflict that might spell the death of an already gravely wounded Iraq.

Notes

- 1 For detailed accounts of the various mechanisms used to change the demographic profile of the disputed territories, see Human Rights Watch (1995); Talabany (2001); and Kelley (2008).
- 2 Yazidis adhere to a set of distinctive religious beliefs that borrow from a number of religions. Their ethnicity is controversial. Kurds typically claim Yazidis as ethnic Kurds, but while most Yazidis speak Kurdish, some do not accept this assignation.
- 3 Interview with Prime Minister Barham Salih, Kurdistan Regional Government, Sulaimaniya, March 2004.
- 4 Both Badra and Tal Afar were claimed as part of the territory of Kurdistan in earlier iterations of the draft constitution.
- 5 Also included here would be territory that is bisected by the Green Line, such as Kalar district, which was taken from Kirkuk and attached to Diyala.
- 6 Most maps depicting the deployment of peshmerga forces show the Kurds controlling most or all of the Rubiya subdistrict of Tal Afar district, thus providing a land bridge connecting Zummar with Sinjar. However, Rubiya is not a territory claimed by the Kurds, and its population is heavily Arab, so it is unlikely that the Kurds would keep Rubiya in any negotiated settlement.

- 7 Recent in-depth studies focused on Kirkuk include Kinghts and Ali (2010); Wolff (2010); Keane (2010); Hanauer and Miller (2012); and Anderson and Stanfield (2009).
- 8 All quotes from the TAL are taken from the copy (available at: <http://www.au.af.mil/au/awc/awcgate/iraq/tal.htm>).
- 9 Article 58 instructed the Iraqi Transitional Government to “act in accordance with Article 10 of the Iraqi Property Claims Commission statute to ensure that such individuals may be resettled, may receive compensation from the state, may receive new land from the state near their residence in the governorate from which they came, or may receive compensation for the cost of moving to such areas.”
- 10 For details of this, see Anderson and Stanfield (2009), especially Chapter 10.
- 11 For example, in 2007, Minister of the Interior Jawad Bolani, a strong opponent of Article 140, issued an order prohibiting the transfer of personal registration documents from one governorate to another. This was in response to the large-scale displacement of citizens due to escalating sectarian violence, but it applied equally to those individuals covered by Article 140.
- 12 The Article 126 procedure required a two-thirds majority in the COR and the agreement of a majority of the Iraqi people in a referendum in order for amendments to be approved.
- 13 As a result of the deal, brokered in September 2009, clear lines of demarcation were established between *peshmerga* forces, concentrated in the north and east of the governorate, and the Iraqi army, located mainly in the south and southwest. Security within Kirkuk city was to be provided by Kirkuk police. For details of the deal, see ICG (2011).
- 14 Knights and Ali (2010: 11).
- 15 *President Barzani: Baghdad's Budget Freeze “As Bad as Gassing of Halabja,” Rudaw*, 6/4/2014 (available at: www.rudaw.net/english/kurdistan/060420142).
- 16 “Iraq's Kurds rule out giving up Kirkuk,” *Aljazeera*, 28 June 2014 (available at: www.aljazeera.com/news/middleeast/2014/06/iraq-kurds-rule-out-retreating-from-kirkuk-20146271440878594.html).
- 17 Deadly confrontations between *peshmerga* and various PMF elements have already occurred in parts of the disputed territories (see, Human Rights Watch, 2016). However, for a major military confrontation to occur would require a degree of coherence and coordination on the part of the PMF and Iraqi government forces that they do not currently possess.
- 18 The KRG remains paralyzed, partly as a result of the Region's economic crisis, but largely as a consequence of President Barzani's refusal to leave the office of the Presidency when his term expired in 2015. This political impasse has reopened old wounds and laid bare the extent to which real power over the Region's nominally nonpartisan institutions, including the armed forces, remains firmly in the hands of the two main parties. Beyond this, each of the two main parties is aligned with external powers (the KDP with Turkey, and the PUK with Iran) whose interests are often antithetical, raising the real possibility that intra-Kurdish rivalries will once again be fuelled and exploited to further the geopolitical interests of regional powers.
- 19 ICG (2008). Under the terms of the deal, a resolution on the final status of Kirkuk is delayed by ten years, power-sharing is implemented in the meantime, and the Kurds “gain” management over oil and gas reserves in the Kurdistan Region and the implementation of Article 140 everywhere other than Kirkuk. On principle, there is nothing wrong with the idea of buying the Kurds off with something of equal value; the problem is finding something of equal value. The gift of a right they already possess according to the constitution (to manage oil and gas in their Region), and the promise to implement a process required by the constitution are probably not sufficient.

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THE CONTINUING PROBLEM OF KRG CORRUPTION

Michael Rubin

Allegations of corruption feature large in the political discourse within Iraqi Kurdistan. Corruption and concerns about rule-of-law have also sullied Iraqi Kurdistan's reputation internationally among governments, media, and potential investors. The U.S. State Department has called corruption "Kurdistan's biggest economic problem."¹ The discovery and exploitation of large oil reserves brought concerns about financial transparency, nepotism, and abuse-of-power to the forefront. Even Masoud Barzani, the *de facto* president of the Kurdistan Regional Government (KRG), has acknowledged the problem and created a five-year "Draft National Strategic Plan to Combat Corruption."²

Corruption in Iraqi Kurdistan is multifaceted. It ranges from ghost employee scams and embezzlement to bribing school teachers and turning a blind eye to the import of counterfeit medicine, to nepotism and profiteering off political positions. It thrives against the backdrop of an outdated legal code unprepared to address key manifestations and a lack of capacity and will to address growing problems.

Iraqi Kurdistan's legal code is rooted in that of Iraq which addresses corruption in Chapter 6 of Iraqi Criminal Code No. 111 of 1969. Section one focuses on bribery, penalties for which include a maximum of ten years in prison and confiscation of the bribe. Section two addresses embezzlement for which penalties range from a fine to life imprisonment with a restitution of the funds stolen. Section three criminalizes "officials who overstep the bounds of their duty" and misuse public authority, and Article 330 deals with the common Iraqi practice of *wasta*, the use of connections to avoid application of law. Iraq's penal code, however, has not been updated to address cross-border crimes.

Iraq also has a Board of Supreme Audit, established in 1927, and both an Inspectors General Office and a Commission on Public Integrity established by the Coalition Provisional Authority in 2004, but the KRG does not recognize the legitimacy of those bodies to act within Iraqi Kurdistan. The KRG has instead founded its own Board of Supreme Audit and an Executive Office of Governance and Integrity, but neither has been able to operate independently of political interests and, indeed, the Executive Office of Governance and Integrity reports directly to the KRG prime minister who, in some instances, may be part of the problem. To rectify this problem, KRG Law 3 of 2011 established a Commission of Integrity in the Kurdistan Region to investigate and prosecute corruption cases. Nevertheless, corruption remains rampant.

Ghost employees

Iraqi Kurdistan has become a region of first world hotels and restaurants even as its basic economic infrastructure remains stuck in the third world. Banking is old-fashioned. It is a cash society; credit cards are rarely accepted and cash machines are a rarity. The lack of electronic banking coupled with the huge amount of cash flooding the country alongside the U.S.-led invasion enables fraud on a great scale. In August 2016, for example, police arrested the manager of a Rasheed Bank in Kirkuk for seeking to pass a \$50 million bad check, the largest single act of fraud in Kirkuk's history.³

To collect salaries, most Kurds must queue in their offices. *Peshmerga* go to their headquarters, and police visit their directorate. One of the most common mechanisms of corruption in Iraqi Kurdistan is to inflate government ledgers with ghost employees so that managers and senior officials can skim their salaries to augment their own. Seldom are ghost employees in Iraqi Kurdistan fictional. Most often, the false employees are family or friends of senior officials, with the no-show workers also benefiting from a cut in exchange for their silence.

As the KRG weathers a financial crisis with the government regularly defaulting on its payroll, the government has begun to tackle the problem of ghost employees, at least among some sectors. On 17 January 2017, Diler Mustafa, deputy head of the parliament's *Peshmerga* Committee, said that the committee had identified thousands of fraudulent salaries. He told *Basnews*, a portal controlled by Masoud Barzani's eldest son Masrour, "more than 8,000 members did not show up to receive their salaries, meaning that they are ghost employees, unknown or fake identities."⁴ In addition, another 200 officers double-dipped, receiving payments from both Baghdad and Erbil. In February 2017, Dilshad Shaban, a Kurdistan Democratic Party (KDP) member serving in the Kurdish parliament, said that the KRG had annulled 30,000 ghost positions.⁵

Hubris, entitlement, and a sense of impunity compound the problem as sometimes top-ranked officials become ghost employees themselves. Ako Muhammad, the editor of Rudaw, one of Iraqi Kurdistan's largest media companies and one founded and controlled by Prime Minister Nechirvan Barzani, reportedly received a monthly teachers' salary more than a decade after he stopped teaching.⁶

Against the backdrop of a deep financial crisis in Iraqi Kurdistan, the KRG has undertaken efforts to constrain the ghost employee problem. It seeks to issue new biometric identification cards replete with unique social security numbers to 1.4 million public sector employees. The issuance of such cards would be the first step in theory to an electronic payment system.

Budgetary shortfalls have focused greater internal attention to the problem of inflated payrolls. Even when employees did show up for work, often their jobs were redundant. Noshirwan Mustafa, the chairman of the Gorran Party, a group which split from the Patriotic Union of Kurdistan (PUK) in part because of the failure of the PUK to tackle corruption, estimated to U.S. diplomats in 2008 that 80 percent of the KRG's budget went to pay salaries of the bloated civil service.⁷

Compounding the problem of inflated payrolls is poor and sometimes nonexistent accounting. On 12 October 2016, for example, the Sulaymani governorate council created a three-member committee to investigate revenues and payroll.⁸ This suggested that the council had been spending millions of dollars without any idea of how much revenue oil sales and border customs had generated.

Nepotism

Nepotism fuels corruption throughout Iraqi Kurdistan in both the public and private sectors but remains a sensitive subject. In 2010, unknown assailants allegedly affiliated with the KDP's security forces murdered journalist Sardasht Osman after he published a poem lampooning nepotism within the ruling Barzani family.⁹ The problem starts at the top: *de facto* KRG President Masoud Barzani, for example, has placed his eldest son Masrour in charge of both the region's national security council and the KDP intelligence services. His second son Mansour is a commanding general, while his nephew Nechirvan is prime minister. Other close family members are prominent businessmen, serve on the KDP's leadership council, or represent KDP or Kurdish interests abroad.

The same holds true with the PUK, which Jalal Talabani founded as an antidote to KDP tribalism and nepotism, but which has since fallen victim to the same phenomena. Jalal had two sons: he appointed his elder son Bafil to an important military command and placed his younger son Qubad to be the KRG's representative to the United States. Nephew Lahur Talabani leads the PUK's anti-terror force and niece Ala Talabani heads the PUK faction in parliament. Widow Hero Ibrahim Ahmed controls PUK media and has become the master of finances. After the KDP and PUK agreed to a new unity/power-sharing arrangement, Hero arranged for Qubad to become KRG deputy prime minister.

There is neither a legal mechanism nor code of ethics to prevent such nepotism. Government, party, and business leaders often flaunt their nepotism and act with impunity. According to the Kurdish Policy Foundation, an independent and nonpartisan Kurdish public policy institute focusing on Iraqi and Syrian Kurdistan, the problem is exacerbated by a lack of any independent institution or agency to hold government to account. "The visible nepotism in Kurdistan Region's governmental departments and institutions are caused by the absence of legal bodies that are able to sue political parties for malpractice, violating the constitution," it declared. "In the absence of a legal procedure, structure or body that can hold political parties responsible, nepotism will continue to surface."¹⁰

Nepotism extends from the political sphere into the business world. Because there is no legal mechanism defining conflict of interest, many politicians appoint family members—brothers, sons, cousins, and nephews—as *de facto* business agents. Hence, when Qubad Talabani served as KRG representative to the United States, he acted both as diplomat on behalf of the government and as an agent for his family's business interests. Mohammad Sabir, Jalal Talabani's brother-in-law, acts in a similar capacity as Iraq's ambassador to China. Nechirvan Barzani, meanwhile, often invites potential investors to the region and can even conclude deals without publicly registering them and without detailing side deals declared in official documents.¹¹

Perhaps the marquee example of the political-private business dealings was the establishment of the Korek cell phone company by Sirwan Barzani, Masoud's nephew. After Iraqi President Saddam Hussein's 2003 ouster, cell phone networks became one of Iraq's most lucrative contracts. First the Coalition Provision Authority and then the new Iraqi government created a licensing system to operate throughout the country. Korek initially side-stepped the licensing process and instead received monopoly protection by the KDP *peshmerga* who promised to destroy rival company towers in KDP territory.¹² Eventually, Korek used several hundred million dollars in public KRG money to purchase a license to operate throughout Iraq, the acquisition of which resulted in a company worth upward of \$1 billion. Sirwan and his partners thus used public money for personal gain. When Korek subsequently accrued a \$375 million

tax debt to Iraq, it sought a further public bailout, without Sirwan and other stakeholders relinquishing their share.¹³ Korek is not alone. Asiaccell, Korek's Sulaymani-based competitor, reportedly divides its profits 50-50 between three senior PUK members and the company.¹⁴

Each party and most personalities own businesses to which they seek to funnel government contracts. The Nokan Group, for example, is the financial outlet of PUK founder Jalal Talabani and his wife Hero Ibrahim Ahmed. Nokan's manager, Dler Sayyid Majid, is also PUK finance and administration director. Halo Ibrahim Ahmed, Hero's brother, said the company formed originally to support the *peshmerga* and the families of those killed fighting against Saddam Hussein but, under his sister's tutelage, it has made billions of dollars in agriculture, tobacco, energy, and real estate, often acquiring land at below-market rates or even without cost, usually to profit the Talabani family and PUK.¹⁵

While such conflicts of interest and legal impunity have been long common in intra-Kurdish business dealings, the influx of foreign investment in the wake of Saddam Hussein's ouster made Kurdish corruption an international concern. Kurdish leaders in practice force foreigners to partner with Kurdish officials and their designated business front men, many of whom will demand shares—anecdotally up to 40 percent—even if they do not contribute materially to the investment.¹⁶ The Panama Papers, more than 11 million documents leaked by WikiLeaks and originating in a Panama-based law firm which specialized in creating offshore entities to obscure ownership and hide wealth, further illustrated how Kurdish politicians created Kurdish companies to partner with foreign oil firms and other companies.¹⁷ The Eagle Group—one company included in the Panama Papers—was the suggested investment wing for Nechirvan Barzani.¹⁸ For senior officials, a share in foreign investment is only one means of profit. Contracts can be resold or subcontracted repeatedly for a fraction of the original tender, lining the pockets of ministers and their relatives along the way until there is little if any money left to complete the project.¹⁹

Foreign businessmen accused some Kurdish officials of seeking further profit by refusing to abide by contractual terms. A 2012 lawsuit filed in a British court charged that Bafil Talabani conspired to defraud a company based in the British Virgin Islands of a \$60 million commission.²⁰

The KRG continues to use Iraqi law except where the KRG parliament has amended or supplanted it. In theory, misusing public position for personal gain is illegal under Article 331 of Iraqi Penal Code. On 18 September 2016, the Sulaymani-based independent news network NRT reported that Kurdistan Integrity Commission had arrested current and former mayors of Khanaqin on Article 331 violations.²¹ Such prosecutions, however, seldom extend to top-tier politicians and office-holders.

As Iraqi Kurdistan's economy has developed, the range of conflicts of interest has also grown. Across the oil-producing countries of the Middle East, some of the most tightly held secrets are oil reserves and the preparation of negotiations strategies with which to approach international energy companies. The sale of insider information can be lucrative. It is against this backdrop that, in October 2016, the KRG Ministry of Natural Resources announced that it was investigating a London-based company which claimed to have confidential KRG data, apparently from a KRG official who was seeking to profit from his connections and access.²² In April 2016, Kurdish authorities arrested Adham Karim, the head of the Iraqi Central Bank in Erbil, for illegally trading in bonds, a scheme which investigators believe may have cost the KRG \$1 billion. While Karim sought advantage from his position and insider information, the KRG's lack of legal framework for anything beyond embezzlement might make it difficult to charge him with a crime.²³

Abuse of power manifests itself in other ways. Because generous pensions accompany government service, many senior political officials promote friends, family, and loyalists

immediately prior to their retirement so they can draw pensions at a higher level. *Lvin*, an independent newspaper that often tracks corruption cases, reported that Barham Salih, KRG prime minister between 2009 and 2012, had retired 19 officials as ministers in order to increase their pensions.²⁴ The Patriotic Union of Kurdistan political bureau subsequently overturned the promotions but, in many cases, friends and family of senior politicians receive inflated pensions. PUK officials have said that Omer Fattah, PUK prime minister between 2004 and 2005, likewise appointed friends and families as ministers for a few hours in order to award them higher pensions. Indeed, both the PUK and the KDP have accused each other of illegally paying tens of thousands of people inflated pensions.

Misappropriation

The failure to develop a formal regional budget exacerbates corruption. Civil society leaders often complain that published budgets are vague.²⁵ When, on 23 June 2004, the Coalition Provisional Authority transferred \$1.4 billion to Iraqi Kurdistan—its share of remaining oil-for-food program funding—much of the money simply disappeared.²⁶ Gorran head Noshirwan Mustafa in 2008 told U.S. diplomats that the KRG gave each political party \$35 million per month from the KRG's budget. Party leaders need not spend the cash on party functions; they can just as easily pocket the money themselves or distribute it as patronage to supporters. There is no accounting to how such funds are then spent.²⁷ The 2013 Financial Report from the Ministry of Natural Resources describes multimillion dollar allocations for “various small projects” including simply \$50 million to the “Presidency office” without any detail or control as to how the money was spent. The lack of budget continues to be a problem moving forward, with the KRG announcing as recently as 2017 that it would issue projections of income and spending but not a formal budget.²⁸

The failure to control spending has become fodder for intra-Kurdish mud-slinging. For example, after Shanaz Ibrahim Ahmed—sister of Hero Ibrahim Ahmad, the wife of Jalal Talabani—used her Facebook feed to criticize PUK politburo member Mala Bakhtiyar for spending lavishly on a conference at a time when salaries were going unpaid, his voice piece *Chawder News* responded, “a person who considers herself as a PUK's princess has criticized the conference in an attempt to deflect the public attention from her and her husband's wealth.”²⁹ Bakhtiyar's reference was to a 75,000 square meter land grant given by the PUK to Latif Rashid, Shanaz's husband, worth upward of \$100 million. Such land grants are a frequent source of complaint among civil society and good governance leaders. Politicians use the notion that they can privatize state land as a means to reward friends and family, buy influence, and use insider information to transfer land to relatives which they know the state will need to buy back at inflated costs for airports, roads, hotels, or other imminent development. Upon the formation of the new Iraqi government, *de facto* President Masoud Barzani gave land grants worth close to \$1 million each to most parliamentarians in Baghdad as a means to influence.

Oil industry corruption

Iraqi Kurds have long suspected that they have exploitable oil and gas. From the monarchy to Saddam Hussein, however, successive Iraqi regimes neglected to develop Iraqi Kurdistan's potential energy resources, with the exception of those around Kirkuk, which they instead subjected to ethnic cleansing in order to make them Arab. The ouster of Saddam Hussein and the Iraqi government's recognition of Iraqi Kurdistan's special status opened

the floodgates to regional oil deals, even absent an agreement with Baghdad over national and regional oil laws. The resulting inflow of money, coupled with financial opacity, a lack of internal controls, and an inadequate legal framework, exacerbated corruption.

The most basic problem surrounding the KRG's oil dealings is opacity. Such opacity runs counter to the law. First, the KRG's Oil and Gas Law no. 22 of 2007 and then the Oil and Gas Revenue Fund Law of 7 April 2015 were supposed to deal with net and gross revenue, and the spending in between but, in practice, only the top political leadership in the region knows exactly how much oil and gas are extracted and exported.³⁰ On 24 August 2016, PUK politburo member Mahmud Sangawi said that the KRG had siphoned off \$28 billion. The following day, KRG spokesman Safeen Dizayee said that Sangawi's claim had "no factual basis."³¹

Sangawi's figures might have been an exaggeration, but both the KRG oil revenue and its ultimate disposition remain subjects of recrimination and dispute. On 2 November 2016, for example, the Sulaymani-based independent Kurdish television station NRT reported that KRG oil production amounted to almost one million barrels per day, bringing the KRG almost \$1 billion per month. To determine its numbers, the NRT counted tankers passing Iranian border posts and the Ibrahim Khalil/Habur crossing between Turkey and Iraqi Kurdistan to determine the export of 230,000 barrels per day in addition to the 600,000 barrels per day delivered by pipeline to Ceyhan, and 80,000 barrels per day provided to local refineries.

NRT accused *de facto* KRG President Masoud Barzani of siphoning unreported oil revenues to foreign bank accounts. While the Ministry of Natural Resources denied the allegations and threatened a lawsuit against NRT, NRT said it had secret documents showing that, in just the first half of 2016, the KRG had siphoned off \$1.2 billion revenue from 34 million barrels of oil into private accounts. "The data is real and the KRG has hidden it, even from the Iraqi government," it declared.³² NRT further said that much of the resulting money is placed in foreign bank accounts, with money transferred as needed to the Kurdistan International Bank, a private bank allegedly controlled by the KDP.³³

While Barzani denies personal involvement in corruption, he has also acknowledged it. On 17 May 2016, the KDP issued an arrest warrant for Chra Rafiq, the ex-wife of KRG Minister of Natural Resources Ashti Hawrami, on charges of corruption and froze \$250 million in her accounts.³⁴ According to Sherko Jawdat, a member of parliament from the Kurdistan Islamic Union, Rafiq operated a ghost company which would receive discounted naphtha from the government, which she would sell on the black market, netting her \$10 million monthly.³⁵

The Iraqi central government pays transit fees of approximately \$30 million per month to export oil on a pipeline stretching from Beiji, in north central Iraq, to the Turkish port of Ceyhan. Because the Islamic State (ISIS, ISIL, Daesh) disrupted refining at Beiji, the only entity transporting oil across the pipeline was the KRG. Within Iraq's Ministry of Oil, senior officials said that there was a discrepancy between what the Iraqi Kurdish leadership say they exported and what Iraqi sources among the Turks in Ceyhan said the meters showed.³⁶ Iraqi officials speculated that the difference in declared oil exports and metered oil exports represents a secret side deal between senior Kurdish and Turkish political leaders. NRT suggested that only Masoud Barzani, Nechirvan Barzani, and Ashti Hawrami know the KRG's true oil revenue.³⁷

Possible embezzlement of oil revenues impacts not only the resources available in Iraqi Kurdistan, but it also exacerbates relations with Baghdad. While Iraqi Kurdistan claims 17 percent of Iraq's oil revenue, Iraqi authorities argue that Iraqi Kurdistan's exports must

figure into the overall calculation. Therefore, skimming oil revenue off the top effectively steals from Baghdad as well. This is why on 3 January 2017, Prime Minister Haider al-Abadi called on the KRG to be transparent over its true oil revenues. “Where is the money that comes from the oil?” Abadi asked.³⁸

While the KRG sought to brand itself “the other Iraq,” a safe, secure, democratic oasis in the region and “an emerging market offering excellent opportunities,”³⁹ oil industry corruption has also tarnished Iraqi Kurdistan’s reputation. On 27 November 2015, for example, Dana Gas, a United Arab Emirates-based energy company and one of the largest investors in Iraqi Kurdistan, won a London Court of International Arbitration ruling worth nearly \$2 billion against the KRG.⁴⁰ The dispute revolved around whether Dana had exclusive rights to develop the Khor Mor and Chemchemal fields for 25 years. When, in 2009, Dana sought to sell 20 percent of its shares to international players, Dana officials said KRG officials demanded bribes and created obstacles to development of the fields in order to compel further illicit payments.⁴¹ The impasse caused a six-year delay in development, which also undercut KRG finances in two ways: first, in lost profits on undeveloped fields and second, because it dissuaded other companies from investing in Iraqi Kurdistan.

Dana’s resort to arbitration not only reflected frustration with Kurdish business practices but also the lack of credible judicial recourse in Kurdistan, especially with regard to commercial law.⁴² The case, which Dana won, shed light on the KRG’s endemic corruption.⁴³ While the KRG blamed non-payment on the fight against ISIS and the pressures of caring for refugees, profligate spending by Kurdish political elites and the lack of austerity at top levels of the KRG belied such claims. Hawrami himself wrote,

If the KRG carried on as before with its uncurbed spending and without real reforms, then even if we reached 1 million barrels of crude oil production per day and oil returned to \$100 per barrel we would still not cover our financial requirements.⁴⁴

Claims against the KRG continue. On 12 May 2017, Dana Gas and its partners filed a claim in federal court in Washington, DC, seeking recognition of the London arbitration decision and compulsory enforcement, including the potential seizure of KRG assets in the United States.⁴⁵ The Sharjah-based Crescent Petroleum Company, itself a minority stakeholder in Dana, likewise filed an \$11 billion arbitration claim in London for overdue payments.⁴⁶ Curiously, corruption may have helped Crescent’s case. In exchange for personal favors, Sherko Jawdat allegedly provided the oil company insider information to use against the KRG.⁴⁷

Such tactics appear common. Nadhim Zahawi, a British conservative MP, reportedly earned \$349,000 per year to serve as chief strategy officer for Gulf Keystone Petroleum. Zahawi reportedly helped the KRG avoid arbitration with Gulf Keystone, a move which allowed the KRG to delay paying its nearly \$300 million debt.⁴⁸

KRG refusal to abide by arbitration rulings has undercut Iraqi Kurdistan’s business climate further. At a time when KRG debt grows, foreign companies remain unwilling to invest more without promise of regular payment and remain reticent to increase production to make up for shortfall caused by declining oil prices.⁴⁹ These factors all culminated in a July 2015 failure by the KRG to float a bond on the international market with favorable terms. While the KRG sought to tap international debt markets for a five-year \$1 billion bond, the market responded with an offer costing the KRG 11–12 percent per year, reflecting a lack of confidence in KRG stewardship.⁵⁰ In comparison, Ivory Coast debt with a much longer maturity—December 2032—yields 6.43 percent, and Iraqi government debt with a 2028 maturity trades at 8.2 percent.

Security

Corruption has not only retarded Iraqi Kurdistan's economic and democratic development, but it has also imperiled its security. The 1994–1997 intra-Kurdish civil war began with a dispute over distribution of revenue from the Habur/Ibrahim Khalil border-crossing between Iraqi Kurdistan and Turkey. Financial opacity and mutual suspicion about embezzlement effectively led to the deaths of several hundred and a *de facto* political split which continues to date.

Corruption also may have enabled and certainly hampered the Kurdish response to the rise of the Islamic State and its surprise June 2014 seizure of Mosul. Iraqi officials and even some Kurdish politicians privately suggest that KRG officials may have sold weaponry to the Islamic State prior to its seizure of Mosul in the mistaken belief that ISIS would limit its attacks to Iraqi government forces and weaken Baghdad ahead of parliamentary elections. Iraqi Kurdish journalists have implicated Nehad and Hemdad Barzani, both step-brothers of Masoud Barzani, in the illicit oil trade with the Islamic State. They also accuse Aras Sheikh Changi, a cousin of Jalal Talabani, and Mahmud Sangawi, a PUK leader in Jalawla. The son of the owner of the Asia Cell telecom company also allegedly bought discounted oil from the Islamic State as a middleman to sell onward at a profit.⁵¹ Firsat Sofi, a KDP parliamentarian, estimated that the illegal trade with ISIS in which Kurdish political elites had engaged amounted to more than \$1 million per day.⁵²

Embezzlement and misappropriation of aid and weaponry also hampered the fight. As Masoud Barzani's legal term in office ended in August 2015, his political party convoyed military equipment that had been diverted away from the fight and into party control through the heart of Erbil.⁵³ Failure to pay salaries led some *peshmerga* to go absent without leave or to sell their weaponry on the black market. That so much military equipment went missing led the German defense ministry to suspend deliveries of military equipment to the KRG.⁵⁴ Corruption impacted security in other ways. *Rudaw* reported rumors that internally displaced persons bribed Kurdish security officers to be released from camps in which they were to be vetted for links to the Islamic State.⁵⁵

KRG response to corruption

Senior KRG leaders acknowledge a corruption problem. "Confronting corruption must be all-encompassing and include all sectors in the government," Masoud Barzani said. "I reassure the people of Kurdistan that no one will be spared in this process and no official can stand in the way of these reforms. These reform steps will continue and they need the cooperation of all sides."⁵⁶

Functionally, however, this is untrue. While the KRG has charged a few low-level politicians with "wasting public wealth,"⁵⁷ neither the Barzani nor Talabani families have addressed allegations of high-level corruption among top family figures. Nor has the 2011 code of conduct issued by the Council of Ministers to address transparency, conflict of interest, and bribery been implemented evenly across the KRG. Whistleblowers face harsh penalties when they report corruption. Soran Omar, a KRG parliamentarian from the Kurdistan Islamic Group, said he faces 14 lawsuits for having named names in corruption investigations.⁵⁸ Well-connected party officials enjoy functional immunity even when corruption causes injury or death. In 2003, for example, the Hoz Group, a company close to the ruling party, smuggled a contaminated batch of the cancer-treatment drug Avastin. When a public hospital in Erbil subsequently used the drug, it blinded 30 patients.⁵⁹

Beyond the rhetoric, however, government response emphasizes symbolism over reform. Senior KRG officials repeatedly point to contracts with prominent, international auditing firms. In 2008, Kurdish officials bragged about their decision to hire PricewaterhouseCoopers (PwC) to conduct comprehensive needs assessment of the corruption environment in the Kurdish region.⁶⁰ The following year, PwC presented the KRG with the results of its nearly year-long “good governance assessment.”⁶¹ The KRG, however, neither implemented its findings nor corrected deficiencies. The PwC contract primarily allowed senior KRG officials to launder its image. For example, Qubad Talabani, son of then-PUK head Jalal Talabani, spoke of briefing congressmen, diplomats, and businessmen about the PwC assessment.⁶² In 2011, he dismissed protestor complaints after local security forces fired on demonstrators in Sulaymani, again by citing the unreleased and apparently unimplemented PwC report.⁶³

As criticism mounted about KRG corruption against the backdrop of a default on civil service salary payments, the KRG again promised to tackle corruption. On 10 February 2016, Masoud Barzani issued a statement on the KRP website to “further regulate the affairs of the KRG and conduct reforms to resolve shortcomings” but offered no details.⁶⁴ The move came against the backdrop of complaints that quasi-party private businesses avoid taxes. While *Xebat*, a KDP-affiliated newspaper, reported the same day that Barzani would, in the name of transparency, investigate the wealth of KDP members in order to recover illegal gains, neither the KRG plan nor the paper outlined any time frame or clear mechanism. The KRG did demand in resolution four of 17 April 2016 that the all KRG institutions and corporations should open their doors to KRG financial monitoring, but this too appears to have gone unimplemented.

With the public unassuaged by Barzani’s promises, the KRG again turned to international accounting firms. In October and November 2016, the KRG signed deals, respectively, with Deloitte and Ernest & Young.⁶⁵ The KRG, however, limited their access. “They will be auditing all future, present and past activities of the energy industry,” Nechirvan Barzani said, adding, “Obviously, we will not allow them to see the [text of] the agreement with Turkey.”⁶⁶ While the Kurdistan Region Presidency subsequently said that auditing would include all oil-related activities,⁶⁷ it is unclear whether the Ministry of National Resources will allow the auditors to investigate how the ministry arrives at the data it provides.

The KRG has made great strides over its quarter-century existence, but neither an increasingly cynical public nor international investors appear willing to allow the KRG to leave corruption unaddressed or respond with only symbolic remedies. As Iraqi Kurdistan moves toward independence, how it handles its corruption problem may soon determine whether it thrives as an aspiring democracy or descends into state failure and civil unrest.

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THE RUSSIAN HISTORICAL AND POLITICAL APPROACH TOWARDS NONCONVENTIONAL INDEPENDENCE OF IRAQI KURDISTAN

Kirill V. Vertyaev

The phenomenon of the people historically divided by political boundaries is a subject of active methodological research from the point of the political forecast of possible proclamation and future fate of any independent Kurdish state. However, unpredictable consequences of such a step make research fellows refer to more or less obvious topics and issues that have a substantial body of investigated source base. The main problem here is the Kurdistan outlines that are very conditional and nonconventional as boundaries of an imaginary state inside Iraq, and any attempt to resolve this issue *de jure* is fraught with both political and military complications. Since the middle of the 20th century, the focus of modern Kurdish political nationalism has concentrated on the “Arab” part of ethnic Kurdistan, which covers 20 percent of the territory of Iraq and includes the northern part of Syria. In this area live only 20 percent of all ethnic Kurds, and today it has become the core of the Kurdish national movement that sends a powerful impetus to all parts of ethnic Kurdistan and is seen as a passionate call for national self-determination and sovereignty. Here also arises a vivid phenomenon of the “us-and-them” dichotomy that is one of the sources of ethnic particularism and secessionism most acutely realized in the “Arab-Kurds” confrontational line associated with the center in Baghdad and the “Kurdish periphery”.

The October 2017 events around oil-rich Kirkuk have clearly shown that even a nonbinding referendum on independence in the Kurdistan Region of Iraq (KR) and its surrounding disputed territories (that were referred to as “Kurdistanian”, not just Kurdish lands in the question of the referendum) may result in a complex of tectonic shifts throughout the Middle East and generate a conflict with the involvement of geopolitical interests of different parties, not only regarding Iraq but also Iran and Turkey due to their phobia about Kurdish secessionism against the backdrop of possible integral processes of national mobilization in the Kurdish milieu with the emergence of a “Greater Kurdistan”. Also these events allow us to figure out not only the aggravation of ethnic or confessional particularism of Kurds, Arabs, Sunnis and Shiites but also the lack of solidarity within Iraqi Kurdistan

between different political forces, like the Democratic Party of Kurdistan (KDP), the Patriotic Union of Kurdistan (PUK), concentrated around the clans of Barzani and Talabani, and leftist and pro-European “Gorran” (Change).

Considering this, Russia’s official position with respect to a putative independent Iraqi Kurdistan is not only spicy but also ambiguous. On the one hand, this position, voiced by both the Russian Foreign Ministry and the President, boils down to a simple statement that the issue of an independent Iraqi Kurdistan is an internal affair of Iraq and must be resolved within the constitutional norms of this state. However, on the other hand, active participation in the exploration and extraction of oil and gas in the KR by such Russian giants as “Rosneft” and “Gazpromneft” indicates that these largely risky venture deals concluded with the Regional Government of Iraqi Kurdistan may well be a significant investment into the economy of a future independent Kurdish state. In other words, Moscow says it supports Iraq’s territorial integrity while also recognizing the aspirations of the Kurds for a homeland. As Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov said, “We start from the fact that the legitimate aspirations of the Kurds, like other peoples, need to be within the framework of existing international legal norms” [1].

Politically, this position is extremely vulnerable in light of Moscow’s active support for the pro-Russian referendum in Crimea in 2014. Hence, the quite natural question arises: does the resolution of the conflict around the status of Iraqi Kurdistan lie in the sphere of national interests of modern Russia? This is an important issue. However, it must be noted that Crimea is by no means comparable with Iraqi Kurdistan in terms of Russian national priorities. Both civilian and military Russian support for the Crimean secession amidst a restrained reaction to the similar demands of the Iraqi Kurds creates an ambiguity concerning Russia’s position in relations with the Iraqi Kurds, while also taking into account the wide background of semiofficial Kurdish-Russian diplomatic contacts that have existed for at least the past 100 years. Given the serious background of contacts between the Union of Soviet Socialist Republics (USSR) and the Kurdish political elites of Iraqi Kurdistan since the days of the Mahabad Republic and escape of Mustafa Barzani to the Soviet Union in 1946, one can say that Moscow at least shows interest for the political fate of the Kurds.

Methodological background of Kurdish self-determination in Iraq

The Kurdish national movement during its heyday in the first half of the 20th century was analyzed in considerable detail by Soviet orientalist researchers. First of all, we should mention Professor M.S. Lazarev with his fundamental work “Kurdistan and the Kurdish question (1890s–1917)” (1964). This work was later continued by his “Imperialism and the Kurdish Question (1917–1923)” (1989) and “Kurdistan and the Kurdish Question (1923–1945)” (2005), in which a thorough historical analysis of the problems of the formation of Kurdish identity at the turn of the century took place in light of the policies and interests of various powers—primarily Russia, Britain and Germany. Despite the methodological class determinism that was characteristic of Soviet scientific thought, Lazarev’s works provided if not political then mostly moral validity for the national sovereignty of not only the Iraqi Kurds but also of all Kurds of the region, as a nation divided. However, the current conflicts around the disputed territories in Iraq and the multi-ethnic and multi-confessional nature of the hypothetical Kurdish state have brought new challenges for orientalists, which must be answered.

The conflict situation around Iraqi Kurdistan can be described in the terminology of polynationalism as the coexistence of several ethnic, confessional and other communities within a single state with a high degree of intra-group political mobilization. The experience

of some polyethnic countries also shows that multi-nationality itself, as a state-forming factor, can become a stabilizing element designed to minimize social tensions in societies with a certain antagonism between hostile but not exclusive national ideologies. However, present-day Iraq faces a crisis of not only territorial integrity but also national Iraqi identity itself.

The Russian academician V. Tishkov, who once privately remarked that a “nation is the same as a tribe, only with an army”, suggested that the nation can be viewed as a semantic-metaphorical category that acquired emotional and political legitimacy in modern history but did not become a scientific definition. In turn, a nation as a collectively shared image and nationalism as a political field for applying such an image can exist without recognizing the nation as a real community. Nation, as the object of all aspirations of nationalism, is an artificial one, for it is the product of self-styled nationalistic imagination aimed at gaining power and reaping the benefits of political struggle. According to Tishkov, a nation as a product of national struggle is also an artificial phenomenon because it has no roots either in nature or history, while the past that nationalists rely on is just a myth existing in the minds of nationalists, even cynically fabricated for specific political purposes. Such a modernist approach to the definition of nationalism that was prevalent in modern scientific historiography was formed in the early 1980s by such scholars as Ernest Gellner (“Nations and Nationalism”, 1983), Benedict Anderson (“Imaginary Communities”, 1983) and Eric Hobsbawm and Terence Ranger (“Invention of Traditions”, 1983).

Until the middle of the 20th century, the concepts of nation were popular in Europe with an appeal to a mysterious call of blood, soil and territory that were based not on one’s personal decision to belong to a particular national community but on some socially imagined phantom. Demythologization of such traditions was the main historical mission of those who supported modernistic approaches to the definition of nationalism. Their main postulate, perhaps, was that nations do not arise because there is a common language, territory or culture but because each individual makes a decision to belong to a single community called the nation. An example was vividly demonstrated by the nonbinding referendum for an independent Kurdistan in September 2017.

The Russian philosopher Alexander Zinoviev suggested once that a certain minimum number of a “*humanhill*” are needed to create a people. If the people break up into parts, then it is very difficult to reunite, and social laws will give rise to a unilateral orientation of consciousness. In this case, the emergence of nations and communities called national states is “the highest stage of evolution, followed by a new stage, the creation of super-communities” [2].

In the works of the Russian researchers V.A. Tishkov and V. Shnirelman, national ideology sometimes appeals to language, sometimes to religion, and also to the ideological foundations of the sociopolitical existence, but it represents itself as a nation (if it exists within a democratic regime) as a mobile, changing and largely phantom category. At the same time, Russian authors emphasize the fact that there are two types of nations that have been established in social researchers’ minds: one is ethnogeological (cultural), and the other is civil-territorial, which raises the question of the degree of maturity of ethno-cultural nations in their geographical borders for the formation of a “common destiny”, which is the basis of nationwide mobilization.

V. Tishkov suggests two more types of nationalism that are more in line with the Kurdish realities of the Middle East: one is hegemonic (or dominant) nationalism, usually referred to as a dominant ethnic group or state, and peripheral or defensive ethno-nationalism—more often existing on behalf of ethnic minorities and state entities controlled by them. The latter manifests itself in various forms: from cultural nationalism to armed separatism [3]. At

the same time, Tishkov accentuates the vulnerability of the prevailing USSR tradition of understanding a nation in its ethno-cultural meaning, when the very national concept has been closely connected with concepts of statehood and self-determination. In using this concept of a nation in an ethnic context, empirical conclusions immediately follow that all ethnic nations like the Russians, Kurds, Kazakhs, Tatars and Latvians must necessarily self-determine and obtain their own state.

Hypothetically independent Kurdistan might be seen as one of the examples of the realization of such rights. The USSR was a long-term champion of the national self-determination ideology mostly applicable to the colonial peoples, and, as part of its influence, this ideology was implanted as an instrument to support the “international national liberation movements” with geopolitical rivalry and the exposure of imperialism, such as the rebel movement of Mustafa Barzani in Iraq ever since the mid-1940s, when the Soviets tried to weaken the position of England in Iraq. Ethno-nationalism, therefore, has become a collection of simplified but influential myths born by both Soviet and post-Soviet practices, but they are still correlated in the minds of Kurdish national activists with the common tradition of struggle for national self-determination.

The modern materialistic approach to the definition of nationalism was largely shaped by the efforts of Ernest Gellner, who saw the cause of its actualization in society and capitalist development as an instrument for the realization of economic and political power. Along with this, other researchers, such as the previously mentioned Professor M.S. Lazarev, saw some form of social or economic disparity between individual ethnic groups in a particular country as one of the main reasons for the actualization of national identity. Such a disparity, in the opinion of the disadvantaged group, leads to an unjust distribution of benefits and resources, including such an important resource as political power in the country, not to mention such a resource as Iraqi (or Kurdistan) oil. However, those factors that influence the transition of such groups to the active stage of confrontation with the central authorities that, in their opinion, act within narrow ethnic particularism (sectionalism), impede the equitable distribution of resources or restrict this group in using or even manifesting their cultural rights.

In contrast to the aforementioned social modernists, M.S. Lazarev saw the validity of the scientific approach toward the definition of a nation. He supported it by the idea that “nationalism is a social category with a complex of epistemological structures that require an interdisciplinary approach and, in view of its relevance, is a subject of study both from historical and actual political points of view” [4]. M.S. Lazarev noted that the Middle Eastern region has no common criteria in the policies that would unite the specific manifestations of nationalism of individuals into a national policy and ideology of a single country. The experience of interethnic and interreligious conflicts in countries with diverse ethnic or confessional composition such as Turkey, Iraq or even Lebanon manifests a crisis of the Middle Eastern concept of national states in a form that sharpens atomical characteristic identities.

The problem of Kurdish national history, that is, the story of how a separate ethnos sought to realize itself as a single nation both in narrative and theoretical terms is of particular interest. As Professor M.S. Lazarev mentioned, Kurdish history was on the sidelines of the “big themes”, that is, the histories of Turkey, Iran and Arab countries as well as their predecessors, the Ottoman and Safavid Empires, because it was not the history of a state-forming people [5]. In the context of the national ideology of state-sensing people or self-perceptible nations, each of their national histories is usually inextricably linked with the history of the formation of the state, that is, with civil history. In this context, the emergence of the Kurdish

people in the Middle East arena had its own peculiarities and was associated with extremely unfavorable factors for the development of such a nation-building process. Apparently, these unfavorable factors still exist.

Historical background of Russian-Kurdish relations

The national self-determination of the Kurds in the Ottoman Empire after World War I was actively supported by Britain, but it is a little-known fact that Russia was the first country in the world to recognize the rights of the Kurds for national sovereignty. It happened precisely 100 years ago in 1917, when the provisional government, which seized power for only eight months in St. Petersburg, understood the futility of the Russian occupation of Iran and made an agreement with Persian-Kurdish tribal leaders for Russian-Kurdish friendship and the recognition of Kurdish national rights.

The following revolutionary and political changes in the Russian Empire and in the USSR within the 20th century (such as the October Revolution in 1917 and the USSR dissolution in 1991) made international relations with other nations and countries also subject to change. As a matter of fact, considering the Russian Empire, the USSR and the Russian Federation as different states and subjects to international commitments, we can identify certain features of Russian-Kurdish politics that were inherited by the Soviet Union and by the modern Russian Federation.

Russia's relations with the Kurds began in the Caucasian War (1806) and were an instrument of political, commercial and military expansion of the Russian Empire in Transcaucasia and Persia. This can be attributed to the relations of Russian representatives, diplomats, military officers, traders, travelers and their long-term contacts with Kurdish elites, including Kurdish political leaders. One hundred years ago, one of them was Abdulsalam Barzani, the elder brother of Mustafa Barzani. He had contacts with the Russian vice-consul in Hoi, N.S. Kirsanov. In 1914, Barzani announced a Kurdish uprising against the Ottoman Empire under his own leadership and with the support of Russia. After that, however, Abdulsalam Barzani was captured and executed by the Ottoman administration. His actions fatally complicated relations between the two empires and, perhaps, were one of the catalysts of the Turkish military actions against Russia, which was the reason for the entry of the two countries into World War I in late October 1914.

At that time, Russian officers, unlike diplomats, had more freedom in forecasting military situations, building close relations with Kurdish notables and developing political recommendations in relations with the Kurds. This approach was applied in the conditions of World War I, when Russia became interested in using the Kurdish factor against the Ottoman Empire.

Shortly before the outbreak of the war in 1914, the Russian consul in Bitlis, Shirkov, sheltered a rebel Kurdish sheikh, Selim Bitlisi, in the Russian consulate. This can be regarded as an example of the vivid role of personal factors and decisions in international politics. Consul Shirkov was the first to view the Kurdish national flag used by the rebels, but he did not provide its description. Shirkov refused to extradite the rebel sheikh to the Ottoman authorities, citing after consultations with the Russian ambassador that "the Kurdish uprising is a political issue and we should be as cautious as possible in it" [6].

During World War I, the captain of the General Staff, Smirnov, was the first to propose the establishment of an "independent" Kurdistan under a Russian protectorate in the occupied territories of Bayazet *vilayet*. However, he underestimated how the overwhelming majority of Kurds would resist any external political influence. It should be borne in mind that

unlike Shirkov, Smirnov extrapolated his considerations in the conditions of World War I, when the belligerents questioned the very existence of political boundaries [7].

Thus, military officers did not always coincide with the position of the Tsarist government of Russia. Did Russia really consider occupying the *vilayet* of Bayazet by creating a puppet, “independent” Kurdistan during World War I? This is a very controversial question. However, this idea was inadequate for Russian interests already in the time of the provisional government after the February revolution, which overthrew Tsarism in Russia in 1917. The provisional government was aware of the futility of the Russian occupation of Iranian Kurdistan but sought to enlist the support of the Iranian Kurds by concluding, in 1917, a semiofficial agreement with the leaders of the local Kurdish tribes, with the view of hostility and mutual support. On behalf of the provisional government, this agreement was concluded by General Baratov.

As for the struggle of the Iraqi Kurds for their independence within the framework of the goals of Kurdish self-determination, it became a reality almost six years after the creation of the Kingdom of Iraq. The Soviet Union had no influence on these movements of the insurgents under the leadership of Sheikh Ahmed Barzan, but the later uprising of Mustafa Barzani in 1943 was supported by the USSR, mostly via Comintern structures, as it was seen as an anti-imperialistic liberation of Kurdish and Iraqi people, and their lands from British occupation. In spite of that, Soviet Russia never considered the Mahabad Republic in 1946 (which was the birthplace of the former president of Iraqi Kurdistan, Masoud Barzani) as a sovereign entity, which expressed the national aspirations of all Kurds divided by political boundaries in their countries. The policy of the USSR was also aimed at establishing relations with the Kurds as a people (or even an ethnically based nation) whose problems of self-determination lay solely in the sphere of interests and capabilities of the countries in which those Kurds lived. Such an approach, formed in the conditions of communist ideology, sought to distance the USSR external policy from any imperialistic essence of geopolitical interests shown by the major powers in the Middle East.

After the demise of the Mahabad Republic (1946), Mustafa Barzani and his followers, surprisingly for Stalin, sought shelter in the USSR. It is no more than a myth that Barzani and his followers were met in the USSR with open arms: Stalin did not permit Barzani and his people to cross the Araks River when they were chased by Iranian troops. When his units at last crossed the river, they were disarmed and interned separately in the same camps and special settlements as the Soviet Kurds evicted from Transcaucasia.

The problem of Kurdish sovereignty in the form of autonomy in Iraq has become more acute since the 1960s. After the revolutionary *coup d'état* in Iraq in 1958, strongly backed by the USSR, the Kurds in the north of the country demanded more political independence and opposition to the authoritarianism of the central government in Baghdad and forcible Arabization of the Kurdish lands. Under the leadership of General Mustafa Barzani, not without assistance from Moscow, his Kurdistan Democratic Party (PDK) had become a military and political organization that waged an armed struggle for the national rights of the Kurds.

After Barzani's return to Iraq, a special correspondent for the *Pravda* newspaper and later Prime Minister of Russia, E.M. Primakov, contributed to mediating the conflict between Barzani and Baghdad in the late 1960s. The talks were held between the Baath government and the rebels of Mustafa Barzani in their base in Hajji Omran. The transformation of Mustafa Barzani's views on the political self-determination of the Kurds in Iraq is rather controversial. In fact, the USSR provided an informational mouthpiece to express Kurdish national claims through *Pravda*. We can find his statements “to establish the Kurdish flag in all regions of divided Kurdistan” [8], as well as his assurances that he was a dedicated

autonomist who was in favor of a federalized Iraq. Primakov, being an intermediary in the settlement of the conflict between the Kurdish autonomists and the government of Baghdad, perhaps against his will, became one of the key architects of future Kurdish statehood, despite the fact that he believed, until the end of his days, that conditions for independent Kurdistan were not ready yet.

The relationship of both Tsarist and Soviet emissaries with the Kurds in Russian Middle Eastern politics was largely motivated by personal factors, but more likely, directives of the Central Committee for resolving the crisis in Iraq were predominant over the personal motivation of the choice and the decisions of Mr. Primakov. Was the Kurdish question really considered as an instrument of governing the Iraqi political elites on the part of the USSR or was it an independent political phenomenon? Countries like Iraq, with their pseudo-socialist orientation, were led by the party, which in fact was a party of Arab nationalists, whose elites simply flirted with the USSR. Primakov was supported by the Central Committee and KGB with a very wide range for maneuver. The sympathies of the Kurds were on the side of the USSR, and the nature of the trusting relationship between E. Primakov and both Mustafa Barzani and Saddam Hussein, at that time the deputy chairman of the Revolution Command Council, allowed Mr. Primakov to show more flexibility in these negotiations. One of his goals was to establish collaboration of the Barzani followers with the Iraqi communists, but this plan failed. Nevertheless, Kurdish autonomy as a form that satisfied both sides of the conflict was proclaimed as part of an agreement with the Government of Iraq in 1970. But claims of Kurdish autonomists on the province of Ta'amim (the city of Kirkuk) were still frozen for an indefinite period of time.

It must be taken into account that the Middle Eastern policy of the USSR was confronted at that time with rather complex problems. In its support of the national Kurdish movement, Moscow in many ways tried to make the Iraqi political elites more manageable and, like the Russian Kurdologist M.S. Lazarev, wrote, "such a policy was unlikely to be dictated by the Kurdish philosophy of Moscow. Its course, in view of the general pro-Arab orientation of the USSR, was necessarily sharp and flexible, and that is why quite unprincipled" [9]. Indeed, subsequently, after worsened relations between Barzani and Saddam, Moscow sent E. Primakov again as an intermediary between the Kurds and Baghdad. However, Primakov's mission failed. Barzani perfectly understood that Moscow, for the sake of Baghdad's firm adherence to the anti-Western course, was easily ready to sacrifice Kurdish national interests in its external politics. The USSR also was seeking access to Iraqi oil and the Kurdish problem in general. Iraq in particular was only one of the components of the Middle Eastern policy of the USSR and by no means the most determining one. Moscow's preeminent position in the Kurdish issue in comparison with Western countries was mostly determined by the presence of qualified Kurdish specialists and traditionally friendly relations with representatives of the Kurdish political elite. Therefore, the main goal of the Kurdish policy of the USSR in the 1960–1970s was the creation of its military and political influence in the region of Iraqi Kurdistan by supporting leftist, pro-communist movements but less of "feudal rebels" struggling for their national independence.

The ideological split among the Iraqi Kurds, as well as the lack of support from Iran after the Algerian agreement (1975) signed between Iraq and Iran, which stopped the supply of arms (mostly of USA and Israel origin) to the Iraqi Kurds through the territory of Iran, led to a temporary defeat of the Kurdish national movement in Iraq. But Barzani's uprising allowed the USSR to establish its influence in Iraqi Kurdistan in the 1960s, including mediation in providing Barzani's supporters through Iran with military and material assistance.

However, the political positions of the USSR in the region came to naught in the second half of the 1970s, when any participation of Moscow in the Kurdish affairs in Iraq in view of the extremely unstable position of the USSR in Baghdad was seen as undesirable. In fact, Moscow actually kept a blind eye on blatant repressions against Kurds, including chemical attacks on Halabja in 1988 and the Anfal operation, sometimes regarded as an attempt of genocide against the Kurdish population in northern Iraq. This, of course, did not increase the influence of the USSR among the Iraqi Kurds. After 1991, relations between Russia and Iraq were obscured by debates about the repayment of the debt of the USSR in the amount of \$7 billion, and then to Russia. The United States offered to write off Iraq's debt to the USSR. But obviously Russia was still eager to get it back.

The oil and gas factor in the relationship between Russia and Iraqi Kurdistan

According to various estimates, the oil reserves of Iraqi Kurdistan are about 45 billion barrels, and the region itself is in sixth place in the world in this indicator. The USSR tried to get influence on this oil market ever since 1946 when Stalin once mentioned, that “Kurdistan is floating in a sea of oil”, meaning that Barzani would help Moscow to get its hand on the Iraqi oil.

Russia sought to compensate for its losses in Iraqi debts by concluding profitable contracts with Iraq for oil production. Thus, in the 1990s, the Russian monopolists in the oil and gas sector were aimed at preventing the export of cheap Iraqi high sulfur oil to the world market for it had much in common with the Russian Ural oil brand. This caused a misunderstanding with the authorities in Baghdad, who in 2002 suspended the contract with the Russian company Lukoil. Nevertheless, the choice of Russian oil companies by the Iraqi authorities until 2003 as partners for the “Oil for Food” program was conditioned by their political motives to minimize the costs and burden of imposed sanctions [10].

The fall in oil prices in 2014–2015 marked the beginning of an acute economic crisis in Iraqi Kurdistan, when unjustifiably high expenditures for state employees, security forces and Peshmerga caused a budget deficit that the Regional Government was not able to compensate, relying on just 17 percent of the income from the exports of Iraqi oil. The crisis was aggravated by the pressing need to conduct military operations against ISIS. From this point of view, the current activities of Russia's largest oil corporations (such as “Gazpromneft” and “Rosneft”) in Iraqi Kurdistan's domestic oil market and their investment contracts have become important and necessary sources of the fund's inflow into the rent economy directly dependent on the oil price. Summarizing these agreements, concluded in February, June and October 2017, Russian companies receive a share of 65 percent of all reserves, capacities and resources of Iraqi Kurdistan.

Meanwhile, it is difficult to accurately estimate the oil reserves in Iraqi Kurdistan, bearing in mind the absence of clear boundaries for Kurdistan. According to the leading expert of the Union of Oil and Gas Producers of Russia, R. Tankayev, the recoverable reserves of Iraqi Kurdistan are unlikely to exceed 500 million tons of oil. Therefore, most of the statements of the Kurdistan authorities about rich oil reserves are rather political, aimed at the attraction of investments [11].

This allows us to characterize “Rosneft” transactions in Iraqi Kurdistan as a futures deals. “Rosneft” has already paid \$1.3 billion as a prepay to the Regional Government due to the February oil agreement covering the period of 2017–2019, that is being strongly criticized by Baghdad. “Rosneft” declares that it will coordinate its business with Baghdad, but details of this deal are rather vague. All this may be boiled down to the fact that “Rosneft” uses

the Kurdish factor in Iraq to get lower prices for the crude oil and preferences for pipeline management and gas exploration, while politics here serve economic interests. Even shortly after the central government forces took control over oil-rich Kirkuk, “Rosneft” and the Kurdish Regional Government launched a joint implementation of an infrastructure project to operate the pipeline of the region. The share of “Rosneft” in the project may be around 60 percent. Another participant in the project (the local KAR Group) will have a 40 percent stake as the current oil pipeline operator. This step was mostly motivated by intentions to take control of gas pricing in Turkey in order to avoid reducing the Russian gas supplied by the “Turkish Flow” of natural gas from Iraq that is more economic to transport. Such investments in the Iraqi Kurdistan gas infrastructure project will be carried out under the BOOT scheme (Build-Own-Operate-Transfer).

Taking into consideration such tactical economic interests and not denying the rights of the Iraqi Kurds to self-determination, Russia is seeking for a concept of reasonable, independent and principled pragmatism in its Middle East policy, including relations with the Iraqi Kurds. One of the basic postulates of such an approach is to consider solutions for all major Middle East security problems on compromise and collegiate means by all the parts. The presence of foreign oil companies in Iraqi Kurdistan, such as “Rosneft”, “ExxonMobile”, “Chevron”, “DNO” and “Genel Energy”, brings multibillion-dollar profits both to the treasury of Iraq and Iraqi Kurdistan and is the main restraint to possible military escalation in the region around Kirkuk and its environs. On the other hand, it is obvious to see that the KRG’s decision to hold the referendum was strongly motivated by the possible inflow of oil-backed money to the economy of the imaginary, independent Kurdistan as it was possibly stipulated by nondisclosure agreements with “Rosneft”, “Chevron” and some other oil industry actors, concluded directly with the Regional Government but with formal concordance with the business practices launched in Iraq.

Objective analysis of the balance of power in this region will allow Russia to build mutually beneficial relations with all the key actors in the region, including Iraqi Kurdistan, within the framework of a federative Iraq, or, if it eventuates, as an independent state. The oil and gas politics of the Russian state-owned companies in Iraq are strongly motivated by the fact that Russian political elites, without fear or favor, seem to understand the unsustainability of the political form of modern Iraq as it has been “reinvented” by the USA during the occupation of Iraq since 2003 but still have to keep in line with the international commitments and laws concerning the integrity of Iraq.

In parallel, Russian state-owned oil companies, such as “Gazpromneft” and “Rosneft”, are actively conducting multimillion-dollar contracts for the exploration, production and transportation of Iraqi oil. Through Russia’s consulate in Erbil, Russia officially supports humanitarian, economic and cultural contacts with Iraqi Kurdistan, taking into account rather high levels of cooperation with regional partners: Turkey, Iran, Iraq and Syria. And this is one of the evidences of “sitting-on-two-chairs” politics that clearly characterize the more economic than political trends of current Russian relations with the KR.

Russian interests and resettlement of conflict about the status of Iraqi Kurdistan

Now the phenomenon of the Kurds, as a nation without a state, creates a powerful back-drop for supporters of Kurdish independence throughout the world. However, this creates an image of a Kurdish state as a center of attraction for other Kurds living in Turkey, Iran and Syria, where the Kurdish population is three times bigger than that of Iraqi Kurdistan.

Fears about the unpredictable consequences of the proclaimed independence of Iraqi Kurdistan make foreign approaches to this issue very cautious. Therefore, today's position of the community of experts on Middle Eastern issues may differ from the official position of the Russian Ministry of Foreign Affairs regarding the feasibility and prospects of possible Kurdish independence in northern Iraq, considering that the experts' opinion is mainly based on a comprehensive analysis of the interests in the region, balance of forces and, above all, the aspirations of the Kurdish people who demand national sovereignty. The Russian Foreign Ministry, in turn, puts the national interests of the state at the forefront, and this position can also be commented on or criticized.

Today, the national interests of the Russian Federation regarding the status of the KR in northern Iraq are mediated both by the current balance of power and Russia's interests in the entire Middle East. However, they are mostly connected with Syria and with the prospects primarily of economic relations with Iraqi Kurdistan, as a subject of the Iraqi Federation, or if it occurs, a hypothetically independent state or an entity within the possible confederation of Iraq. The issue of military cooperation between Russia and the KR is blocked by the fact that the Russian "Rosoboronexport" state-owned company cannot sell military equipment directly to the subjects of the Iraqi Federation or unrecognized states. However, the benefits of such business are highly doubtful due to the already stable supply of Russian arms to Baghdad and mutual unwillingness of any sharp deterioration in the relations between Erbil and Baghdad in the event of the secession of the KR.

As to the personal relations of the Russian and Iraqi Kurdistan leaders, attention should be paid to the format of the meeting between Russian President V. Putin and Prime Minister N. Barzani in the field of the Economic Forum in St. Petersburg in early June 2017. This was held in conjunction with the informal meeting of V.V. Putin with the President of the Republika Srpska, an entity in Bosnia and Herzegovina, which has a similar quasi-independent status in a federal state and is generally characterized by an orientation toward and friendly relations with the Russian Federation. This may be interpreted as a sign that the two entities challenging one another for political secession are obviously involved in the spheres of Russian if not national, but mostly economic or political interests.

The situation around the Iraqi Kurds and Iraq as a whole is also seen by Russia in the framework of ensuring collective security in the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO), where Iran is currently an observer and strictly opposes Kurdish independence from Iraq. However, the preservation of the territorial integrity of Iraq is not the only aspect determining the official position of Russia in connection with the referendum.

In 1993, Masoud Barzani said that the Kurds proclaimed a course toward the creation of a federal state in Iraq. However, a year later, there were obvious insurmountable contradictions between the KDP and the PUK regarding the distribution of power in Iraqi Kurdistan and customs revenues, which turned into armed clashes between supporters of the two Kurdish parties. The same threatened to happen again, when the PUK leadership in Sulaymaniyah openly opposed secession by withdrawal of their Peshmerga troops from Kirkuk to let the Iraqi army and Shia militia Hashd Ash-Shaabi take over the city and the province.

In 1993, Russia almost did not participate in the political settlement of this conflict, or, more precisely, its mediocre mission ended in failure. In September 1998, with the mediation of the United States, an agreement was concluded between the KDP and the PUK to create an administration consisting of representatives of both sides. At the same time, a commitment to the unity and territorial integrity of Iraq was proclaimed, and a formula for income distribution was agreed upon. Within the framework of federative Iraq, Kurdistan

received a share of 13 percent of the export of all Iraqi oil, which was then increased to 17 percent. But now, due to the Kurdish elites, this system seems to be failing and has to be reloaded or even abandoned.

There was an obvious desire of the elites of Iraqi Kurdistan to hold a referendum before the final victory over the Islamic State with the subsequent new redistribution of political influence in the Middle East between all regional and global participants. Thus, by expressing the will of the Iraqi Kurdistan population, local elites tried to ensure themselves against a possible “second Sykes-Picot” in which Kurdish statehood in northern Iraq once again could be sacrificed for the immediate aspirations and national interests of neighboring states and major powers.

Against the backdrop of dynamically developing its economic ties with Iraqi Kurdistan, Russia’s cautious stance in the political sphere is mediated by the desire not to damage the relations with Iraqi Kurdistan and Iraq, on the one hand, and not to allow itself to be dragged into any anti-Kurdish actions, on the other. Such an attempt to “sit between two chairs” will be the defining foreign policy of the Russian Federation with respect to this issue after the referendum.

The Russian interest in implementing economic projects related to the exploration and export of oil and gas, including that of Kirkuk, will allow Russia alone, with other parties involved, to mediate the settlement of the issue around this disputed region. The results of the referendum held in the disputed territories were in theory to become a powerful tool in the negotiations of the Regional Government with Baghdad about the future of Kurdistan with strong intentions to include oil-rich Kirkuk into its boundaries. However, the status of the disputed territories remains unresolved since the creation of autonomy in 1970. It was obvious that such an attempt would cause a predictable negative reaction both by the central government of Baghdad and the Shi’a militia (“Hashd ash-Sha’abi”), endowed by the Baghdad regime with a status of paramilitary groups under the patronage of Iran. The issue of disputed territories in the event of the KR secession from Iraq will more than likely lead to armed conflict, given the fact that the confrontation between Baghdad and Erbil has already ripened as the referendum approaches, and Baghdad has clear advantages in air forces and heavy artillery.

With regard to the KR’s territorial claims to oil-rich Kirkuk, this seems to be the most acute dispute, and it has remained unresolved since its inception, when in 1970 an agreement was reached between the autonomous Kurdish Region and Baghdad (however unrealized) that Kirkuk could remain formally under the jurisdiction of Iraqi Kurdistan, while the central government controlled the distribution of Kirkuki oil. However, the implementation of such a compromise plan without significant Kurdish control over this city, sometimes called the “Heart of Kurdistan”, would effectively and economically put an end to the independence of Iraqi Kurdistan. According to the former Governor of Kirkuk Najmaldin Karim (a US citizen and former director of the Kurdish Institute in Washington), the status of Kirkuk should have been determined in parallel with the referendum. He emphasized that in an independent Kurdish state, Kirkuk could have a special status of a “multinational city” [12]. During the Saddam period, the city was subjected to intense and forced Arabization. In addition, currently the region gives shelter to more than 500,000 refugees, mostly Sunni Arabs from the Khavijah and Salaheddin districts. Officially, Turkey claims that Kirkuk is a Turkomen city. The ethnic composition of Kirkuk is the subject of fierce disputes between the Kurdish Regional Government and Baghdad and remains politically motivated.

A referendum on the independence of Iraqi Kurdistan in Kirkuk could be formally legal only after the referendum on including this region under the jurisdiction of the

Regional Government of Kurdistan. Otherwise, we again become witness to the so-called “Crimean precedent”, when an unresolved status of the disputed territory without a clear and predominant declaration of will by local residents could formally become a trigger for foreign intervention. This, in turn, can involve Turkey in a conflict under the pretext of protecting ethnic Turkomen, giving the Turkish government harsh rhetorical blowback about the prospects for the self-determination of Kirkuk.

Looking back at the world experience in political conflicts based on ethnic particularism, it can be noted that they mainly emerged after a subjectively perceived threat to the national interests of peripheral mono- or multi-ethnic groups that share a common set of values and views on national self-determination. In most cases, such a threat has arisen in connection with the civil war and/or unconventional ways of shifting power in the country. But despite all the economic and political contradictions between the Regional Government and Baghdad, these contradictions cannot be considered as critical. It seems that after the referendum the government of Iraqi Kurdistan should clearly determine what threat to national interests and national Kurdish security is being considered or may become possible or evident due to the fact that the KR is part of a federal Iraq.

It was clear that the result of the struggle of the Kurdish militia in Syria and Peshmerga in Iraq against the expansion of ISIS would lead not only to a certain form of sovereignty for the Kurdish enclaves in Syria and the autonomous region of Iraqi Kurdistan but also for the expansion of territories controlled by the KR. In light of the certain unpredictability of the prospects for political development in Syria and Iraq after the imminent victory over ISIS, it will still be difficult to ignore the fundamental principles and rights of self-determination for the Kurdish people of Iraq. On the other hand, it is also obvious that in case of Iraqi Kurdish secession, the disintegration of the whole of Iraq will lead to unpredictable consequences, since the prospects for the existence of a single “Sunni-Shiite” state after Kurdish secession will make Iraq as a viable state very illusory. Within the framework of the Iraqi federation project, the Kurds were (and are still) an important component of the “triangle of stability” inside the Iraqi Kurdish-Shiite-Sunni state.

However, this project proved to be unsuccessful, and Iraq is half a step away from becoming a failed state because of the incompatibility between the Iraqi Kurdish elites and the government in Baghdad (or the so-called “state of the law”), represented mainly by Shiite elites who work closely with Tehran, a situation which is becoming more obvious. Moreover, it is necessary to take into account the fact that there are still international and, especially, internal and regional conditions that can be considered as obstacles to the process of Kurdish self-determination, and this process in the future will depend on a combination of a number of factors that are not obvious yet. In addition to the threat of armed clashes between Erbil and Baghdad, there are also political and ideological contradictions between the main forces of Iraqi Kurdistan, such as the KDP, on the one hand, and the PUK and Gorran, on the other. Nothing justifies the fact that the Peshmerga’s anti-terrorist forces are divided and ruled from two centers, Erbil and Sulaimaniyah, where they are largely controlled by the PUK and their allies that are less addicted to the idea of full Kurdish independence from Iraq. The situation is exacerbated by the presence of refugees in the territory of Iraqi Kurdistan, as already mentioned.

Most likely, we will witness the process of the so-called nonconventional independence of Iraqi Kurdistan, when the regional government will remove the flags of Iraq from state institutions inside the KR or will continue to use the two flags—Iraqi and Kurdish—only for official international purposes. It seems that after the referendum, the international efforts of the leaders of Iraqi Kurdistan to support the recognition of the independence of Kurdistan

will be concentrated within the UN framework or in bilateral interstate contacts. The principle of the negotiation process between the renewed Kurdish parliament and Baghdad will be supported by Russia and is currently viewed from Moscow as the only possible approach to solving the Kurdish problem in Iraq.

In conclusion, it should be borne in mind that the basis of the national mobilization of the Kurds in Iraq is gradually forming the principle of the Kurdish national idea, the essence of which lies in the quite understandable thesis that no Kurdish political force that denies terrorism as a form of imposing certain political views will be in a state of armed conflict with another Kurdish group. In other words, none of the Kurds will fight with another. And such a quite simple national doctrine, understandable at this historical stage and corresponding to all international players, can be taken into account by the Kurds not only in Iraq but throughout the Middle East, including Turkey, Syria and Iran.

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PART X

The Kurdish situation in Syria



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26

THE KURDISH PYD AND THE SYRIAN CIVIL WAR

Eva Savelsberg

In this chapter, I will argue that the Democratic Union Party (PYD) is thus far (June 2017) one of the few winners of the Syrian Civil War. Until the beginning of the protests in 2011, the PYD was not only the party with the most sympathizers in Syrian prisons, its members were also, as a rule, sentenced to longer prison terms than the members of other Kurdish parties and were systematically subjected to torture. Since then, however, the balance of power has shifted in favor of this party, which is currently ruling the predominantly Kurdish regions and beyond. The PYD or rather its military wing, the People's Defense Forces (YPG), is not only armed by the United States but has, at the same time, good relations with Russia. Staffan de Mistura, the special United Nations (UN) envoy tasked with seeking peace in Syria, would like to have the PYD at the negotiation table in Geneva; and the relationship with the Assad regime is that of a more or less "hidden" cooperation. In this chapter, I will analyze why the PYD is so successful—and how sustainable this development will be.

Background

First of all, we have to remember that at least the cooperation with the Assad regime is nothing really new. In the 1980s and 1990s, northern Syria became a breeding ground for the Kurdistan's Workers Party (PKK) from Turkey¹, the mother party of the PYD. While no figures exist as to the exact number of youths who were active members of the PKK, certain sources estimate that around 10,000 Syrian Kurds died or "disappeared" during clashes with the Turkish army.² After Abdullah Öcalan had fled to Syria in 1980, he was offered training facilities in Lebanon and diplomatic representation in Syria. By 1987, the PKK had offices in Damascus and in several Kurdish cities.³ Furthermore, six candidates from 'Afrin overtly declared themselves as representatives of the PKK, and ran for office in the Syrian elections in May 1990.⁴ Relations between the PKK and the Syrian government were mutually beneficial, the former having a base in Syria for its activities against the Turkish state while the PKK militants provided Hafiz al-Assad with a shield against its internal (e.g., potential Kurdish challengers) and external opponents.

Yet the PKK's role as "minority client", with Syria acting as a "patron state", turned out to be risky for the PKK. Threatened by the Turkish-Israeli alliance of 1996, isolated

internationally and dependent on water supply from the Euphrates, Syria finally succumbed to Turkish pressure to withdraw all support for the PKK. Damascus expelled its leader Abdullah Öcalan on October 9, 1998. In January 1999, he began his long journey that finally took him to Kenya, where he was arrested and transferred to Turkey. The repercussions of these developments were deeply felt in Syria. Various high-ranking PKK cadres were handed over to Ankara, and former PKK fighters returning to Syria were sentenced to prison. In 2003, PKK militants, among them Osman Öcalan, the brother of Abdullah Öcalan, created a new party, the PYD, to secure an organizational frame for its thousands of members and sympathizers.

The PYD's rise to power, however, only started in the second half of 2011, when the Iraqi president and chairman of the Patriotic Union of Kurdistan (PUK), Jalal Talabani, allegedly played a key role in initiating contact between the Syrian government, the PKK, and, as a third partner, the Iranian government.⁵ During Saddam Hussein's rule, Talabani had spent many years in asylum in Damascus. Thus, his good relations with the Assad family stem from this time. Additionally, he did not have reservations regarding the Iranian government and the PKK. During the intra-Kurdish civil war in the mid-1990s in Iraq, both supported the PUK against its (then) political opponent, Mas'ud Barzani's Kurdistan Democratic Party (KDP). Against this background, Talabani is said to have negotiated the following deal. In September 2011, the Party for a Free Life in Kurdistan (PJAK), the Iranian arm of the PKK, ended its armed fight against Iran. This was not only in the interest of Iran but also in the interest of the PUK as armed attacks by the PJAK regularly led to Iranian retaliation on PUK-controlled Iraqi territory. At about the same time, the PYD in Syria was reinvigorated. According to information from various activists, as many as 200 PKK militiamen from Turkey and Iraq as well as weapons of Iranian origin were smuggled into Syria at that time. Out of this, the YPG developed.⁶

Interestingly, PKK leader Abdullah Öcalan already suggested in May 2011 that the PYD should build up units for self-defense. According to the messages he gave to his lawyers, Öcalan argued that in case the Muslim brothers came to power during the revolution, they would commit massacres against the Kurds. Therefore, the Kurds needed to be able to defend themselves.⁷ In earlier messages, he also discussed the relationship between the regime and the PKK/PYD. He argued that Assad must negotiate with the PYD about support for the regime, not with tribal leaders, and that the PYD could support Assad if he would acknowledge the Kurdish identity and grant the Kurds cultural rights and democratic self-administration.⁸

However, equipped with an armed wing, the PYD began to prevent the Kurdish population from effectively participating in the revolution. Demonstrations were dissolved, activists arrested and offices of the Kurdish National Council attacked.⁹ The Syrian army did not have to open a "second front" and could stay focused on other areas. In return for its role in suppressing dissent, the Ba'th regime gradually pulled its army and its secret services out of the predominantly Kurdish regions. In the second half of 2012, 'Afrin, 'Ayn al-'Arab (Kobani) and the Jazirah were taken over by PYD and YPG without notable armed conflicts.¹⁰ This tactical relationship between the PYD/YPG and the regime is still valid—and, as Barfi argues, somewhat different from the much more selective tactical relationships between the regime and ISIS or the regime and the Jabhat an-Nusra. Even though regime and PYD/YPG deeply distrust each other, they are very much aware that the rebels and ISIS are their common adversaries. As a consequence—and even though there have been sporadic clashes between the YPG and the regime—the YPG has hardly been targeted by regime airstrikes.¹¹

“Democratic autonomy”

The system established by the PYD in the Kurdish areas of Syria is referred to as “democratic autonomy” and “democratic confederalism”. The former refers to a re-grounding of the political status of people, on the basis of self-government rather than on peoples’ relations with the state. “Democratic confederalism” aims at the strengthening of local administrative capacities organized in the form of councils at the very local level, of streets and then neighborhoods, through district/village and town/city to region. Thus, “democratic confederalism” may be regarded as the form of self-administration in which autonomy is organized. The leader of the movement, Abdullah Öcalan, considers this as a necessary and decisive break from centralized and representative systems, which turn politics from collective decision-making to individual choice and is based not on social relations among people but on individual relations of people with the state, turning politics into a private activity.¹² In his own words,

Democratic confederalism understands itself as a coordination model for a democratic nation. It provides a framework, within which inter alia minorities, religious communities, cultural groups, gender-specific groups and other societal groups can organize autonomously. [...] The people are to be directly involved in the decision-finding processes of the society. This project builds on the self-government of the local communities and is organized in the form of open councils, town councils, local parliaments, and larger congresses. The citizens themselves are the agents of this kind of self-government, not state-based authorities. The principle of federal self-government has no restrictions. It can even be continued across borders in order to create multinational democratic structures. Democratic confederalism prefers flat hierarchies so as to further decision finding and decision making at the level of the communities.¹³

Reality, however, is different. “Democratic autonomy” has turned into something else in “Rojava”, in a system that is reminiscent of the older and well-known model of “people’s democracy”, a political concept familiar in former socialist countries. There is one ruling party, and all other groups must subordinate themselves to this main party. Competing parties are not allowed to participate in the political process. Indeed, decisions for “Rojava” are neither taken by the many (local) councils, nor by Salih Muslim and Asya Abdullah in their position as co-chairs of the PYD, and not even by Abdullah Öcalan anymore. Instead, the power is with the military leadership in Qandil, which regularly delegates high-ranking PKK cadres to Syria.¹⁴

The PYD is doing its best to disguise the fact that it is part of a highly centralized cadre-party. A telling example is the establishment of a local administration in the Jazirah, ‘Afrin and ‘Ayn al-‘Arab on November 12, 2013.¹⁵ No comprehensive list of groups having decided to establish this administration or of signatories having signed the accompanying “social contract” has ever been published. Moreover, the participants known are either affiliated with the PYD, like the PYD’s women’s organization Yekîtiya Star, or are entirely unknown, such as the Liberal Kurdish Union (*Yekîtiya Lîberalî ya Kurdistanî*), the Kurdish Democratic Peace Party in Syria (*Partiya Aştî ya Demokrata Kurdî li Sûriyê*) or the Communist Kurdistanian Party (*Partiya Komonîst ya Kurdistanî*). Neither the Kurdish National Council in Syria nor any of its senior political member parties signed the social contract.¹⁶ It was also the PYD alone taking the decision to appoint the three governments in the “cantons” of Jazirah, Kobanî and ‘Afrin on January 21, 27 and 29, 2014. Finally, representatives of PYD-affiliated organizations

met on March 17, 2016, in Rumaylan to decide upon a federal administrative system for the area in northern Syria under PYD control,¹⁷ not, as suggested by the PYD, but rather by members of the different social groups representing the population of that region.

The consequence of this authoritarian one-party-system is severely felt in the PYD-ruled regions. Many laws and decrees issued are everything else but democratic. Not only is the law on compulsory military service, which will be discussed later, highly restrictive, but the press law passed on December 19, 2015, only claims to safeguard the freedom and independence of the press. In reality, it limits these freedoms considerably. In democratic societies, the press is in principle free. This means, anyone can operate a paper, magazine, radio and television station as well as online publications. Only then, if in the framework of reporting the prevailing law is violated, will independent courts take action. However, the PYD's press law intends to make all forms of media registered; all journalists must be accredited before taking up work. The criteria for a media license (also subject to charge) and the accreditation process for journalists remain unclear. In addition, there is a press council whose job it is to comprehensively monitor media reporting to detect violations of the law. The press council is, in such cases, authorized to impose fines and revoke publishing and broadcasting licenses, temporarily or permanently. The entire law can be characterized as showing a fundamental distrust of the free press.¹⁸

The PYD's campaign against freedom of opinion produces scores of victims on the ground: the number of unlawful arrests or kidnappings in order to intimidate representatives of other political parties is much higher under PYD rule than ever under the Syrian regime. Politicians of the member parties of the Kurdish National Council in Syria, an umbrella organization in opposition to the PYD, are regularly abducted and imprisoned,¹⁹ and their offices are closed and burned down. Apart from politicians, journalists and independent activists have also frequently become victims of the PYD.²⁰ Journalists working for media outlets criticizing the PYD, such as Rudaw and Orient, are not allowed to work in the Jazirah.²¹ Last but not least, the YPG and PYD are accused of more than 30 murders since they took over control in the Kurdish areas of Syria.²² These severe human rights violations, however, are often ignored, even in scholarly works on the Syrian Kurds. It seems that many researchers as well as politicians have internalized Salih Muslim's cynical comment that "PYD enforcement might be severe, but at least they don't chop heads".²³

From terrorist outlaw to preferential ally

The main reason for the YPG's strength is the fact that it is the only armed Kurdish group in Syrian-Kurdistan. Even though only existing since 2012, it profits from the decades of experiences of the PKK. As mentioned earlier, those holding high-level positions within the YPG or the PYD have a long history as PKK cadres and fighters.

Moreover, whenever necessary, the YPG—officially a Syrian-Kurdish militia—is supported by fighters from Turkey. Kobanî is a good example: only initially, it was the YPG fighting ISIS, but when ISIS forces reached the city of Kobanî, they were replaced by PKK fighters from Turkey. Around October 10, 2014, about 400 PKK fighters crossed into Syria from Turkey; others followed. According to PKK sources, 400 of their fighters were killed. However, independent activists estimate their number to be around 1,500.²⁴ After a long siege, the PKK was eventually supported by air strikes of the U.S. Air Force; moreover, the Kurdistan Regional Government (KRG) sent peshmerga to Kobanî.²⁵ Between January 27 and February 10, 2015, ISIS was expelled from all the territories in the vicinity of Kobanî that were under PYD control prior to their ISIS capture.²⁶

After such success, large segments of the Western press celebrated the YPG/PKK as the sole rampart against Islamist militias. Moreover, its alleged democratic qualities were emphasized. Both narratives, however, conceal that the YPG, in the beginning of the revolution, squashed all attempts of other Kurdish political parties to build up armed units to defend the Kurdish regions. Moreover, the YPG is still denying entry to Syria to the Roj peshmerga, a force of Syrian Kurds trained by the KDP-Iraq.²⁷

Nevertheless, and even though the PKK is listed as a terrorist group in the United States, Kobani was the beginning of U.S. armament of the YPG. Since then, Washington and the YPG have coordinated several airstrikes in the provinces of al-Hasakah and ar-Raqqah, and the Kurdish militia has been directly armed. Officially, however, neither the PKK nor the YPG is armed, but rather the Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF)—a group often referred to as independent, as a force of locals willing to free their hometowns, as a mix of Syrian Kurds, Arabs, Syriac Christians and Turkmen. Time to recall, thus, that this is far from reality. It was the YPG announcing, on October 12, 2015, the establishment of the SDF,²⁸ and it is the YPG that continues to dominate these forces until today, not only by number but also by leadership.²⁹

Future perspectives

The PKK/PYD, thus, has clearly enhanced its positions through the Syrian civil war. However, one should be careful not to overestimate its popularity on the ground. About 50 percent of their fighters in Syria originate from Turkey, not from Syria. On its official website, the YPG stated that between November 2, 2015, and January 3, 2016, a total of 76 of its fighters had been killed during armed conflicts in 'Ayn al-'Arab (Kobani), 'Afrin, Tall Abyad and al-Hassakah. The birthplace of 43 of the dead was in Turkey, the birthplace of 32 of the dead was in Syria, and one person had been born in Iraq. Thus, 56 percent of the dead originated from Turkey.³⁰ These numbers are supported by a study conducted by the Atlantic Council, according to which Kurds from Turkey total 49.24 percent of the YPG's self-reported casualties between January 2013 and January 2016.³¹

Moreover, those Syrian Kurds fighting in the ranks of the YPG do not necessarily do so because they believe in the PYD's policy: as the PYD and YPG offer jobs and privileges, as well as access to electricity and food supplies, many Syrian Kurds simply join them in order to make their living in war times. Additionally, the YPG's engagement in forced recruitment in Syria testifies to their limited support among important sectors of the Syrian-Kurdish population.

Never before in Kurdish history, which is rich in uprisings, has forced recruitment been utilized. According to organizations such as Human Rights Watch, the UN and KurdWatch, the YPG is even recruiting children, some as young as 12 years old, to be engaged in combat. For example, Nurman Ibrahim Khalifa was kidnapped by the YPG when she was only 13 years old and brought to a PKK-controlled camp in Iraqi-Kurdistan. During her forced stay, she witnessed an 18-year-old woman being publicly executed by a PKK official because she had attempted to flee from the camp several times. The woman's dead body was thrown into the nearby river.³² Such brutality is the rule rather than the exception, and since its implementation, forced recruitment is one of the most important reasons for young, male Kurds to flee from the Kurdish regions.³³

Additionally, depending on the evolution of the conflict, the convergence of interest between the YPG/PKK and the United States on the one hand and the YPG/PKK and the Syrian regime on the other hand may well end. The Pentagon did not choose the YPG/PKK as an ally because it believes in its democratic qualities, but it was desperately searching for a

partner on the ground after its Free Syrian Army (FSA) train-and-equip program had failed. Only very few trainees from the 500-million-US-Dollar-program to prepare 5,400 fighters within a year ended up fighting inside Syria. Moreover, one of its groups was captured by Jabhat an-Nusra.³⁴ Besides strict vetting rules, one of the problems of the program was that its fighters should only fight ISIS, not the regime, a concession many FSA-linked groups did not want to make. The YPG/PKK, on the other hand, was willing to solely fight ISIS, and was thus an easy partner for the Department of Defense. Moreover, the PKK had significant military experience, stemming from its decades-long fight against the Turkish state, and thus promised to be able to fight ISIS most effectively.

However, once ISIS is defeated, there are few reasons for the United States to further support the PKK. It is much more likely that the United States will then focus on a rapprochement with its NATO partner, Turkey. Obama's decision to support the YPG significantly alienated the United States from Turkey. Whilst the United States is arming the YPG, Turkish forces are implementing the military operation "Euphrates Shield" in the region between Kobani and Afrin. According to official military sources, more than 400 YPG/PKK fighters were killed between August 2016 and mid-March 2017.³⁵

Another problem for the United States is the close relationship between the PYD/PKK and Iran. Iran hopes to secure its access to Hizbollah-controlled Lebanon through the PKK-controlled Syria. This is obviously not in the interest of the United States. As a consequence, the United States is pressuring the PYD/PKK to break with the Iranian regime.³⁶

If the Ba'ath Regime, on the other hand, is able to further invigorate its position in Syria, it may well decide to take over full control in the Kurdish regions again. When, in 1998, the Syrian government decided to stop its cooperation with the PKK due to its external interests, there were no protest from the PKK's side—no demonstrations, no attacks—even though the PKK had large training camps and thus armed fighters in Syrian-controlled Lebanon at that time. Against this background, it is quite possible that the PKK will again withdraw from Syria without resistance, in particular if Qandil decides that they have no chance against the regime's (and possibly Russia's) air force.

Last but not least, a relationship between Ankara and the PYD/YPG modeled on that between Ankara and Erbil, as promoted by several analysts,³⁷ does not seem very realistic. The decisive difference is that the PKK—unlike the KDP and Masud Barzani—has its base and its main interests in Turkey and that the PYD as branch of the PKK cannot foster any independent political strategy. Without a sustainable peace agreement between Turkey and the PKK, there will be no peace between Turkey and the PYD/YPG. It was the end of the peace process in Turkey in summer 2015 that led to a new, more aggressive Turkish policy toward "Rojava". Until then, the PYD/YPG had been consolidating its power in Syria without much Turkish interference. If there is a candidate for an Ankara-Erbil-like peace relationship, it is the Kurdish National Council in Syria, with its good relations to the KDP-Iraq. However, this group has currently no the power on the ground to govern the Kurdish regions of Syria.

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Notes

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- 2 Harriet Montgomery, *The Kurds of Syria: An Existence Denied* (Berlin: Europäisches Zentrum für Kurdische Studien, 2005), p. 134.
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- 5 A high-ranking PUK member in Berlin confirmed that Talabani facilitated contact between the PKK/PYD, the Iranian regime and the Syrian government; private conversation, Berlin, December 2012. Additionally, Omar Sheikmus, at that time adviser of Jalal Talabani, mentioned the agreement in an interview with the Iraqi-Kurdish TV-station Rudaw. Unfortunately, the video is not accessible anymore.
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- 12 Joost Jongerden, "Colonialism, Self-Determination and Independence: The new PKK Paradigm", in Michael M. Gunter (ed.), *Kurdish Issues. Essays in Honor of Robert W. Olson*, pp. 106–121 (Costa Mesa, CA: Mazda Publishers, 2016), p. 115.
- 13 Abdullah Öcalan, *War and Peace in Kurdistan* (London: Transmedia Publishing, 2012), p. 32.

- 14 Interview with a PYD dissident who used to work in the security sector, July 7, 2017. Such individuals include Farhat Derik (chairman of the PYD's People's House in Tall Abyad), 'Umar Husayn Allush (politically responsible for Kobanî and Tall Abyad), Husayn Kochari (militarily responsible for Ra's al-'Ayn), Nazir Hajji Mansur (territorial authority for the Jazirah), Jamshid 'Uthman (militarily responsible for Jazirah and Tall Abyad), Haval Kamal (militarily responsible for 'Afrin), Shahin Jallo (supreme commander of all YPG military units in Syria) and Redur Khalil (spokesperson of the YPG). The positions mentioned in brackets were investigated at the end of 2013 and at the end of 2015. They may, by the time this article is published, already be taken over by other cadres.
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- 16 Those political parties, such as, for example, Salih Gado's Kurdish Democratic Left Party in Syria (not to be confused with the identically named party of Shalal Gado), which left the Kurdish National Council in order to work with the PYD's administration, do not have any political weight. Their positions can well be compared to that of the bloc parties the Assad regime used to tolerate.
- 17 In addition to PYD representatives, delegates from the Movement for a Democratic Society (TEV-DEM), the People's Defense Units (YPG), from the PYD-appointed Democratic Autonomous Administration as well as from the PYD-dominated Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF) attended the meeting.
- 18 An English version of the press law can be found on *KurdWatch*, see www.kurdwatch.org/pdf/KurdWatch_D035_en_ar.pdf.
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THE EVOLUTION OF KURDISH STRUGGLE IN SYRIA

Between Pan-Kurdism and Syrianization,
1920–2016

Jordi Tejel

As the Syrian army pulled out of several towns in the north and northeast of the country in July 2012, Kurds seemed to emerge “out of nowhere”¹ and found themselves masters of their own destiny after more than 40 years of dictatorship and political marginalization. Ever since, the Democratic Union Party (PYD) – a Syrian offshoot of the Kurdistan Workers’ Party (PKK) fighting the Turkish state since the 1980s – and its military force, the People’s Defense Units (YPG), have been exercising state-like power in the Kurdish regions of Syria. In addition, the establishment of *de facto* autonomy in Syria’s Kurdish majority areas has seen the Kurds become the key actors in the conflict at a national level. At the time of writing, the YPG are actively taking part in military operations alongside the United States against the Islamic State (ISIS) around Raqqa, the “capital” of its self-proclaimed Caliphate in 2014. More significantly, the PYD/PKK has become a regional actor able to challenge states such as Turkey, as well as competing Kurdish leaders such as the President of the Kurdistan Regional Government, Massud Barzani.

While many observers may see the empowerment of the Kurds in Syria, and in particular PYD’s ascendance, as a logical consequence of the growing national awareness amongst the Syrian Kurds during the twentieth and early twenty-first century, this chapter will argue that reality is much more complex than what those teleological accounts may suggest. On the one hand, the politicization of Kurdish ethnicity in Syria was not the “natural” outcome of a historical evolution, that is, a linear and progressive evolution from an “ethnic group” to a “national community”. Internal and external dynamics, as well as historical contingencies, have been at play since the establishment of the Syrian state, thereby allowing for the perception of the Kurds by other groups and political actors alike – including Western powers – as “a community” endowed with a sense of solidarity when placed among diverse elements.

However, if cross-border cooperation between all Kurdish regions in the Middle East is a common feature, the pervasiveness of cross-border ties between Syrian Kurds, on the one hand, and Turkish and Iraqi Kurds, on the other, is particularly noteworthy. It responds to some singularities, such as a relatively small Kurdish population in Syria compared to those in Turkey and Iraq, geographical separation of the three Kurdish enclaves in Northern Syria and a clear connection between the emergence of a Kurdish nationalist movement in Syria and the arrival of dozens of intellectuals and activists from Turkey to the Levant between the

1920s and 1930s. These singularities have marked the Kurdish movement in Syria because the very creation of the Syrian state as a pan-Kurdist trend has coexisted, and sometimes overlapped, with a much more locally rooted form of Kurdism. The predominance of one or the other and its consequences in the Kurdish arena throughout contemporary history must thus be analyzed in light of local, national and regional dynamics.

The Kurds and the French Mandate, 1920–46

Kurdish populations placed under the French Mandate occupied three narrow zones isolated from each other along the Turkish frontier: the Upper Jazira, Jarablus and Kurd Dagħ. These three Kurdish enclaves nevertheless constituted a natural extension of Kurdish territory into Turkey and Iraq. The majority of Syrian Kurds spoke Kurmanji and were Sunni Muslims, with the exception of the Yazidis, who were dispersed between Jazira, the Jabal Siman region, Kurd Dagħ and Alawite Kurds in northwestern areas of Aleppo.² However, the Syrian Kurds, by virtue of their geographic origins, history, lifestyle (nomadic/sedentary) and their settlement, did not constitute a homogenous group at the beginning of the twentieth century.

Some Kurdish tribes living in *Bilad al-Sham* in the eighteenth century preserved their close connections with Kurdistan, while others were assimilated into Arab tribal confederations. The left bank of the Euphrates, around Jarablus and Saruj, as well as some strips of land on the right bank, had been settled by the Kurds at the beginning of the seventeenth century, following forced migrations as a result of the Sultans' decisions. Kurdish population of Jazira increased with the arrival of thousands of Kurdish refugees from Turkey and Iraq during the 1920s and 1930s. While before 1927, there were only 47 Kurdish villages in this region, by 1939, the number of villages with Kurdish majority rose to 700–800. According to the official census of 1939, the Upper Jazira had a population of 158,550, comprising 81,450 Muslim Kurds and 2,150 Yazidis.³

In Damascus, the Kurdish military colony first settled in the Saruja Quarter before subsequently migrating to Mount Qasiun. Indeed, it was only under the French Mandate that *Hayy al-Akrad*, or the Kurdish Quarter, with an estimated 12,000 inhabitants during the 1930s, was fully integrated in Damascene life, thanks to the construction of a shaded boulevard which joined the Kurdish Quarter to the rest of the city. However, during the 19th century, before urban reconciliation that was long overdue took place, certain Kurdish notables had nevertheless succeeded in gaining political and economic power in the Syrian capital.⁴

The first Kurdish populations encountered by the French in Syria were those of Kurd Dagħ toward the end of 1919, when French troops penetrated this mountainous region with relative ease. The Damascene Kurds immediately proved their loyalty to the French after the fall of Faysal's cabinet in July 1920.⁵ Furthermore, according to Philip S. Khoury, "the role that Kurdish auxiliary troops had played in suppressing The Great Revolt [in 1925] strained relations between [Arab] nationalists and the Kurds of Damascus for the duration of the mandate".⁶

Kurdish tribes from the Jarablus region expressed diverse attitudes toward French presence in the region. The Kitkan submitted immediately to the French troops on their arrival in 1920, and the Millis cooperated with the French in the Urfa region. However, several Kurdish bands encouraged by the pan-Islamic propaganda joined the Turks in their combat against French troops and the regiments loyal to Mustafa Kemal around Marash, Antep and Urfa. However, it was in the Upper Jazira that the mandatory authorities encountered the greatest resistance up until 1926. Once again, pro-Turkish propaganda in Jazira, targeting Kurdish and Arab tribes, proved to be extremely effective in hindering the advance of French troops. The result of the slow and fragmented integration of Kurdish populations

under the Mandate was a redefinition of Kurdish identity at the local level “in the face of universalist representations of Kurdish ethnicity suggested both by nationalist historians and state-centered historical interpretations”.⁷

The emergence of a “Kurdish policy”

The establishment of a “Kurdish policy” by the mandatory power in Syria was a response to economic and political constraints faced by the French administration. While France’s presence in the Levant was opposed in France, the High Commissioner saw the launching of a profitable economic program in Syria as a tool which could serve to justify its “civilizing” mission. The settlement of nomadic tribes and the agricultural development of Syria were seen as a part of this “mission”. However, the local population of Jazira, which included both Kurdish and Arab nomads, was deemed insufficiently large and unprepared to assume a potential increase in arable lands. In light of this challenge, the High Commissioner envisaged to settle the refugees from neighboring countries with a clear preference for Assyrian, Armenian and Syriac migrants from Turkey.⁸

By 1925, the High Commissioner did not look askance at the new demographic growth of minority groups to counteract the demands of the Arab nationalists. Therefore, he decided to expand this policy to include Kurdish refugees fleeing repression under the Kemalist regime, a decision that brought about unintentional consequences for the Kurds in Syria: namely, the “politicization” of ethnicity.⁹ After crushing the Shaykh Said insurrection in Turkish Kurdistan in 1925, the government in Ankara deported several Kurdish tribes toward the west of the country as a means of ridding Kurdish provinces of its more dangerous elements.¹⁰ At the same time, while some members of Istanbul’s Kurdish clubs sought refuge in Iraq, others looked to France for protection in the Levant.

In exile, certain Kurdish intellectuals worked on uniting all Kurdish associations into one “national” organization, the Khoybun League (literally translated as “Be yourself”). This committee was the basis for the conceptualization of modern Kurdish nationalism in the Kurmanji dialect and, consequently, for the widespread doctrine in Turkey and Syria. The Khoybun League made substantial efforts to create diplomatic contacts, for the most part unofficial, with state players (Iran, France, Great Britain, Italy, the Soviet Union) and non-state actors in the region (Armenians and the Turkish opposition).¹¹ In so doing, Khoybun succeeded in establishing itself as part of the network of politico-military alliances to such a degree that it became an essential regional actor at the time of the Ararat revolt (1927–31) in today’s northeastern Turkey.¹²

The Khoybun League also played a role in the creation of various Kurdish committees and associations in northern Syria and in the larger cities of the Levant, including Aleppo, Damascus and Beirut.¹³ Furthermore, Khoybun leaders, in particular the brothers Jaladat and Kamuran Bedir Khan, played a decisive role in the movement for cultural renaissance in the Kurmanji dialect.¹⁴

Claims for local autonomy

While the Khoyboun committee sought to launch a military revolt in their “motherland” (Turkish Kurdistan), in several instances, tribal chiefs and urban notables advocated for local autonomy within the Syrian framework. First demands came in May 1924 from the deputy Nouri Kandy from Kurd Dagh, who submitted to the mandatory authorities a memorandum demanding administrative autonomy for all the regions with a Kurdish majority. Nouri

Kandy had a clear idea of the role that the Kurds could play in favor of the French Mandate, such as fending off the Arab nationalists who, left to their own devices, would “influence the Arab Union and bring down the mandatory administration”. A similar petition in favor of Kurdish autonomy came from the chiefs of the Barazi Confederation, Bozan and Muhammad Shahin.¹⁵

The political character of Kurdish demands changed after the establishment of the Khoybun League. Former leaders of Kurdish clubs in Istanbul succeeded in winning over a large part of the Kurdish tribes, notably those having found refuge in Syria since 1920, who generally backed their political and cultural demands. Thus, in August 1928, a memorandum was submitted to the French authorities based on the Mandate Charter and on the stipulations relative to the mandatory power’s obligations to favor local autonomy.¹⁶

The French eventually rejected the petition. However, the free hand of the French Intelligence Service in the mandatory administration produced some surprising results in the Upper Jazira. Its officers granted “carte blanche” to a region previously little known to the French. Among these officers, Lieutenant Pierre Terrier distinguished himself upon realizing his projects in the Upper Jazira. After leaving Jazira in 1927, Pierre Terrier was attaché to the Political Cabinet of the High Commissioner where he centralized all affairs affecting Franco-Kurdish relations in Syria.

Faced with increasingly pressing demands for independence from the three Kurdish enclaves in Northern Syria, Terrier launched a counter-proposal. For Terrier, the geographical disposition of the Kurdish territories rendered the constitution of an autonomous province across these regions untenable. He proposed therefore that Kurdish leaders and notables concentrate all their attention on Jazira, where “one could hope to see the evolution of an autonomous Kurdish center. As for the Kurd Dagħ and Jarablus districts, one must be content with certain prerogatives”.¹⁷ The implementation of this plan established the effective division between different Kurdish enclaves and their political and social evolution for years to come.

Thus, the autonomous movement in Jazira, often referred to as the Kurdish-Christian bloc, was partly the result of French endeavors to halt the devolution of powers to the Syrian nationalist bloc in 1936. The principal demands of the autonomist movement from Jazira can be summarized as follows: (1) a special statute with guarantees from the League of Nations comparable to that of the Alawites and the Druzes, (2) support from French troops to guarantee the security of the minorities and (3) the nomination of a French governor under the control of the League of Nations.¹⁸

In sum, the first Kurdish nationalist committee in Syria followed two different, albeit not exclusive, trajectories. To some Kurdish refugees, Turkey was the target of their political activities since it was the country of origin for the majority of its members. In that sense, in order to avoid antagonizing the authorities in Damascus, Khoybun’s leaders never included Syrian Kurds in their demands put forth to world powers after World War II.

Concomitantly, the committee favored political participation of Kurdish representatives since the beginning of the Mandate. Thus, the notorious members of the nationalist committee eventually became deputies in the Syrian Parliament and some, including the sons of both Ibrahim Pasha (Milli tribe) and Hasan Hajo (Heverkan tribe), kept their seats throughout the 1950s.

The search for national integration, 1946–60

The failure of diplomatic initiatives by the Kurdish committees during World War II led to a crisis in the Kurdish nationalist movement in Syria. The old members of Khoybun slowly withdrew from the Kurdish political scene, while Kurdish deputies to the Syrian Parliament

abandoned all autonomist demands for their respective regions in a new effort to maintain the status quo. Consequently, by the late 1940s, the Kurdish movement lacked both a leader and a plan to bring together their diverse political factions.

Faced with this void, some of the more militant Kurds sympathized with the Syrian Communist Party (SCP). Young, politically active Kurds perceived the old Kurdish nationalist elite to be the enemies of the people and vestiges of a bygone era. The involvement of Kurds in the SCP took on such proportions that it was known in the north of Syria as the “Kurdish Party”. In addition, from 1933, Khalid Bakdash, a Kurd from *Hayy al-Akrad*, who used his ethnic background to spread the party’s propaganda in the Kurdish neighborhood of Damascus, led the SCP. Crucially, Bakdash won a deputy seat in 1954, in large part thanks to the mobilization of this electoral stronghold.¹⁹

In parallel, the Kurds in the ranks of the Syrian army at the time of Syrian independence chose to stay there because a military career was seen as one of the rare opportunities for members of the working class and the *petite bourgeoisie* to improve their social status. It must be remembered that despite the imminently Arabic character of the Syrian Republic, the Damascene government had not automatically applied a systematic anti-Kurdish policy in this period. Thanks to the electoral system inherited from the French Mandate, it was possible to elect Kurdish candidates to the Syrian Parliament in 1947, 1949 and between 1954 and 1958. However, Kurdish demands remained absent from all political discussions.

Following the elections of 1954, Syrian Parliament reflected the struggles between political parties, and between the political community and the army. Alliances and counter-alliances with Iraq and Egypt increased from 1954 to 1957. As a result of this impasse, the Baath Party used the army and led Syria to integrate with the United Arab Republic (UAR) under Gamal Nasser in February 1958. In so doing, the Baath accomplished two long-standing aspirations – uniting the Arabs and consolidating the domination of its party in Syria.²⁰

To the Baath’s surprise, Nasser imposed draconian conditions in order to unite the two countries, abolishing all political parties in Syria and putting the Syrian army under Egyptian command. In addition, all political, cultural and religious activities of ethnic and religious minorities in Syria were closely monitored. Among these minorities, the Kurds had two “faults” in the eyes of the authorities: first, they were a non-Arab group and as such threatened the plans for Arab unity, and second, they were associated with the “feudal chiefs” and the world of the “notables”, which the “progressive” authorities wished to eliminate.

Arab nationalism and Barzani’s influence

Under the UAR, publication and mere possession of books written in Kurdish were offenses punishable by imprisonment. Recordings of Kurdish music were smashed when played in cafés. Egyptian teachers were sent into Kurdish regions.²¹ However, it was the survival of small literary societies and clandestine groups which made the restructuring of the Kurdish nationalist movement possible around the Kurdistan Democratic Party in Syria (KDPS) in 1957.

Yet, as with all Syrian political groups, Kurdish circles were also influenced by regional events. Spurred on by the events in Iraq, particularly the agreement between Abdul Karim Qasim and Mustafa Barzani to integrate the Kurdish nation into the definition of the Iraqi state, the KDPS succeeded in mobilizing a large number of Kurds between 1958 and 1961. Within this context, Jalal Talabani, a member of the political office of the KDP-Iraq who took refuge in Syria, played a decisive role in making the KDPS program. Subsequently, the

KDPS served as a propaganda platform for the KDP, which later acted as a link between the KDPS and the “Iraqi” Party.

The party, like all political organizations under the UAR, engaged in clandestine activities, such as the publication of written works in both Kurdish and Arabic, in order to alert the Kurds and the world in general to Syria’s specific problems. The objectives of founding party members were eventually dramatically reduced to merely seeking recognition of the Syrian Kurds as an ethnic group with the right to their own culture.

As in the past, tensions between a rather pan-Kurdist program and a much more “Syrian-oriented agenda” plagued the Kurdish movement. According to Osman Sabri, he founded the KDPS in 1956 together with Abdul Hamid Hajj Darwish, who was studying law at the time, Rashid Hamo (a teacher) and Shaykh Muhammad Isa Mahmud. A year later, the founding members chose Nureddin Zaza, who had returned from Europe in 1956, as President. At the insistence of Jalal Talabani, the name of the party was changed to Kurdistan Democratic Party in Syria at the beginning of 1960.²² This name change, which Osman Sabri opposed because it represented a possible danger to the party members, was significant, for it implied that the Kurdish enclaves of North Syria were also part of Kurdistan. Accordingly, Kurdish aspirations could include the potential annexation of these Syrian territories by an autonomous or independent Kurdistan.

Unsurprisingly, after several months of surveillance, on August 5, 1960, the leaders of the executive committee were arrested and tortured. Within a few days, more than 5,000 people were arrested. The leaders of the KDPS were accused of separatism and eventually condemned to prison.

The years of endless splits, 1963–80

On March 8, 1963, a coalition of Baathist officers seized power in the name of pan-Arabism and socialism, just a month after the Iraqi Baathists’ coup in Baghdad. However, conflicts between factions and people close to the Baathists were so intense that they systematically paralyzed decision-making. Tensions in the ranks of the Baathists culminated in a new coup led by General Hafiz al-Assad on November 13, 1970, and the establishment of the Corrective Movement one year later²³.

Thirty years of the Baath Party under Hafiz al-Assad only deepened the paradoxes and contradictions in Syria. These contradictions included Baathists’ simultaneous socialist ideology and Syria’s dependence on how it was viewed by the capitalist world, the theoretical functioning of the democratic parliament and the reality of the military regime, the aspiration to Arab unity and the pragmatic sense of Syrian interests, and the development of a real national consciousness and persistent community attachments.²⁴

Despite the regime’s contradictions, the Kurdish movement was unable to defend Kurdish interests. In addition to state coercion, the fragility of the KDPS was also due to both internal and external dynamics. Since its inception, the KDPS was subject to various divisions stemming from generational and ideological differences. Although the party had succeeded in bringing together ex-members of the Khoybun and the SCP, this union did not suffice to neutralize the tensions between its left wing (ex-SCP members, young students, teachers and manual laborers) and its right wing (notables, religious leaders and landowners).

These differences added to the split between the partisans of the “progressive” approach of the KDP in Iraq centered on Jalal Talabani, and the “conservative” approach led by Mustafa Barzani. Divisions within the Iraqi KDP also had repercussions on the KDPS. Subsequently, the latter was divided into three blocs: one pro-Barzani, and two contesting parties

split between the left (Osman Sabri and Muhammad Nayo) and the right (Abdul Hamid Hajj Darwish). However, Abdul Hamid Hajj Darwish eventually joined the Marxist camp of Jalal Talabani in 1965, even though he was not a leftist.²⁵

In 1970, Mustafa Barzani attempted to reunify the KDPS by inviting all factions to Iraqi Kurdistan. Despite the effort, he was unsuccessful in reuniting the opposing factions under his party's banner, so a new party was created by Daham Miro. Though this new formation succeeded in uniting conservative party members, the "young go-getters", led by Mullah Muhammad Nayo and Abdul Hamid Hajj Darwish, were not reintegrated in the KDPS, known henceforth as "The Party". Eventually, the left wing came to be led by Salah Badr al-Din of the Kurdish Leftist Democratic Party.

In 1975, the year the Kurdish movement was defeated in Iraq and Mustafa Barzani's KDP broke up, Jalal Talabani made his own attempt to unite the Syrian Kurds. A congress was held, but those loyal to Barzani refused to participate. Furthermore, the Kurdish Leftist Democratic Party split in two, though it kept the same name until 1980. As a result and in the face of pointless ideological disputes, the parties in Syria were condemned to live in a state of lethargy.²⁶

The rise of Assad's game, 1970–99

The Baathist regime, of course, was not an innocent party in these endless splits. As the Baathist regime departed from its original ideology, Hafiz al-Assad was to look for unofficial ties with different elements of the Syrian society. In 1976, as the opposition movement grew among the Syrian Arabs, Assad sought to placate the Kurds by reintegrating certain Kurdish individuals and groups into the communal system and giving them religious (namely, Shaykh Ahmad Kaftaru) and military positions (Alawite Kurds from North-west of Aleppo), positions which did not fall within ordinary ranks of the Syrian army, but into its elite divisions. The Baathist regime also established fluent connections with some Syrian Kurdish parties.

Abroad, this policy of co-optation served to facilitate both the achievement of Assad's regional ambition and to disperse the Kurdish "danger" from Syria. Hafiz al-Assad's regime succeeded in displacing "its" Kurdish problem toward Iraq and Turkey between 1970 and 1990, thus encouraging the polarization of the Syrian Kurds between partisans of the Kurdish movements in Iraq and those in Turkey.²⁷

The establishment of a Baathist regime in Baghdad in 1968, along with a shared Baathist ideology and common economic interests (notably the Kirkuk/Mediterranean oil pipeline and the use of the Euphrates' waters), far from encouraging Iraqi-Syrian cooperation, remained a source of controversy between the two countries for a long time. From 1968, tensions between Syria and Iraq were obvious, primarily in the struggle for Baathist ideological legitimacy.

By 1971, a resolution proposing autonomy for the Iraqi Kurds was approved during the Baath party's 11th national congress since the Kurdish issue had become an additional factor of tension. But the Kurdish political scene in Iraq was also experiencing significant upheavals with the collapse of the KDP after the Alger Agreement of 1975, which provoked the collapse of the party. The former dissidents of this organization, such as Jalal Talabani and other leftist parties, created the Patriotic Union of Kurdistan (PUK) in 1975.

Relations between Syria and Iraq worsened significantly during the 1980s, when Damascus sided with Iran during the Iran-Iraq War (1980–88), condemning the invasion of Iran by Iraq because it weakened the struggle of the Arab states against Israel. In exchange for this support, Iran allied with Syria at the time of the Israeli invasion of Lebanon in 1982. As the Iran-Iraq

conflict dragged on, Damascus sought to weaken Baghdad by working on the reconciliation between the PUK and the KDP, which was accomplished in 1987 and reinforced by the creation of a United Front.

In the early 1980s, external pressure compelled Hafiz al-Assad to take an interest in the Kurdish nationalist movement in Turkey. The conflict between Turkey and Syria was rooted in the transfer of sovereignty from the Sanjak of Alexandretta (Hatay) in 1939 during the French Mandate which benefited Turkey. Besides this territorial dispute, Turkish dams on the Euphrates threatened Syria's water supply, and the announcement of plans to build a dam at Keban in Turkey only served to exacerbate the existing tensions between the two states, leading to border skirmishes.

A connection between these two issues emerged when Turkey proposed an agreement with Syria on sharing the Euphrates' waters in exchange for recognition of its borders. Syria, however, refused to integrate the border question into the negotiations, preferring to exert pressure on Turkey by allowing the PKK and its leader, Abdullah Öcalan, to establish bases on its territory. Later on, the PKK was moved from north of Damascus to the Masum Korkmaz training base in the Beqa valley in Lebanon, which was under the control of the Syrian army. During the Lebanese conflict, the PKK took up arms for the first time in the name of solidarity with the Palestinian cause, thus creating the nucleus of a professional army. In August 1984, the PKK officially launched its armed struggle against the Turkish state.²⁸

Thanks to the cooperation of the Assad regime, northern Syria became a breeding ground for PKK militants during the 1980s and the 1990s. While there are no exact figures regarding the youths who were active members of the PKK, certain sources estimate that between 7,000 and 10,000 Syrian Kurds died or "disappeared" during clashes with the Turkish army.²⁹ According to certain critics of the PKK, families of the disappeared never received call-up papers for these young men, with the clear implication that the Syrian government either quietly accepted enrollment in the PKK "in lieu of compulsory military service", or, alternatively, that it was informed by the PKK of Syrian Kurdish casualties.³⁰

Yet, resorting to "parallel diplomacy" led to increased pressure and caused collateral damage to all the parties involved in the conflict. On the one hand, Damascus' strategic alliances with the PKK, the KDP and the PUK paved the way for tensions between these three competing parties and their local Syrian bases, thereby polarizing the Syrian Kurds. On the other hand, Syria steered its Kurdish nationalists toward the "true Kurdistan(s)", meaning the Kurdish regions of Turkey and Iraq. Therefore, as David McDowall argues, Jabal Talabani, Abdullah Öcalan and probably Masud Barzani either denied the legitimacy of the Syrian Kurdish movement or dismissed it as a small-scale movement that distracted from the "real struggle" for Kurdistan.³¹

Finally, relations between "minority clients" and "patron states" also turned out to be extremely risky. Threatened by the 1996 Turkish-Israeli alliance and dependent on water from the Euphrates, Syria finally succumbed to Turkish pressure to withdraw all support for the PKK. Following Egyptian and Iranian mediation, Damascus expelled Abdullah Öcalan on October 9, 1998. In January 1999, Öcalan began a long journey that took him to Kenya where he was arrested and transferred to Turkey. On August 2, 1999, imprisoned Abdullah Öcalan called for a unilateral cease-fire, accepted by the PKK three days later.

However, "parallel diplomacy" also came at a high cost for the Syrian regime as Assad had to accept the strengthening of cross-border relations between the Syrian Kurds and the Kurds in neighboring countries, while using the Kurdish movement against Iraq and Turkey. By the same token, Syria relinquished part of its sovereignty, particularly in its relations with the PKK. Physically, PKK's militants took *de facto* control over a few small portions of Syrian

territory, notably in Kurd Dagħ. Symbolically, the PKK and the KDP managed to replace the state in the minds of some young Kurds, the same as portraits of Öcalan and Barzani replaced those of Hafiz al-Assad in public spaces such as shops and workplaces. Overall, a relative freedom of action related to propaganda and training that was available to PKK representatives, and to a lesser extent to the KDP and the PUK, led to an increasing awareness of the Kurdish identity in Syria and to the strengthening of the pan-Kurdist ideal by “proxy”. The most obvious political consequence of these dynamics was the adoption by some Kurdish parties of the expression “Syrian Kurdistan” or “Rojava”, referring to Northern Syria, as opposed to the moderate, “Kurdish regions of Syria”.

The “Syrianization” of the Kurdish issue, 1999–2011

The impact of the collapse of the PKK-Damascus axis was deeply felt in Syria; various high-ranking PKK officials were handed over to Ankara, and former PKK fighters returning to Syria were sentenced to prison. In 2003, PKK militants created a new party, the PYD to secure an organizational framework for thousands of its members and sympathizers.

As previously discussed, by delivering Öcalan to the Turkish authorities, Syria lost an important asset for exploiting the Kurdish card at a regional level. Syria’s relations with the Kurdish parties in Iraq also suffered a major blow after the fall of Saddam Hussein in 2003. The Iraqi Kurds were among America’s closest allies during the 2003 Gulf War, allowing them to besiege Kirkuk, the oil-rich historic capital of Iraqi Kurdistan. The acceptance of federalism in the constitution as the new Iraqi state’s system of organization in 2005 only served to strengthen the importance of the Iraqi Kurds, both in Iraq and in the Kurdish arena in the Middle East.³² Almost immediately, demands for administrative autonomy following the Iraqi model were made with varying degrees of intensity in Turkey, Iran and even Syria, confirming the cross-border character of the Kurdish question.

In parallel, the years 2002 and 2003 bore witness to a paradox in Syrian political life. Between 2000 and 2001, at the end of the “Damascus Spring”, when Arab collectives and political parties were playing a major role in articulating political opposition to the regime, the opposition’s center of gravity was displaced toward the “periphery” of the Syrian political arena, that is, toward the clandestine Kurdish parties. In 2001, discussion forums organized across the entire country, including Qamishli, were closed, and the most visible figures of the movement were arrested. It was at that time that a previously marginal party, the Yekîti (Kurd), decided to take various public actions in the Syrian capital denouncing injustice toward Kurds.

The Yekîti Party was created by reshuffling several Kurdish partisan groups of diverse origins, which could be simply separated into two main themes: the first was leftist and included Marxist allies and proponents of national liberation, while the other consisted exclusively of Kurdish nationalists. In the beginning, situated to the left of the political spectrum, the Yekîti did not offer a very different profile from the other “progressive” and “secular” parties, although certain sociological differences were discernible when compared to other groups. First, although the leaders of Yekîti included representatives of all social strata, students, intellectuals and liberal professionals (doctors, lawyers) dominated their ranks. Also, the party was strong mainly in urban centers. Second, the leaders of Yekîti tried to expand the boundaries of the “Kurdish problem” beyond the narrow limits of an “identity movement” to encompass the broader role of a “civil society” movement and respect for all human rights, a program to which various groups could relate. Finally, the Yekîti Party

demonstrated its ambition to change the Kurdish movement's repertoire of collective action by giving more visibility to its demands and putting forward a "Syrian" program around the slogan "the Kurdish problem is being settled in Damascus".

For a while, the PYD seemed to follow Yekîti's "Syrian" strategy. The Qamishli uprising of March 2004 and its aftermath provided the PYD an opportunity to resume its activism in Northern Syria, together with Yekîti and other small Kurdish parties. On March 12, 2004, during a football match between the local team and Dayr az-Zor in the town of Qamishli, insults between the fans of the two sides escalated into a riot that spilled out into the streets. The governor of Hasaka, Salim Kabul, gave the order to the security forces to open fire, resulting in six dead, all Kurds, three of whom were children.

Rumors of a real massacre quickly circulated, and thousands of people demonstrated, while the youngest sections of protestors attacked several symbols of the regime, such as the statutes of Hafiz al-Assad and public buildings.³³ During the following days, the riots spilled over all Kurdish enclaves as well as in the Kurdish neighborhoods of Damascus and Aleppo. Significantly, it was the first time that the Kurdish parties and all Kurdish areas in Syria seemed to reach a high degree of unity in the face of the Syrian regime. This unity, however, did not last. On October 16, 2005, the parties associated with the Iraqi KDP presented the Declaration of Damascus, a document that established a unified platform for democratic change and a solution to the Kurdish issue in Syria. Four parties, including Yekîti and PYD, did not endorse the text. While the former asked for equal rights for Kurds as a "minority", the latter pointed out that the Kurds were not "guests living in an Arab country"; on the contrary, they lived on their own "land".

Notwithstanding their different views of the Kurdish issue, given the lack of support from the Arab Syrian opposition and state violence,³⁴ all Kurdish parties sought a new balance with the regime by late 2005. Accordingly, the Syrian regime would be more likely to allow a flexible approach with respect to public expressions of Kurdish identity (language, music, cultural festivals and public events), while the Kurdish movement would not embrace the goal of overthrowing Bashar al-Assad. Although selective state coercion regarding some Kurdish political figures as well as public demonstrations increased from 2008 onward, the accommodation between the two camps remained unchecked until the "Syrian revolution" of March 2011.

New opportunities and new constraints, 2011–16

The Syrian uprising of March 2011 seemed to provide unprecedented political opportunities for the Kurdish parties. Yet former divisions and conflicts undermined all attempts to unite Kurdish forces behind a single goal: either overthrowing the Syrian regime or establishing an autonomous entity led by a united Kurdish front. Furthermore, as the Syrian crisis became progressively a regional conflict, traditional divisions within the Kurdish political field intersected with deeper and older dynamics, that is, a strong influence of transborder developments and third parties on the Kurdish arena in Syria.

Actually, the Syrian uprising had a profound divisive effect in Northern Syria. While young activists demonstrated against the regime from the very beginning, Kurdish parties adopted at first a wait-and-see strategy. Thus, in June 2011, after demonstrations had already put significant pressure on the Syrian government, the leaders of the Kurdish political parties were invited to Damascus as party representatives for the first time since Bashar al-Assad came to power. The invitation, which was ultimately declined, was part of a host of "pro-Kurdish" measures that the Syrian government had embraced since the beginning of

the revolution. These measures also included the naturalization of registered stateless people (*ajanib* or foreigners) on April 7, 2011, and the effective repeal of Decree 49 on March 26, 2011, measures that satisfied two of the main programmatic demands of Kurdish parties and the Kurdish street activists. For its part, the PYD declared that the “Syrian revolution” was not “their own” revolution, and thus, they should adopt a “neutral” position between Syrian rebels and the Syrian government.³⁵

At the end of March 2012, however, the three blocs – youth committees, traditional Kurdish parties organized under the umbrella of the Kurdish National Council (KNC), and the PYD – transformed themselves into two camps as youth activist groups were co-opted by either the KNC or the PYD. In parallel, however, increasing numbers of regional actors – state- and non-state armed groups – became involved in the Syrian crisis. Turkish Prime Minister, Recep Tayyip Erdogan, declared his former “friend” Bashar al-Assad an illegitimate leader. Subsequently, Erdogan opened Turkey’s doors to Islamist rebels at the Turkish-Syrian border. Iran and Russia expressed, in turn, their will to support Assad’s regime at any cost. Meanwhile, Saudi Arabia and Qatar financed diverse jihadist groups in Syria. It is within this context that the Syrian regime decided to partially withdraw its security forces from the Kurdish enclaves in July 2012.

The ambiguities of “democratic autonomy”

The PYD and its militia, the YPG, are currently the most important actors in the Kurdish regions. Until the beginning of the protests in 2011, the PYD was not only the party with the most sympathizers in Syrian prisons, but its members were also, as a rule, sentenced to longer prison terms than the members of other parties and were systematically subjected to torture. By July 2012, however, the balance of power shifted in favor of this party.

The PYD not only kept away from anti-government protests, its members also clashed with dissident demonstrators in the Kurdish regions. As a result, the Syrian army did not have to open a “second front” and was able to stay focused on other areas: namely, Aleppo, Damascus and Homs. In return for its role in hampering dissent, the Baath regime gradually pulled the army and the secret services out of the predominantly Kurdish regions of Afrin, Kobane and Jazira³⁶ and transferred control to the PYD. The fact that all these regions were taken over by the PYD without major armed conflicts points to the existence of agreements, whether official or unofficial, between the PYD and the Syrian regime.³⁷

Either way, Assad’s decision pursued an additional goal, that is, allowing for the emergence of a buffer zone between Turkey and Syria, dominated by the PYD/PKK. In so doing, the Syrian regime hoped to weaken Turkey’s strategy with regard to Syria. Like his father 30 years earlier, Bashar al-Assad was thus using the PKK/PYD card to apply pressure against Turkey. Subsequently, between 2012 and 2013, hundreds of PKK cadres and militants moved from Mt. Qandil (Iraqi Kurdistan) into Northern Syria in order to put in place a political framework of a *de facto* autonomous area and prepare the Syrian Kurds militarily. Thanks to its traditional popularity among the Syrian Kurds and its high internal discipline, the PYD rapidly overcame other challengers, including non-PYD-affiliated youth committees and members of the KNC. Freed from any significant opposition, the PYD alone promoted the declaration of a local administration followed by the appointment of three governments in the “cantons” of Jazira, Kobane and Afrin on January 21, 27 and 29 of 2014. Moreover, on March 17, 2016, the PYD decided to establish a federal administrative system throughout the areas under PYD control, in which its principles – “democratic autonomy” and “democratic confederalism” – were to prevail.

In the proposed system of “democratic autonomy” and “democratic confederalism”, the former refers to a re-grounding of the political status of people on the basis of self-government, rather than on peoples’ relations with the state. “Democratic confederalism” aims at strengthening local administrative capacities organized in the form of councils at the very local level, of streets and then neighborhoods, through districts/villages and towns/cities to regions. “Democratic confederalism” may thus be regarded as a form of self-administration in which autonomy is organized. More importantly, following Abdullah Öcalan’s prison writings, the PYD claims that a decisive break from centralized and representative systems is needed; the Kurds, as well as all peoples in the Middle East, should abandon the nation-state system, to embrace a kind of communal self-organization.³⁸

In theory, “democratic confederalism” should bring to the fore local concerns and lead to a much more locally rooted Kurdish agenda. Reality, however, is different. On the one hand, “democratic autonomy” has turned into something else in *Rojava*—a system that is reminiscent of the older and well-known model of “people’s democracy”, a political concept common in former socialist countries. There is one ruling party, and all the other groups must subordinate themselves to the party. Competing parties are not allowed to participate in the political process. The consequence of this ideological position is severely felt in the PYD-ruled regions: the number of unlawful arrests or kidnappings in order to intimidate representatives of other political parties has significantly risen since the PYD gained control.³⁹

On the other hand, as Michiel Leezenberg points out, *Rojava* was considered by the PKK as a social and political laboratory in which Öcalan’s principles could be implemented and tested. More importantly, and contrary to the “grassroots” aspirations, the “effective control appears to have remained solidly in the hands of PKK military leader Cemil Bayik”.⁴⁰ Consequently, PYD strategies and alliances within the Syrian context are, in fact, tightly connected to PKK concerns and objectives, which include first and foremost its struggle against the Turkish state, as well as its ambitions to monopolize the Kurdish arena at a regional level. As such, like in the 1980s, but also like in the late 1920s, the Kurdish issue in Syria seems to be subordinated, at least for some parties, to the Kurdish question in Turkey.

It goes without saying that this strategy faces constraints as well. While the central committee in Mt. Qandil continues to decide on important matters, the PYD has to manage significant portions of Northern Syria where local demands – reconstruction in Kobane, boosting economy and education as well as providing security against Islamist attacks – are a constant reminder of the tensions between the party’s principles and practice. At the moment, YPG’s military cooperation with the United States against ISIS around Raqqa secures a central position for the PYD within the Kurdish and Syrian arena. Yet, once the ISIS threat becomes less pressing for the Western powers, the PYD/PKK might face an increasing pressure from Turkey and Syria at the same time, where both could come to the conclusion that the “Kurdish card” is no longer useful. In such a scenario, a repeat of the 1998 dramatic blow for the PYD/PKK should not be ruled out.

Conclusion

Since they were established, the PYD’s relations with the Syrian regime have remained ambiguous. When the Syrian uprising erupted in March 2011 and Syrian-Turkish relations collapsed, Assad allowed PYD leader Muhammad Salih Muslim to return to Syria and encouraged the PKK to reinforce its presence in the northern part of the country. Thirteen years after Öcalan was arrested and imprisoned by the Turkish government, the Syrian regime and the PKK/PYD again found themselves in an alliance of necessity.

Partial withdrawal of Syrian security forces from northern Syria in the summer of 2012 allowed the PYD to become the main political actor in those regions. In so doing, some of the traditional characteristics of the Kurdish question in Syria seem to have changed dramatically. First of all, unlike during the Mandate period, as of November 2016, the PYD and the YPG have succeeded in establishing an (almost) continuous strip of land along the Syrian-Turkish international frontier. Second, the power of local notables—tribal chieftains and Christian elites—has faded away to be replaced by a hegemonic political force—the PYD—that has assumed control of main roads, border crossings and administrative functions in the three Kurdish enclaves.

Consolidation of Kurdish identity and autonomy in Syria may seem unstoppable at the moment. But the “Rojava laboratory”, to use Leezenberg’s expression, may be impeded by social variations that predate the establishment of the Syrian state, and by the resulting divergence in political trends – subordination of the Kurdish issue in Syria to other “Kurdistan(s)” against a much more local agenda – and uneven distribution of strength among the Kurdish political parties in the three enclaves in northern Syria.

Indeed, the PYD’s hegemony is not without its challengers. Kurds in some “liberated” areas have increasingly expressed their disappointment with the authoritarian behavior of the PYD/PKK, reminiscent of the Baathist regime. Furthermore, intervention by Iraq’s Kurdistan Regional Government – in particular its President, Massud Barzani, as the “protector” of Syria’s Kurds – namely, the KDP in Syria and the KNC – has awakened regional intra-Kurdish rivalries. Finally, tensions between some local branches of the PYD and the central command of the PKK in Mt. Qandil on issues such as the proposal to establish a “living museum” in Kobane to “honor the Kurdish martyrs” which would occupy large sections of the devastated city, best illustrate the contradictions and ambiguities of “democratic autonomy” as it has been implemented in *Rojava*.⁴¹

In sum, although the uprising of 2011 has paved the way for unprecedented dynamics and opportunities, the tight connectedness of the Kurdish issue in Syria with external influences, including parties from other Kurdish areas and regional powers, continues to impose political and, since 2012, military constraints on the evolution of the Kurdish struggle in Syria.

Notes

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- 2 Stefan Winter, “Les Kurdes de Syrie dans les archives ottomanes”, *Etudes kurdes* 10 (2009), pp. 125–56.
- 3 Centre des Archives Diplomatiques de Nantes [Thereafter CADN], *Fonds Beyrouth, Cabinet Politique, No. 1367*, “Répartition de la population de la Haute Jézireh”. Beirut, April 1939.
- 4 Richard Thoumin, “Deux quartiers de Damas. Le quartier chrétien de Bâb Mushallâ et le quartier kurde”, *Bulletin d’études orientales* I (1931), pp. 116–35.
- 5 Nelida Fuccaro, “Ethnicity and the City: The Kurdish Quarter of Damascus between Ottoman and French Rule, c. 1724–46”, *Urban History* 30 (2003), pp. 206–24.
- 6 Philip S. Khoury, *Urban Notables and Arab Nationalism: The Politics of Damascus, 1860–1920* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1984), p. 526.
- 7 Nelida Fuccaro, “Minorities and Ethnic Mobilisation: The Kurds of Northern Iraq and Syria”, in Peter Sluglett and Nadine Méouchy (eds.), *The British and French Mandates in Comparative Perspectives* (Leiden: Brill, 2004), p. 595.
- 8 Christian Velud, “L’émergence et l’organisation sociales des petites villes de Jézireh, en Syrie, sous le mandat français”, *URBAMA* 16–17 (1986), pp. 85–103; Vahé Tatchjian, *La France en Cilicie et en Haute-Mésopotamie. Aux confins de la Turquie, de la Syrie et de l’Irak* (Paris: Karthala, 2004).
- 9 Jordi Tejel, *Le mouvement kurde de Turquie en exil. Continuités et discontinuités du nationalisme kurde sous le mandat français en Syrie et au Liban, 1925–1946* (Bern: Peter Lang, 2007).

- 10 Hamit Bozarslan, “Les révoltes kurdes en Turquie kémaliste (quelques aspects)”, *Guerres mondiales et conflits contemporains* 151 (1988), pp. 121–36.
- 11 See Jordi Tejel, “Le Khoyboun et la fabrication des premiers martyrs du nationalisme kurde”, *Etudes kurdes* VI (2004), pp. 41–58.
- 12 See Robert Olson, *The Emergence of Kurdish Nationalism and the Sheikh Said Rebellion, 1880–1925* (Austin: Texas University Press, 1989); Ihsan Nouri Pasha, *La révolte de l’Agri-Dagh* (Geneva: Editions kurdes, 1986).
- 13 10. *NA (London)*, *AIR 23/414*. Memo from Air Headquarters Baghdad to D.I.G of Police. “List of Kurdo-Armenian nationalists”. Baghdad, December 4, 1928.
- 14 Jordi Tejel, “The Kurdish cultural movement in Mandatory Syria and Lebanon: An unfinished project of ‘National Renaissance’, 1932–46”, in Djene Rhys Bajalan and Sara Zandi Karimi (eds.), *Studies in Kurdish History, Empire, Ethnicity and Identity* (London: Routledge, 2015), pp. 158–74.
- 15 Respectively, *CADN, Fonds Beyrouth, Cabinet Politique*, No. 1054. Petition addressed to General Billotte. Aleppo, May 9, 1924; *CADN, Fonds Beyrouth, Cabinet Politique*, No. 1054. Petition addressed to General Billotte. Aleppo, April 1, 1924.
- 16 *Ministère des Affaires Etrangères (Paris)*, *Quai d’Orsay, série Levant 1918–40*, No. 181. Memo presented by Sureya Bedir Khan to Philippe Berthelot, general secretary to the Ministry for Foreign Affairs. Paris, August 7, 1928.
- 17 *Service Historique de l’Armée de Terre (Paris)*, *4H 319*, No. 3, “The Kurds”, No. 465/C.E/R. Beirut, January 19, 1943.
- 18 *Archives Dominicaines, SAULCHOIR (Paris)*, *Haute Jazira*, No. 45, Vol. II, “The Manifesto from Jazira”. April, 1938.
- 19 Jordi Tejel, *Syria’s Kurds: History, Politics and Society* (London: Routledge, 2009), pp. 42–45.
- 20 Derek Hopwood, *Syria, 1945–86. Politics and Society* (London: Unwin Hyman, 1988), p. 39.
- 21 Fereď Nemir, “La politique kurde de la Syrie”, in Halkawt Hakim (ed.), *Les Kurdes par-delà l’exode* (Paris: L’Harmattan, 1992), p. 151.
- 22 Mamed Jemo, *Osman Sebrî, Apo. Analyse bio-bibliographique* (Paris: University of Sorbonne nouvelle, 1990), pp. 33–34.
- 23 The new leader of the Baathists aimed to shift and broaden the regime’s foundation by means of an open economic policy and a practical foreign policy, contributing to the constitution of the informal axis of Damascus-Riyadh-Cairo.
- 24 Elizabeth Picard, “La Syrie de 1946 à 1979”, in A. Raymond (ed.), *La Syrie d’aujourd’hui* (Paris: CNRS, 1980), p. 183.
- 25 For a comprehensive analysis of the evolution of the Kurdish parties in Syria, see Harriet Allsopp, *The Kurds of Syria: Political Parties and Identity in the Middle East* (New York: I.B. Tauris, 2014).
- 26 Christian More, *Les Kurdes aujourd’hui: Mouvement national et partis politiques* (Paris: L’Harmattan, 1984), p. 205.
- 27 Jordi Tejel, “Les Kurdes de Syrie, de la ‘dissimulation’ à la ‘visibilité’?” *REMM* 115–16 (2006), pp. 117–33.
- 28 For a comprehensive early history of the PKK, see Paul J. White, *Primitive Rebels or Revolutionary Modernizers: The Kurdish Nationalist Movement in Turkey* (New York: Zed Books, 2000).
- 29 Harriet Montgomery, *The Kurds of Syria. An existence denied* (Berlin: Europäisches Zentrum für Kurdische Studien, 2005), p. 134.
- 30 David McDowall, *The Kurds of Syria* (London: HKRP, 1998), p. 65.
- 31 *Idem*, pp. 69–70.
- 32 Hamit Bozarslan, “Le Kurdistan d’Irak aujourd’hui”, *Critique Internationale* 29 (2005), pp. 25–36.
- 33 For a comprehensive analysis of the Qamishli uprising, see Jordi Tejel, *Syria’s Kurds: History, Politics and Society* (London: Routledge, 2009), pp. 108–32.
- 34 By late March, the final count was 43 dead, hundreds wounded, and around 2,500 arrests.
- 35 For a comprehensive analysis of the early stages of the Kurdish involvement in the Syrian uprising, see Eva Savelsberg and Jordi Tejel, “The Syrian Kurds in transition to somewhere”, in Mohammed M.A. Ahmed and Michael Gunter (eds.), *The Kurdish Spring: Geopolitical Changes and the Kurds* (Costa Mesa, CA: Mazda Publishers, 2013), pp. 189–217.
- 36 An exception is Qamishli, where the Syrian army and its security service still have a base.
- 37 Eva Savelsberg, “The Syrian-Kurdish movements: Obstacles rather than driving forces for democratization”, in David Romano and Mehmet Gurses (eds.), *Conflict, Democratization, and the Kurds in the Middle East, Turkey, Iran, Iraq and Syria* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2014), p. 98.

- 38 See Joost Jongerden and Ahmed Hamdi Akkaya, “Democratic confederalism as a Kurdish spring: the PKK and the quest for radical democracy”, in Mohammed M.A. Ahmed and Michael M. Gunter (eds.), *The Kurdish Spring. Geopolitical Changes and the Kurds* (Costa Mesa, CA: Mazda Publishers, 2013), pp. 163–85.
- 39 International Crisis Group, *Flight of Icarus? The PYD’s Precarious Rise in Syria* 151 (2014).
- 40 Michael Leezenberg, “The ambiguities of democratic autonomy: the Kurdish movement in Turkey and Rojava”, *Southeast European and Black Sea Studies* 16: 4 (2016), p. 683.
- 41 Between August and December 2014, ISIS besieged the city of Kobane. As a result, large sections of the city were destroyed. Following the intervention of the US air force, Kobane was freed from ISIS, and projects of reconstruction arose. While the central command of the PKK in Qandil urged the creation of a “Kobane living museum”, local reactions against this project—namely, the right of inhabitants to reclaim their land and property—prompted PYD’s branch to voice these local concerns. At the time of writing, it is still unclear whether the project will be implemented or not. Firat News Agency, “There is a proposal to turn Kobanê into a museum”, *Kurdish Info*, January 31, 2015, www.kurdishinfo.com/muslim-proposal-turn-kobane-museum, accessed May 26, 2016.

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THE ROOTS OF DEMOCRATIC AUTONOMY IN NORTHERN SYRIA—ROJAVA

Michael Knapp

A look at the political constellations of Northern Syria in 2017 reveals various dominant powers. The conflict in Syria might be portrayed in simplistic geopolitical manner as a conflict between Russian and US interests along with their allies. Yet this is part of the picture now dominated almost entirely by the cruelty of the so-called Islamic State. While the conflict does have its geopolitical background, the war is fought along sectarian and ethnic divisions. With its Neo-Ottoman policy, Turkey tries to play out Sunnism in its gamble for power, while Iran, Syria and Iraq are using Shiite identity as political leverage.

Against this divisive policy, the multicultural and multireligious Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF) form a counterpoint of radical togetherness. They are composed of Arabs, Suryoye¹, Turkmens, Kurds and numerous supporters from all over the world.² It is no coincidence that some of their most prominent commanders are women, like Cîhan Şêx Ehmed, a commander of the Women's Defense Units (YPJ).³ The multiethnicity of the SDF and the prevalence of women in command posts do not arise from nowhere. Rather they are products of a historical and ideological development that is intertwined with the presence of the Kurdistan Workers Party (PKK) and its ideological development in the region. Nevertheless, the SDF are not a sub-organization of the PKK but are nurtured by the concepts of plurality and democracy inspired by Abdullah Öcalan, imprisoned chairman of the PKK.

In this chapter, we will engage with the development of the Democratic Autonomy and Democratic Confederalism concepts in Rojava society. The roots of the ideology of Apoism⁴ lie within the PKK's Marxist-Leninist uprising in Northern Kurdistan (Turkey) but developed alongside a deep criticism and self-critique of authoritarian socialism and the implementation of communalist and feminist models in the whole Kurdish region and particularly in Rojava. This chapter will address the emergence of models for radical democracy in Rojava, by viewing the history of the Kurdish liberation movement and its impact on the region. In the following pretext, a short introduction to the history of Kurdish political organization in the last century will be given, focusing on the ideological shift within the PKK, and arriving at the formation of the (Kurdish) Democratic Union Party (PYD) along with the development of a post-party policy in Rojava, as well as the meaning of Democratic Autonomy as concept and practice.

From Ottoman Empire to monistic national state

The region of Mesopotamia and Syria has long been one of many diverse cultures: the Kurds, Arameans, Armenians, Arabs, Chechens, Jews, Greeks and many more throughout history. In relation to ethnic, cultural and religious identity, various policies were carried out and were reflected in peaceful cohabitation as well as in open war and persecution.

In 1516, what we today call Syria had been overrun by the Ottoman Empire. For most of its governance, the Ottoman Empire tolerated other beliefs and was not explicitly based on ethnicity. The percentage of Christians within the empire was one-third in 1516 and was still 20% in 1912.^{5,6} Statecraft was weak, especially in the mainly Kurdish-inhabited regions, and a large part of the Kurdish population lived as nomads who crossed the border controlled by regional lords. Tensions escalated with the introduction of the French-inspired Tanzimat reform period of 1839–1876, which tried to establish centralism and led to uprisings—especially in the Kurdish emirates whose autonomous privileges had been abolished.⁷ Punctuated by insurrections, Ottoman rule continued until 1918.

World War I for the people in today's Syria was marked by forced recruitment, disease and famine. The Ottoman Empire, a close German ally, disintegrated at the end of the war. National statehood in Europe can be dated to the 18th century, against a background of market creation and infrastructure for capital accumulation that gave capital the option for expansion of military and colonial power up through modern imperialism. In the Middle East, national statehood was practically prepared by the Sykes-Picot Agreement of 1916—shaping the Middle East to fit British and French strategic interest. After the defeat of the Ottoman Empire alongside the Central Powers, the establishment of national states in the former territory gained momentum. While the Ottoman Empire was based on an Islamic ideology of legitimation, the introduced European model of the national state was structured on the intertwining of Ethnos and Demos. This led to nationalist and racist ideologies like Turanism and Pan-Arabism, which connected citizenship with “being Arab” or “being Turk,” while other identities were persecuted or assimilated. Thus, “becoming Arab” or “becoming Turk” was decided by the borders drawn in the Sykes-Picot treaty and the path of the Baghdad railway. The construction of national borders split the Kurdish population and even family ties. The ancient city of Nusaybin was split and became the city of Al Qamişli (founded 1926) on the Syrian side; Serê Kaniyê became Ras Al Ayn in Syria and Ceylanpınar in Turkey (split in 1918).

Until its formal independence in 1946, today's Syria remained under French domination. As an antithesis, French colonial policies had generated a Pan-Arabist discourse influenced by European nationalism, especially German romanticism. In the 1930s, Syrian Kurds alarmed by growing Arab nationalism rebelled against Arab rule from Damascus and agitated for autonomy in Cizîrê. In response, the French government placed Cizîrê under its own direct control in 1938.⁸ During World War II, Vichy France (along with Germany and Italy) built air bases in Syria. In 1941, the Free French forces invaded Syria with British support and promised independence—but with the victory of Charles de Gaulle in France and the restoration of French colonialism, the promise was broken.⁹ France was trying to maintain its control over Syria, which soon was rendered impossible by the resistance of the population of the region and the weakness of the position of France in the Middle East, especially in comparison to Great Britain.¹⁰ After an election victory of the National Bloc under Al Quwatli in 1943, the Syrian government gave notice to the French authorities that the Syrian constitution would be amended, providing complete independence. In 1944, the administration began to be transferred to the Syrian authorities; official independence

was obtained in 1946.¹¹ The Ba'ath (Arabic for "reawakening") Party—founded in 1940—was the strongest Pan-Arabist movement at that time. The new party, secular and anti-imperialist, offered careers to supporters of Arab nationalism. Pan-Arabist identity was built not on religion but on nationhood,¹² and the movement attracted people whose lives had been disrupted by the imperialist drawing of borders.

Yet Pan-Arabism also had a problem: it excluded "non-Arab" population groups by definition, notably the Kurdish people in the north. In 1961, the Syrian Arab Republic was declared and identified as an ethnically homogeneous Arab nation-state.¹³ In the following year, a census was taken of Heseke province, after which 120,000 to 350,000 Kurds (the numbers vary) were stripped of their citizenship and left with no legal standing. This condition would be passed down to their descendants.¹⁴

After a coup in 1963, the Ba'ath Party came to power, and the head of internal security for Heseke province, Muhammad Talab Hilal, developed a twelve-point plan for the Arabization of northern Syria:

The bells of Jazira sound the alarm and call on the Arab conscience to save this region, to purify it of all this scum, the dregs of history until, as befits its geographical situation, it can offer up its revenues and riches, along with those of the other provinces of this Arab territory.... The Kurdish question, now that the Kurds are organizing themselves, is a malignant tumor which has developed and been developed in a part of the body of the Arab nation. The only remedy which we can properly apply thereto is excision.¹⁵

Reflected in this anti-Kurdish plan was not only Hilal's distrust of the Kurds, but also the fear of a growing Kurdish self-consciousness that questioned the definition of an Arabic Republic.

Hilal's plan included removal of the Kurds from their land, denial of education and job opportunities, extradition of "wanted" Kurds to Turkey, replacement of Kurdish clerics with Arabs, a propaganda campaign, settlement of Arabs in Kurdish areas, establishment of an Arab *cordon sanitaire* along the Turkish border, creation of cooperative farms with Arab settlers, denial of the right of non-Arabs to vote or hold office and denial of Syrian citizenship to immigrant non-Arabs. This plan was executed in the following decades.¹⁶ Several of these points had already been implemented with the deprivation of citizenship in 1962; the rest were carried out from 1966 onward. Kurdish landowners who were critical of the system had their land expropriated, and Arabs were allowed to settle in the region. Under Hilal's plan, Kurdish sources suggest that 6,552,700 acres of land were expropriated from Kurdish farmers by the Syrian state.¹⁷

The first Kurdish parties in Syria

Kurdish parties had already been formed by 1957 with the Democratic Party of Kurdistan-Syria (PDK-S), from which most of the region's later Kurdish parties would issue. The PDK-S had close ties to the PDK-I in Iraq, and splits within the PDK-I were reflected along the same fault lines in Syria. Along with the permanent repression and infiltration, this led to uncountable numbers of small parties and alliances.¹⁸ The character of these parties was one of negotiation with the Syrian state, even though they were illegal. The Kurdish population mostly refrained from organizing within the parties, both because of the infiltration and heavy repression, and because the people were alienated from the parties due to interparty rivalry.¹⁹

Democratic Confederalism and Apoism

While the population was highly politicized, they organized themselves within their own neighborhoods and families and not much within party structures. In these social relationships and fabric that already existed, in Middle Eastern and the Kurdish society due to structures of Aşîret,²⁰ we see one of the sources on which the model of communalism in Rojava has its roots. Nevertheless, the structures of Democratic Autonomy are formed to transcend Aşîret structures as well as ethnic-, belief- or gender-based divisions to organize communal life together.

Apoism is a complex ideology for a concept of radical democracy, with similarities on the one hand to communalists like Murray Bookchin, taking up the understanding of radical Democracy from Hanna Arendt, who saw in “council democracy” the lost treasure of democracy,²¹ and on the other hand with Rosa Luxemburg, who explicitly included the democratization of economy in the concept while mainly focusing on the organization of workers.²² The discourse of these American and European theorists is then linked to the communal social fabric and history of Mesopotamia, with the aim of taking the collective structures of solidarity and exchange from traditional societies while discarding patriarchal and feudal traditions.

To make this distinction, Apoism is analyzing history in a way that posits a matriarchal or matrifocal society without hierarchy in Neolithic ages before statecraft and patriarchy were introduced “by treason and force.” From this point of view, Apoism is trying to empower what Öcalan calls “democratic civilization” while discarding the structures of “state civilization” and “capitalist modernity.” The importance of this historical consciousness is visible in the fact that members of the PKK take their oath on the “Neolithic values.” At the base of Apoism’s values are decentralization and responsibility of the community; therefore, it has to be said that the PYD is ideologically Apoist and therefore close to the PKK but not a part of it.

The concept of Democratic Confederalism entails the self-governance of society, not through the state but through communes consisting of a few households (usually between 20 and 150), which solves problems in economy, justice and security as far as possible within the commune. Only if problems cannot be solved on the communal level are wider levels like quarter councils or city councils involved. The commune has a strict gender quota of 40% and co-chairpersons, at least one male and one female. If there are other religious or ethnic identities within the commune, they are represented in that context as well. The co-chairpersons represent the commune within quarter-councils, which send representatives to the city councils and from there to the next higher council, depending on the region. All these councils form a parallel structure which can coexist with representative democratic structures as we see in today’s Rojava. If these structures are attacked, there exists a right of self-defense, such as the situation with the ongoing conflict in Turkey. However, the focus lies by principle on finding peaceful, political solutions, a consequence of the stalemate between the PKK and Turkish state in the 1990s.

In a self-criticism of the PKK and on principles of violence more generally, Öcalan explains,

An ideology which sees killing as a virtue or sees it as virtue under certain circumstances isn’t serving the ideals of liberty and equality of the exploited and oppressed humanity. It has to be seen as progress to reckon with “theories of violence” giving violence more legitimacy than the necessary right of a society on a free life and a common accepted legitimate self-defense.²³

Democratic Autonomy implies the political autonomy of the council and the individual in their political decision-making within the boundaries of the social contract. For Rojava or

Northern Syria today that means many councils and communes may share Apoist values but are not PYD, and that other communities like Arabs in Tall Abyad or Manbij also start organizing themselves in communes as an effective means of individual and collective political participation. Apoism is using a third way in the question of individual and society, which means taking neither the individualist stance of liberalism nor the collectivist stance of statism. It states that the individual can only be understood through society, and vice versa. Democratic Autonomy emphasizes that both the individual and society administer themselves through their own will.²⁴ Thus, Apoism recognizes individual as well as collective rights and stands for equilibrium between the society and the individual. An isolated individual only able to formulate their political will through periodic voting is seen as powerless. Therefore, the commune arises to guarantee the representation of the individual in a sort of dialectic between singularity and multitude.²⁵

Seen from the perspective of this singularity-multitude dialectics, the PYD must be understood much differently from a classical party aiming at the representation of individuals or groups (and their interests) within the parliament. It is more of a structure supporting the organization of society through council democracy. Aldar Xelil from the leadership committee of TEV-Dem describes the phase between 2005 and 2011 as follows:

We had been working in 2005 for about two years for the PYD. After these two years, we understood that we've got to work more within society to embed organization within society. The project of Democratic Autonomy wasn't aimed at building a political party but a social project. Therefore, we overcame the limited work within party boundaries. In that context, we built up KCK-Rojava, something like the people's council of Rojava.²⁶

Abdullah Öcalan also formulates this concept:

The process started by the foundation of the people's congress (Kongra-Gel) will unfold step by step. Building up the communal self-governance of Kongra-Gel as instrument of coordination is the core of the Kurdish process of democratization. This democratic movement has no resemblance to the Kurdish Regional Parliament in Iraqi Kurdistan whose federalism is based on a feudal-bourgeois understanding of state. Kongra-Gel rejects statism in principle. Democratization and statecraft oppose each other in a dialectic contradiction. The theories and institutions constructed out of the initiative of Kongra-Gel won't construct a federal but a democratic Kurdistan.²⁷

Apoism is highly critical of representative democracies and suggests a form of radical democracy based on councils:

Instead of binding the people to the state by election rituals, democratic action can only mean to encourage it to his own existence, freedom and self-governance. To pursue posts within the state and advertise for this within the people means nothing else than a heavy blow against democracy. I call it treason that democracy became exactly like this in the 19th and 20th century... The game of voting the own rulers is actually nothing different from a meeting of slaves which meet occasionally to confirm the same lord.²⁸

As an alternative to the model of representative democracy, Apoism offers radical council democracy. Toward that concept, the raising of consciousness is considered of high importance:

True Engagement for democracy can only be realized, if it rests on the social identity of population, its freedom and self-governance. Democratic action means creating consciousness and organization in all communities, villages and city quarters and creating this way a platform for decision making regarding the most basic problems of the people and entrusting persons with their implementation.²⁹

At least in the Kurdish regions, Democratic Confederalism has become a counterweight to the devastating consequences that monistic nation-statism has brought to the region. Understanding that the national-liberation struggle aimed at building a “state of one’s own” only reproduces the problems of power, monism and statecraft, Apoism calls for a solution beyond national statehood. The Leninist principle of people’s right of self-determination is redefined as the right of the singularity to organize life within the confederation of the multitude, in contrast to the right of every people to a national state. Democratic Confederalism is not necessarily aimed at overthrowing the state but at strengthening the social fabric for organizing society. It emphasizes assembly democracy as an alternative way of organizing society, by beginning to organize former state tasks within the community and federation.

From the PKK to the PYD

The foundation of the PYD is closely connected to the development of the Kurdish movement as inspired by the PKK. An understanding of contemporary developments in Rojava requires a short introduction to the PKK’s history in the region.

After the military coup of 1980 in Turkey, the PKK used the antagonism of Syria to acquire a (more or less) safe haven within Syria and Syrian-occupied Lebanon. The PKK of the 1980s must be seen in the context of anti-colonial liberation movements and therefore within the political coordinates of the Cold War, struggling as a Marxist-Leninist-oriented liberation movement for the establishment of a socialist, democratic-centralist Kurdistan. Although it worked in the context of other anti-colonial liberation movements, the PKK saw the struggle primarily as a question of the democratization of society and maintained a critical distance from Real Socialism. Nevertheless, Syria acted geopolitically within the auspices of the USSR and had an interest in tactical support for the PKK due to its enmity toward the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) state of Turkey.

The Syrian state tolerated the activity of the PKK in the region as long as the PKK organized the Kurds in the struggle against the Turkish state and not within Syria. The Mahsun Korkmaz Academy was founded on the Bekaa Plain, where tens of thousands of people received their political education, and within the PKK, it was normal at that time to refer to the region of Rojava by the term “little south,” striving for the liberation of Northern Kurdistan (Turkish Kurdistan) followed by the other parts.³⁰ The main route for PKK fighters into the mountains of Kurdistan went directly through Rojava and Cizîrê into the Cudi Mountains.

The PKK had to be careful not to jeopardize its safe haven, which was crucial for its survival; organizing the Syrian Kurds in addition to the Turkish Kurds required much tactical diplomacy. While the Syrian state tried to use the PKK as a tool to control the Kurdish population, the reports of witnesses from Rojava tell that this is only part of the story. When the PKK started to be highly present in Northern Syria/Rojava, it began with community organizing and education. During interviews in many cities, interlocutors related their experiences with the leading cadres of the PKK—up to Abdullah Öcalan—coming to cities

like Tirbespî, Amûde, Dêrik, Kobanî and Afrîn to give education programs on Kurdish identity, women's liberation and self-organization, and planting the seeds of the developments we see today.

With the collapse of the Soviet Union in 1990–1991, Real Socialism came to an end. As liberation movements around the world disintegrated, the situation in Syria and the PKK began to change as well. While the PKK reached a peak of military capacity in the beginning of 1990s, it became clear that the war against the Turkish state could not be won militarily by either side. This initiated the development of political solution mechanisms. The first-time federative models and a democratization of Turkey as whole came into the discussion within the PKK. Meanwhile, the United States and its ally Turkey pressured the Syrian government to expel the PKK. Turkey, by controlling the water supply to Syria (through dams of the Southeastern Anatolia Project) and threatening direct intervention, forced Syria to break up the PKK camp. Öcalan was made to leave Syria and begin a long voyage which ended in his abduction and imprisonment in Turkey.

After Abdullah Öcalan was expelled from Syria, the Ba'ath regime's repression nearly inhibited the PKK entirely from continuing its work within Syria: "When Serok left Rojava, it got much harder," said Silvan Afrîn, a Yekîtiya Star representative in Dêrik:

The repression was extreme. The regime arrested many people in Rojava. We continued, but underground ... There could be only a few protests, and all the organizing had to be done covertly. We did actions for our martyrs and demonstrations for International Women's Day, but about five hundred women would come, and a thousand soldiers.

The repression heightened after Lebanese politician Rafiq Al-Hariri was murdered, for which Syria was blamed. Hanife Hisên, a member of the TEV-DEM³¹, saw a further escalation due to Syria's isolation after the attack

Syria was isolated internationally—it was surrounded by enemies, Lebanon and Israel. Turkey became an important friend in the region. Turkey and Syria held talks in Adana and agreed on the goal of isolating the Kurds. In fact, they secretly decided on a plan to annihilate the Kurds. So for us, the years from 2004 to 2011 were a period of decline and betrayal.

From the beginning of his imprisonment, Öcalan intensively studied the writings of libertarian theorists like Murray Bookchin and the historians Immanuel Wallerstein and Michel Foucault as well as works on Sumerian mythology, religion, philosophy, archaeology, physics and much more. He also developed a critical analysis of his own practice as leader of the PKK. From all these sources, he developed the models of Democratic Confederalism and Democratic Autonomy that would become foundational for revolutions in Rojava and North Kurdistan. Öcalan began to develop the shift of paradigm within the PKK from centralism to communalism, from a centralized party to a multifaceted self-organization of civil society.³²

In all parts of Kurdistan, new parties with the paradigm of radical democracy, peace, Democratic Confederalism and women's liberation were founded. These parties were not extensions of the PKK but were inspired by the ideology of Öcalan.

One of these parties was the PYD in Syria, founded in 2003. The PYD was able to build on the work of the PKK in Rojava in the 1980s and 1990s. With the shift of the PKK from centralism to a decentralized, communalist, radical democratic, antinational concept, the

function of the PYD differed quite significantly from the model of classical parties. While other parties at least aimed for mass membership, the aim of the PYD was the empowerment of society to build up councils and the empowerment of communities, especially women.

Therefore, the councils organized were not based on PYD membership, but tried to reach all strata of society. The PYD played the role of ideological motor, strongly supporting the radical democratic self-organization of society. While Marxist-Leninist ideology was based on organizing the worker class, the Apoist movement tries to organize society as a whole, with the intention of empowering the people to solve their basic needs. All the regional Apoist parties, as well as other parties and civil organizations, are represented in a kind of federative structure: the People's Congress, Kongra Gel. This connection especially seems to have come under attack, as on 29 November 2004, when Şilan Kobanî [Meysa Bakî] from the board of the PYD and representant in the leadership of Kongra Gel was killed in an attack near Musul, as were Zekerya Îbrahîm [Zekerya Toros], a member of the PYD board; Hikmet Tokmak [Fuat]; and PYD members Hacı Cumalî [Civan Kobanî] and Nebû Ali [Cemil Kobanî].

The building up of self-defense and council structures in Northern Syria

In the events at Qamişlo on March 12, 2004, when a soccer game ended in anti-Kurdish rioting that killed at least 70 people and injured more than 300, the repression against Kurdish organizational structures with ideological ties to the PKK soared. Women's activist Hanife Hisen, who witnessed those times, described the situation as follows: "the Assad regime used [that] soccer game as an opportunity to arrest hundreds of Kurds and to ban the parties." A climate of fear and repression prevailed. "At this stage, the state tortured some friends to death. The people withdrew into private life. In one week in February 2011 a hundred people were arrested in Aleppo."³³ All witnesses report this as a time of fear and withdrawal. Nevertheless, this fierce repression catalyzed the formation of the first clandestine, armed self-defense structures around which the Peoples Self Defense Units (YXG) and later the YPJ/YPG would form. Silvan Afrin, an activist of the women's movement Yekîtiya Star, described the time between 2004 and 2011 as follows: "At one time we had around 15 members in a neighborhood.... We were committed to building a substantial confrontation, and the people were very much aligned with the movement's ideals." Connections to Arab women were built up too, as Arab activist Aysa Efendi states: "I was arrested [in 2008] because of my political work and taken to Aleppo. There I was imprisoned for a year and tortured repeatedly." But she kept working: "We women in the Arab culture were nearly slaves. So we had the most to gain from this revolution—but also the most to lose. And overturning the clan structures and the various ethnic boundaries takes time."³⁴

Despite the severe repression, the organizing not only continued but gained momentum. As Aldar Xelil describes this phase, "We organized in that time, between 2005 and 2007 secretly because every time the regime got to know about our councils its members would be arrested. Some of them had been tortured to death already."³⁵ The model of clandestine councils was implemented, and party members as well as a majority of nonparty members were included. Those councils could be seen as a first step toward the organizing of society. The difference from Marxist Leninist concepts was that all parts of society should be included in these councils. Certainly, the inclusion of persons not close to the movement was hindered by the heavy oppression.

In 2005, the Apoist women's movement Yekîtiya Star was founded. Their first task was organizing women and building up clandestine councils. Most of the men had already been

arrested, and according to Hanife Hisen, only women could move freely. Therefore, most of the organizational work depended on the women's council. Hanife Hisen described the work of Yekîtiya Star in that time as follows: "They conducted educational sessions, held meetings, and did grassroots work. But it was all very precarious. The men who were arrested suffered brutal punishments. That's why the women did all the organizing. Only the women could move around openly."³⁶

While on the brink of civil war, the Kurdish movement sought alliances for a peaceful democratization of Syria. Under the rule of the Baath regime, this task was difficult, and particularly due to repression, families close to the Apoist ideology were organized in the underground structures of the Kurdish movement. A major problem in those times which interview-partners repeatedly mentioned was the fragmentation and individualization of society due to fear of repression and assimilation.³⁷ The grade of organization differed significantly; while Kurdish quarters of Aleppo, the region of Afrîn and Kobanê had organized many civil councils since 2004, the situation in Cizîrê was more fragmented due to the high presence of traditional Kurdish parties with close ties to the PDK in Northern Iraq/Southern Kurdistan.³⁸ The organization process within society was clandestine, and from the outside nearly invisible. This is reflected also in the research discourse of the time, as scholars like Jordi Tejel stated in 2009 that the Apoist movement was unable to get a hold in society alongside the traditional parties that dominated the region.³⁹ This may be connected to the fact that the Apoist movement in general and the PYD in particular were highly engaged in community organizing.

Building up of YXG and YPG

Furthermore, the traditional parties had lost their appeal—especially to the youth movement—and as the situation in Syria began to deteriorate, the organization of quarter councils sped up.⁴⁰ The PYD itself was quite aware of the problems of fragmentation and destruction that a war would cause, and engaged itself in opposition for a peaceful change. Another danger arose as opposition groups grew more and more influenced by Turkey, Saudi Arabia, Qatar and the Muslim Brotherhood, taking an anti-Kurdish (more or less Islamist) position. Especially in cities like Aleppo with a high possibility of escalation, the amplification of self-defense became necessary. Beritan Sorxwin, an eyewitness of that time in Aleppo, stated,

When we started building up self-defense units especially in the quarters of Ashrafiye and Sheik Maqsoud especially young people on the streets began to join the structures. They were frustrated with party policy but saw the necessity of defense of the quarters. Some people in the quarters looked at these sometimes-tattooed young people disrespectfully but when they saw them active in the defense of the quarters the view in them changed and many more people joined the self-defense units.⁴¹

H. Amer confirmed this:

The first to join were young people from the streets, with no strong [political] views. As soon as the first martyrs fell, more people joined. Almost every family already had members who were martyrs, [meaning PKK guerrillas]. At first our work was very dangerous. Regime agents were everywhere, all around us. In all of Dêrik there was only one friend [heval]. But gradually we visited all the families of martyrs and prisoners,

and everyone was ready to do something. The state left us in peace, and we established a few strong points.⁴²

Silvan Afrin explained the further development:

In the spring of 2011, we expected that the protest movement would spread.... We talked about how to get ready for it, and what we would do. We were very watchful. That spring we began to build people's organizations. The question arose as to how we would protect ourselves. So in July or August we established the YXG [predecessor of the YPG]. At first we were few in number, as most people were still so intimidated by the state. We invited all the minorities to a founding congress, but because the war was going on, only a handful had the courage to show up.⁴³

Afrîn then explained the relationship of councils to the PYD in the following way:

The only party that supported us was the PYD. We were always criticized for that, but the PYD had worked every day at the grass-roots, and our numbers grew. We built the armed units illicitly. Many people in Kurdistan had weapons hidden away: shotguns, pistols, Kalashnikovs. Within six or seven months we organized the self-defense committees of the YXG clandestinely.⁴⁴

These self-defense units were not to be understood as party militias of the PYD but as self-defense organizations following the Qamişlo uprising in 2004. With the heightening oppression in 2005, secret self-defense units in Afrin, Qamişlo and Aleppo were formed. By 2007, these self-defense councils undertook their first military activity against anti-Kurdish attacks in Raqqa. As the tensions in the Middle East grew in 2010, serious military organization took place.⁴⁵ Sipan Hemo, a former YXG commander, stated that from 2010 onward, an intervention in Syria or Iran was expected.⁴⁶ This was probably seen both as a danger and opportunity. Military organization took place even before the first uprisings in Syria. Secret self-defense teams were built up, and in the summer of 2011, the YXG was proclaimed with four active regions: Aleppo, Afrin, Kobani and Qamişlo. "In the spring of 2011, we expected that the protest movement would spread," Silvan Afrîn told us.

Sipan Hamo related,

We declared that we would retaliate [against] any attack against our people and promised this. At this time the Syrian regime was very strong in our region. We built up a secret camp in Afrin and gave three months' education programs and sent the teams afterwards in other cities. ... We said that we would defend all Kurds despite of their political orientation.⁴⁷

The first actions of the YXG were retaliations against murders of Kurdish politicians. Hamo stated that the first official YXG operation was the retaliation for the murder of a Yekîî member, a party which stands quite apart from the PYD. Afterward, they responded to an attack on a leader of the Partiya Peshverû in Kobanî with a raid on a police station. That was the first operation of the YXG against the Syrian state. Other operations against state officials followed. The YXG received a heavy blow with the killing of Xebat, one of their important commanders. At his funeral, hundreds of thousands participated and showed their support for these structures and growing the ranks of the YXG⁴⁸

In February of 2012, the Peoples Defense Units (YPG) was founded. Like the YXG, it arose not as party organization but as a defense force for all parts of society. Thus, from the beginning, members of many different parties and ethnicities participated in the YPG, which was formed not only as a unit of defense for all Kurds but for all peoples of Rojava.⁴⁹

The self-administration at the brink of civil war

In the meantime, protests of Kurds in cities of Northern Syria grew louder. “We decided to hold a regular anti-regime demonstration every Friday,” Hanife Hisên said. “But we saw that if we were going to send people out into the streets, we had to be able to protect them. Otherwise, all it would take was one attack, and they wouldn’t go out anymore.”⁵⁰

“Before the revolution began,” recalled current PYD co-chair Asya Abdullah, both as a party and as a movement, we had stayed away from people’s assemblies and instead hashed out our differences in ideas at congresses. But then at people’s assemblies we listened to the views of the people. Projects were proposed, decisions were made, and a road map was created. Subsequently, we published our project for Democratic Autonomy. We think it’s the best solution not only for West Kurdistan but also for all of Syria.

In the spring of 2011, the protesters won several concessions. In June, the state of emergency that had been in place since 1963 was ended. Just months earlier in April, a Syrian ministry had announced that the stateless Kurds would finally receive Syrian citizenship, and the next month they were told they had the right to work. Yet this policy affected only those who were registered as “foreigners,” the *ajanib*. The “hidden,” the unregistered *maktoumeen*, were not. Estimations place the number of *maktoumeen* between 140,000 and 160,000. Moreover, compensation of the *ajanib* for their losses had not been discussed.⁵¹

Many Kurdish activists interpreted this sudden, partial concession as an attempt to induce Kurds not to revolt against the regime. However, the concessions of the regime were not accepted, and the Apoist movement of self-governance took the stance that an escalation of conflict in Syria would lead to a protracted civil war endangering the whole society. The Kurdish freedom movement, especially the youth organization and the PYD, supported resistance to the Assad regime as a matter of democratic change; it did not want the conflict to be militarized. Nevertheless, the political conflict gradually turned into civil war, and the main opposition to Assad became Islamized and reactionary. Its democratic character became marginalized, and foreign regional and international forces began to dominate these Islamized factions.

The policy of the “Third way”

Neither the regime nor the main opposition was responsive to Kurdish demands for recognition, so Rojava’s Kurdish movement opted for a third path. “We positioned ourselves as a ‘third force’ between the regime and the opposition,” said Hisên.

Our declared goals within the Syrian rebellion were (1) to permit no attack on Syria from the outside, (2) to avoid armed struggle, (3) to find solutions through dialogue and ally with other opposition forces. But once we established ourselves, groups started attacking us. They accused us of collaborating with the regime. It’s a lie—the regime had always oppressed the Kurds. Even as you and I are speaking today, there are still

people in prison from the old days. We don't collaborate with the regime ... And most of the Syrian opposition was Islamist, and we couldn't ally with them—a revolution can't come from the mosque.⁵²

In August 2011, the People's Council of West Kurdistan (MGRK) was established with the support of the PYD: "Throughout Rojava we held elections, and three hundred people were elected to the People's Council, to shape the politics of Rojava." The co-chairperson of the PYD, Salih Muslim, characterized the people's council of Rojava as follows:

We call it the Western Kurdistan People's Council. It is organized everywhere and it includes the Self-Defense Committees, also in the villages, and they are guarding the people. I mean the people themselves have organized the People Defense Units. They are armed groups and protecting the society. For daily demands and daily work, in the municipalities and towns, we have committees, so we don't need the central authorities or the main government. Everywhere and in every place we have a kind of self-rule, self-government, and till now it is very successful. I think if we could have done it for whole Syria, the situation in Syria would have been different.⁵³

Once the protests in Syria started on March 15, 2011, people of diverse identities encouraged Democratic Autonomy in Rojava as a way to create a society together without a nation-state. Öcalan's models of Democratic Confederalism and Democratic Autonomy were already widely known, driving forward the radically democratic organizing. The construction of multiethnic councils, courts, security forces, military units, women's organizations and economic cooperatives spread all over Rojava in the following months. In 2017, within the canton of Cizîrê alone, more than 4,000 active communes exist and have begun organizing their security, economy, justice and infrastructure collectively.⁵⁴ The development of the communes has found its repercussions in the introduction of more and more parties and ethnicities into the people's council of Rojava and Tev-Dem. The parliamentary structure has peacefully coexisted with the council structure as a parallel system up through now, and the founding of the Federation of Northern Syria has shown that the project is not a project only for the Kurds but for the whole region.

Notes

- 1 Assyrians, Arameans and other Christian minorities in Syria.
- 2 See also <http://kurdishquestion.com/article/3784-sdf-denies-accusations-it-is-affiliated-to-the-pkk>, last checked 25.02.17.
- 3 <http://tr.hawarnews.com/firatin-gazabi-reqqayi-ozgurlestirme-hamlesinin-ucuncu-asamasi-basladi/>, last checked 25.02.1.
- 4 The term Apoism will be used in this article as it is in the Turkish and Kurdish discourse—the ideology of Democratic Autonomy, Democratic Confederalism and Democratic Nation, which will be shortly described in this article. For further reading, see Jongerden, Joost; Akkaya, Ahmed Hamdi (2013).
- 5 McHugo (2015).
- 6 According to Statistics of the German Federal Government, the percentage of Christians in Turkey (2001) is less than 0.8% (www.bpb.de/nachschlagen/zahlen-und-fakten/europa/70539/themengrafik-religionszugehoerigkeit).
- 7 See also Yildirim (2012).
- 8 McDowall (2003), p. 470.
- 9 McHugo (2015).
- 10 Ibid.

- 11 Ibid.
- 12 McDowall (2003), p. 91.
- 13 Ibid., p. 471.
- 14 Ibid., p. 475. The variance in numbers resulted in part from the different counting methods: some counted individuals, while others, as is common in Syria, counted households.
- 15 McDowall (2003), pp. 474–75.
- 16 Ibid.
- 17 Allsopp (2015), p. 25ff.
- 18 For a detailed account on the history of Kurdish parties within Syria, see also Schmidinger (2014), p. 103.
- 19 See also Allsopp, p. 99.
- 20 Aşîret is a structure of amplified, often fictive, kinship, with the potential of forming political as well as military and economic alliances. See also: Aydin, Özel (2006), p. 52.
- 21 Arendt (2011), p. 249.
- 22 See also Knapp and Jongerden (2016).
- 23 Öcalan (2005), p. 25.
- 24 Öcalan (2017), p. 116.
- 25 Hardt and Negri (2013), p. 55ff.
- 26 Interview with Aldar Xelil by the author in May 2015.
- 27 Öcalan (2010), p. 437.
- 28 Ibid. p. 498.
- 29 Ibid.
- 30 Personal conversation with PKK activists who were in Syria in the early 1990s in June 2016.
- 31 The Tevgera Demokratik Movement is an umbrella organization in which various parties and civil organizations participate and support the process of building up all aspects of democratic autonomy.
- 32 See also Jongerden and Akkaya (2016).
- 33 Interview by the author in May 2014
- 34 Ibid.
- 35 Interview by the author with Aldar Xelil in May 2015.
- 36 Interview by the author in May 2014.
- 37 Interviews by author in Rojava end of 2015.
- 38 Interviews by author in Rojava at the end of 2015.
- 39 See also Tejel (2009), p. 79.
- 40 See also Allsopp (2015), p. 206.
- 41 Personal Conversation in May 2015.
- 42 Interview, Rojava, May 2014.
- 43 Ibid.
- 44 Ibid.
- 45 See also Allsopp (2015), p. 132.
- 46 nucehaber.com/haber/roportaj/ypg-komutani-sipan-hemo-kurtler-kaybetmeyecek/5114.html, last checked 25.02.17.
- 47 Ibid.
- 48 Ibid.
- 49 <http://anfurturkce.net/kurdistan/ypg-bazi-kesimler-halklarin-basarisini-karalama-cabasinda>.
- 50 Interview by the author May 2014.
- 51 Allsopp (2015), p. 173.
- 52 Interview by the author, May 2014.
- 53 Comp. Jongerden and Akkaya (2016), p. 174.
- 54 Numbers retrieved by research of the author in cooperation with the regional self-administration of Northern Syria, Canton Cizîrê. See also, Munzur and Enzan (2017).

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PART XI

Iran



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IRAN AND THE KURDS

Nader Entessar

Introduction

The purpose of this chapter is to provide an overview of the Kurdish condition in contemporary Iran. The current phase of the state-society conflict between the Kurds and the central government in Iran and the most serious Kurdish challenge to the Iranian government's authority can be traced to 1945 when the Autonomous Republic of Mahabad was established.¹ Although the Mahabad Republic collapsed after only one year, its ultimate meaning for today's Kurdish dilemma in Iran and elsewhere in the Middle East remains a subject of intense debate among the Kurds. Was Qazi Mohammad, the President of the Mahabad Republic, a Soviet puppet, as his critics have claimed, a naïve nationalist, or a patriot whose main objective was to create an autonomous Kurdistan within a democratic and federal Iran? What was the extent of Soviet involvement in supporting the Mahabad Republic and its ill-fated contemporary in Iranian Azerbaijan? These and similar questions are important issues for historical research and debate. However, for our purposes, there is little doubt that the rise and fall of the Mahabad Republic was a watershed in politicizing Kurdish ethnic demands in Iran.

The demise of the autonomous republics in Mahabad and Azerbaijan accelerated the process of the reintegration of non-Persian ethnic groups into the emerging centralized power structure in Pahlavi Iran. For example, many of the Kurdish tribes that had joined forces with the Mahabad Republic returned to their tribal areas. In the words of General Hassan Arfa, Chief of Staff of the Iranian Army during 1944–1946, the Kurds returned to their tribal homelands

not with the bitter and humiliated feelings of a vanquished nation which had lost its dearly-won but short-lived independence, but only with the knowledge that this venture, like many others before, had not come off and that for the time being they had better sit quietly and show themselves good citizens.²

Notwithstanding General Arfa's assessment, the Kurds accelerated their demands for cultural autonomy after the demise of the Mahabad Republic. As people with a common culture and historical experience and a distinctive language, the Iranian Kurds have long felt that

without cultural autonomy, they cannot attain full citizenship rights in the country. In fact, attachment to the Kurdish language remains perhaps the most important manifestation of contemporary Kurdish nationalism.

Kurdish belongs to the family of Iranian languages, and thus has an Indo-European origin and is more akin to Persian than to Arabic. Nevertheless, Kurdish is distinct from other Iranian languages and is generally unintelligible to the speakers of Persian. There is no Kurdish *lingua franca*, and speakers of various Kurdish dialects may not be able to communicate with each other. However, one should not overemphasize the differences among various Kurdish dialects as they are all related to each other. For example, Kurmanji-speaking Turkish Kurds can easily learn other Kurdish languages and communicate with their counterparts in Iraq. In Iran, the main Kurdish dialect is Sorani, which is widely used in such major Kurdish cities as Mahabad, Saqqez, Sanandaj, and Marivan. Sorani is also the main dialect of the Iraqi Kurds in Erbil, Sulaymaniya, and Kirkuk. Kurds in Kermanshah use Kirmanshani, which is similar to Lori, an Iranian language spoken by the Lors, who live primarily in the neighboring province of Loristan. The Kurds living around Paveh and some other towns near the Iran-Iraq border region use Hawrami (Gurani). In short, language remains the most significant barometer of Kurdish identity in Iran and the rest of the Middle East.³

Mohammad Reza Shah and the Kurds

After the downfall of the Mahabad Republic, the Iranian government outlawed the Kurdish Democratic Party, which had led the revolt against the central government and whose members were heavily involved in running the Mahabad government. The period immediately following 1946 was marked by nationalistic ferment throughout the country. The issue of nationalization of the Iranian oil industry, which had been championed by the nascent nationalist coalition, the National Front, and its leader, Dr. Mohammad Mossadegh, had galvanized the entire country. Mossadegh's nationalistic platform, his liberal democratic ideals, and his desire to govern the country through free elections generated enthusiasm among the Iranian Kurds. When Mohammad Reza Shah was compelled to appoint Mossadegh as prime minister under heavy popular pressure, the Kurdish Democratic Party resurrected itself and began to campaign in various Kurdish cities and towns. Kurdish support for Dr. Mossadegh's government convinced the Shah that the Kurds had to be contained at all costs. In a massive display of support for Mossadegh's crusade to force the Shah to reign and not rule, as stipulated in Iran's monarchical constitution, Iranian Kurds voted overwhelmingly in a referendum on August 13, 1953, to limit the Shah's power. According to the Kurdish leader Dr. Abdul Rahman Ghassemlu, in the city of Mahabad alone, the Shah only received two votes out of a total of 5,000 votes cast.⁴

After the Anglo-American-sponsored coup of August 1953 and Mossadegh's overthrow, the Kurds once again found themselves at the mercy of the Shah's regime, and the Iranian Army was once again placed in charge of Kurdistan. Although sporadic rebellions continued to occur throughout Kurdistan in the post-coup decades, no sustained Kurdish revolt occurred in Iran from 1953 until the onset of the Iranian revolution in 1978. The Shah's success in containing Kurdish nationalism was partly due to the superior forces of the Iranian Army and partly a result of his government's successful carrot-and-stick policy. For example, the Shah managed to "pacify" Kurdistan through a selective policy of co-optation of tribal leaders by offering them political and financial rewards. The powerful Jaf tribal chiefs are a good case in point. The Shah's government identified traditional power holders in the

tribe and subsequently gave them high-level positions in the local and national government apparatus. When he embarked upon implementing his land reform program in 1960–1963, the Shah left the large landholdings of the Jaf tribal leaders untouched. Salar Jaf was given a high-level position in the imperial palace bureaucracy, while his brother, Sardar Jaf, became an influential member of the Iranian parliament.

The Shah's final policy posture vis-à-vis the Kurds was precipitated by the Kurdish revolt in neighboring Iraq. The Shah viewed the assumption of power by the "radical nationalist" Ba'th Party in Iraq as a threat to Iran's national security. Therefore, he decided to use the Kurdish revolt in Iraq as a counterforce to weaken the Ba'thi regime in Baghdad. Until 1966, the only significant outside help to the Kurdish guerrillas, which were led by the veteran fighter Mullah Mostafa Barzani, had come from the Kurdish Democratic Party of Iran. However, the Shah soon recognized the potential for using direct aid to Barzani as a means to

secure some direct influence within the Kurdish national movement. The idea was to make Barzani's movement depend upon the aid and to increase that aid as the movement grew so that eventually the Kurdish movement's survival would depend upon it.⁵

The Shah had correctly calculated that by helping Barzani, he could compel him to cease his aid to the Iranian Kurds and even collaborate with the Shah's government in restraining Kurdish activities inside Iran.

Barzani's policy of collaborating with the Shah's regime proved disastrous for his own political fortunes and the cause of Kurdish autonomy. Scores of Kurdish militants who had left Iran to join Barzani's forces returned home disillusioned with Mullah Mostafa's strategy and objectives. The returning Iranian Kurdish fighters soon found themselves surrounded by the Iranian army and their escape route blocked by Barzani's forces. Some key members of this group, such as Abdullah Moini and Sharif Zadeh, were killed fighting the Iranian army. Sulayman Moini, Abdullah's older brother, along with a number of other Iranian Kurds, was arrested on Barzani's orders and later executed by his forces. According to one estimate, some 40 Iranian Kurdish militants were either killed by Barzani's forces or handed over to Iranian authorities to face certain death.⁶ Mullah Mostafa Barzani himself was victimized by the Shah's policy of divide-and-rule when the Shah and Saddam Hussein signed the Algiers Agreement in 1975, thus abruptly terminating Iran's aid to the Iraqi Kurds, inflicting a severe blow to the cause of Kurdish autonomy in Iraq, and bringing to an end the long career of Mullah Mostafa Barzani as the most significant Kurdish leader of his time.

Iran's revolution and the Kurds

The Kurds enthusiastically supported the Iranian revolution of 1978–1979, and a broad spectrum of the Kurdish population participated in the revolutionary process from the outset. However, the initial Kurdish euphoria over the demise of the Pahlavi monarchy soon gave way to the bitter realization that the Kurdish autonomy demands would go unheeded by the new Islamic government. After the establishment of the Islamic Republic of Iran, it became quite evident that Ayatollah Khomeini's objective of establishing a strong and centralized Islamic state would clash with the goals of autonomy-seeking Kurds. Despite Khomeini's rejection of recognizing ethnic differences among Muslims, the Constitution of the Islamic Republic did recognize the existence of linguistic diversity among the

Iranian people. In Article 15 of the Constitution, Persian is recognized as the official language of the country. All official communications as well as instructional and educational materials must be in Persian. However, the use of local languages in the media and the classroom is permitted so long as the local languages are used in conjunction with Persian.⁷ The only specific recognition given to the minorities in Iran's Islamic constitution was to the non-Islamic religious minorities (Christians, Jews, and Zoroastrians) and not to the Islamic minorities, such as the Kurds. The latter group was viewed as an integral part of the Islamic *umma*, or community, and hence not to be treated differently from other Muslim groups in the country.

The Kurds, however, saw an unrivalled window of opportunity created by the downfall of the monarchy to push for autonomy and recognition of their cultural rights by the new government in Iran. Dr. Abdul Rahman Ghassemlou, who had become the Secretary General of the Kurdish Democratic Party of Iran (KDPI) in 1973, returned to Iran on the eve of the Iranian revolution after several years of exile in Europe and sought to transform what was then a dormant KDPI into the principal Kurdish political organization in the country. On March 30–31, 1979, the Iranian government conducted a referendum asking the voters to vote on a single proposal—to maintain the monarchical system or replace it with an Islamic republic. The KDPI, as well as many other secular groups in the country, boycotted the referendum because it only offered two choices to the voters. Given the general antipathy toward the Shah's regime at that time and enthralled with revolutionary euphoria, it was evident that the majority of voters would opt for the choice of the Islamic republic. Khomeini's exhortations for a massive turnout resulted in an overwhelming victory for the new regime as 98.2 percent voted to replace the monarchy with an Islamic republic.⁸ The Kurds had lost their first political battle with the revolutionary regime in Tehran.

The Kurds then shifted the focus of their political struggle to affect the draft of Iran's new constitution. The proposed constitution was unveiled by the provisional revolutionary government of Prime Minister Mehdi Bazargan in June 1979. Although the draft of the constitution contained democratic provisions to safeguard the rights of all Iranians, the Kurds felt that it did not address their autonomy demands adequately. The KDPI joined many other nationalist and secularist groups and demanded that a constituent assembly, consisting of no more than 500 representatives, be elected to debate and revise the draft constitution. Fearing the dilution of the Islamic elements of the draft constitution if a constituent assembly, representing several constituencies and interests, were to review the document, Ayatollah Khomeini ordered the establishment of a 73-member Assembly of Experts to review the proposed constitution. Kurdish nationalists were not included in this body. Nevertheless, the Kurds continued to articulate their views on the shape of the new constitution in formal and informal gatherings. For example, Sheikh Ezzedin Hussein, the spiritual leader of the Sunni Kurds in Mahabad, argued that since Iran was a multinational state, its constitution must legally recognize the cultural, economic, and sociopolitical rights of all ethnic and religious groups in the country.

Furthermore, many Sunni religious leaders opposed the inclusion of Shi'ism as the official religion of the state in the new constitution. According to Ayatollah Montazeri, the head of the Assembly of Experts at the time of the drafting of the Islamic Republic's constitution, conflicting opinions were expressed by the members of the Assembly on this issue. The Sunni clerics, as well as some Shi'i members of the Assembly of experts (e.g., Azodi) preferred Islam, rather than Shi'i Islam, to be listed in the new constitution as the official religion of the country.⁹ Ahmad Moftizadeh, a Sunni Kurdish cleric sympathetic to the Islamic Republic, was also asked to express his views on this topic to the members of the Assembly

of Experts. In the final analysis, those favoring the inclusion of Shi'i Islam as the official state religion prevailed. They argued that the overwhelming majority of Iranians are Shi'i Muslims, and that even the monarchical constitution had recognized Shi'i Islam as the official state religion. It would be unthinkable for the Islamic Republic to do less than what the Shah had done in this respect. Moreover, they reasoned that the Sunnis would still be able to follow their religious practices and the rulings of their own judges in religious courts.¹⁰ The Kurdish leaders were also concerned that the clerical leadership in Tehran would seek to replace Kurdish leaders, both secular and religious, with Shi'i personalities or Sunnis loyal to the Islamic Republic. As evidenced by subsequent developments, the Kurdish fears in this regard were not without foundation.

Acrimonious debates about the draft constitution and Kurdish autonomy demands conjured up memories of the Mahabad Republic. Furthermore, Ayatollah Khomeini and his supporters within the clergy feared that the foundation of their preferred system of government would be weakened if ethnic demands, especially secular ones, were accommodated in the revised constitution. To make matters worse, tension between the Islamic authorities and Kurds manifested itself in a series of armed clashes between the forces of the KDPI and the newly created *pasdaran-e enghelab* (Revolutionary Guards). In order to stem the tide of armed conflicts in Kurdistan, Sheikh Mohammad Sadegh Sadeghi Guivi (better known as Sadegh Khalkhali) was dispatched to the region to try and punish those who had taken up arms against the new regime in Tehran. As the first judge of the revolutionary courts who condemned scores of high-level officials of the Pahlavi regime to death, Khalkhali's arrival in Kurdistan bode ill for a peaceful resolution of the conflict. In a series of trials that lacked even the most basic elements of fairness, Khalkhali condemned scores of Kurdish nationalists to death. He blamed Prime Minister Bazargan, who had tried unsuccessfully in the past to reign-in Khalkhali's freewheeling dispensation of justice, for the deterioration of conditions in Kurdistan. In particular, Khalkhali accused Barzargan of currying favor with Ghassemlou and other high officials of the KDPI. As Khalkhali put it, by placing "known communists" in key positions in Kurdistan, Bazargan was responsible for the martyrdom of Revolutionary Guards in the region, and by undermining the authority of the revolutionary courts, Bazargan "weakened their steadfastness."¹¹ Continuing armed clashes between the Kurds and the Iranian military and Revolutionary Guards led to, *inter alia*, the banning of the KDPI at the end of autumn 1979 followed by Ayatollah Khomeini's labeling of Ghassemlou as *mofsid-e fil arz* (corrupter of the earth).

However, shortly before the complete breakdown of negotiations between the Kurds and the representatives of the Iranian government, Ayatollah Khomeini issued a conciliatory message addressed to the people of Kurdistan. In his message, Khomeini, for the first time, publicly acknowledged the legitimate grievances of the Kurds. Khomeini promised to continue negotiations with religious and nationalist leaders of the Kurds until peace and calm was restored in the area. Khomeini's message further stated that a lot of people in Iran had suffered under the monarchy and the revolutionary government, and asked for their patience and forbearance. In the last paragraph of the letter, Khomeini beseeched the Kurds to join him in the name of God and Islam to "save our country and to direct our energies against the real enemies of the country led by the United States."¹² The content and tone of Khomeini's last message to the Kurds was profoundly different from his previous message issued three months earlier in which he had issued an ultimatum for the Kurds to lay down their arms. It was apparent that Khomeini had feared that continuing armed clashes in Kurdistan would redound to the detriment of the Islamic Republic and could have even broadened the conflict with unforeseen consequences for the integrity of the country.

Intra-Kurdish conflict in the KDPI

The banning of the KDPI and damning of its leaders by the Islamic Republic did not put an end to the Kurdish leadership's search for dialogue with the Iranian government. However, Ghassemlou's dabbling with the Islamic Republic in search of moderate figures within the ruling circles in Tehran caused open dissension within the KDPI. Some on the left in the KDPI accused Ghassemlou and the "Kurdish bourgeoisie" of betraying the Kurdish cause by abandoning KDPI's ideals in favor of a policy of national reconciliation with the "Iranian bourgeoisie" in the Islamic government.¹³ This led to a major schism within the KDPI. The ensuing power struggle among the different political factions was carried into the KDPI's Eighth Congress in 1988, resulting in the expulsion of 15 prominent members of the party's Executive Committee. The left then coalesced around the expelled members and established a new movement, the Kurdish Democratic Party of Iran—Revolutionary Leadership.¹⁴ However, this breakaway party was never able to develop into a broad-based popular organization and eventually withered away as a functioning entity.

The KDPI was dealt a major blow when Ghassemlou was assassinated on July 13, 1989, while meeting with representatives of the Iranian government in a Vienna apartment. In addition to Dr. Ghassemlou, Dr. Abdullah Ghaderi-Azar, the KDPI's chief representative in Europe, and Dr. Fazel Rasul, a member of the Iraqi Patriotic Union of Kurdistan, were also assassinated by killers who, according to both the KDPI and independent sources, were connected with certain circles in the Iranian power structure. After Ghassemlou's assassination, the KDPI appointed Dr. Sadeqh Sharafkandi to become the KDPI's new Secretary General. In an eerily similar situation to that of Ghassemlou's assassination, Sharafkandi, along with the KDPI's European and German representatives and four other Iranian dissident leaders, was gunned down in the Mykonos restaurant in Berlin in 1992. The Mykonos incident, and the subsequent verdict handed down by a German court on April 10, 1997, further strained Kurdish-Iranian relations. The significance of the Mykonos verdict was that, for the first time, a foreign court had implicated the highest echelon of the Iranian government, including the Supreme Guide Ayatollah Ali Khamenei and then president Ali Akbar Hashemi Rafsanjani, in ordering the killings of the KDPI's leader and other dissidents.¹⁵

The KDPI once again swiftly appointed Mostafa Hejri to replace Sharafkandi. Hejri himself later stepped aside in favor of Abdullah Hassan Zadeh but shortly thereafter resumed his old position as the KDPI's Secretary General, which he currently holds. Hassan Zadeh, in turn, created a separate faction of the KDPI but finally decided to give up active political activity in 2006. The Hassan Zadeh faction of the KDPI appointed Khalid Azizi to lead the smaller faction of the KDPI, which has been led by Azizi since 2006.

In my judgment, the KDPI has yet to fully recover from the loss of Ghassemlou. He was an adept politician who had extensive contacts within a large cross section of Iranian society. Moreover, because of his long residence in Europe, Ghassemlou had also established an extended political network in Europe. There is no doubt that Ghassemlou had been the most recognizable political leader with the widest appeal within the Iranian Kurdish population since the downfall of the Mahabad Republic.

Kurds and the reform era

The election of Mohammad Khatami as Iran's president in May 1997 and the defeat of conservative forces in the February 2000 parliamentary elections generated a great deal of expectation for political change in Iran. Khatami, a reformist mid-ranking cleric,

received some 70 percent of the popular vote with a mandate to reform Iran's political system and allow the emergence of a genuinely pluralistic political culture in the country. As Khatami had stated, "we cannot expect any positive transformations anywhere [in Iran] unless the yearning for freedom is fulfilled. That is the freedom to think and the security to express new thinking."¹⁶ Furthermore, Khatami, from the beginning of his presidency, continued to emphasize the notion of inclusiveness (i.e., Iran for all Iranians) and the importance of the rule of law in nurturing and enhancing the foundation of Iran's political system. The Kurds, as well as several other ethnic groups in the country, welcomed Khatami's election.

However, the reform movement (the Second of Khordad Movement) that brought Khatami to power and provided him with political backing proved to be weak. In addition to limits imposed on the authority of the president by the Iranian constitution, Khatami and his supporters were challenged in all arenas by their conservative opponents. When challenged, Khatami always conceded. Closing down of the reformist newspapers and organizations as well as jailing of supporters of political reform have gone unchallenged by Khatami, save occasional speeches he delivered denouncing violations of the rule of law.

The lingering suspicion that the Kurdish demand for autonomy is, in fact, a disguised attempt at secession has hindered meaningful dialogue between the Iranian reformists and the Kurds. From the outset, the Kurds have denied that their aim is to weaken Iran or to establish a sovereign nation-state of Kurdistan. As Ghassemlou stated emphatically, "Let me make one thing clear: no political force in Iranian Kurdistan wants to secede from Iran. Our demands are framed within the context of [the] Iranian state."¹⁷ He also helped coin the term "democracy for Iran, autonomy for Kurdistan" as the motto of the KDPI. Abdullah Hassan Zadeh, the KDPI's former Secretary General, has also reiterated this point in numerous occasions. In an interview with *Al-Zaman*, Hassan Zadeh further stated that the KDPI believes that the time for establishing small, nonviable countries has long passed. That is, the legitimate rights of the Kurds can be best guaranteed within a democratic Iran. Besides, Hassan Zadeh continued, regional geopolitical realities in the region will not allow the creation and/or survival of an independent Kurdish state.¹⁸

In response, the Iranian authorities have insisted that the KDPI must prove its loyalty to Iran and the principles of the Islamic Revolution. In the words of Dr. Mostafa Chamran, the first Defense Minister of the Islamic Republic, who oversaw some of the most intense battles in Kurdish regions in the early months of the postrevolutionary period, if the KDPI and other Kurds really believe in the Islamic revolution,

we would give them autonomy not just in Kurdistan but also would also ask them to show us how to give autonomy and freedom to every ethnic group in the country. However, if they simply use fancy and misleading slogans to hide their intention to harm Islam and our revolution and to serve foreign powers whose interests are diametrically opposed to those of the Iranian people, including the Kurds, we will fight them to the end.¹⁹

Hamid Reza Jalaipour, a major theoretician of Iran's reform movement, criticized the very notion of autonomy (*khodmokhtari*) as proposed by the KDPI. What does autonomy entail for Iran? What guarantees will Iran have that outside powers would not take advantage of the situation and harm our territorial integrity? Jalaipour further declared that the recipe for Kurdish autonomy is anathema to Iran's national identity and is a foreign concept to most Iranian Kurds. He further stated that because Kurdish history in Iran is so vastly different

from Kurdish experience in Iraq or Turkey, models of autonomy imported from outside Iran are not applicable to Iranian Kurdistan.²⁰

Finally, Kurdish autonomy demands may run counter to similar demands by other ethnic groups in Iran. There are several areas of Iran where the Kurds, Azeris and other ethnic groups live side-by-side. For example, the provinces of West Azerbaijan, Ilam, and Kermanshah are inhabited by numerous groups, including the Sunni Kurds, Sunni and Shi'i Kurds as well as the Armenians and Assyrians. The exclusive ethnic claims of each group may generate inter-ethnic conflict in these provinces.

This problem first came up during the negotiations between the KDPI and the provisional revolutionary government of Iran in 1979 and is still a sensitive issue under Khatami. In fact, when a group of Azeri intellectuals, journalists, students, and parliamentary representatives wrote an open letter to President Khatami asking for more cultural autonomy for the Azeris, they also referred to a "specific ethnic group" that seeks to create another "Karabakh enclave" in Azerbaijan. It was clear that the Kurds were the target of this letter. Consequently, the KDPI criticized both the Azeris and Khatami for ignoring Kurdish claims in West Azerbaijan.²¹ The aforementioned is symptomatic of logistical problems that may snarl granting autonomy demands of the Kurds in a democratic Iran. Notwithstanding political and logistical problems, it is clear that the long-term stability of Iran requires the recognition of the rights of all of its inhabitants.

Kurds in the post-reform era

Iran's ninth presidential election in 2005, which ultimately resulted in the election of Mahmoud Ahmadinejad as the country's president, was marked by an open discussion of "nationality issues" by some of the candidates. This marked the first time since the establishment of the Islamic Republic that ethnic and nationality issues were recognized as part of public policy debate, and several candidates openly sought the votes of Iranian nationalities. Mostafa Moin, the main candidate of the reformist camp, made a special effort to woo voters from the non-Persian nationalities and turned Iran's multinational character into an important part of his campaign platform. Moin criticized both those who ignored the country's multinational nature and those who sought to divide the country along ethnic, religious, and linguistic grounds. In this vein, Moin promised complete equality for all Iranian citizens, which is a right guaranteed under the Iranian constitution. Recognizing discrimination as potentially destabilizing, Moin stated that his administration would be composed of all nationalities. Echoing Khatami's campaign slogan, Moin also made "Iran for all Iranians" the centerpiece of his presidential campaign. In addition to Moin, several reformist personalities and writers opined that without recognizing the rights of Iranian nationalities, democracy would not take root in the country. Furthermore, many reformists welcomed Jalal Talabani's election as president of Iraq and viewed his accession to power in neighboring Iraq as the natural progression of the recognition of nationality rights in the region.²²

Moin was defeated in the first round of presidential balloting. Unlike the candidates of the reform bloc, Mahmoud Ahmadinejad, the winner of the 2005 presidential election, campaigned on a platform that emphasized socioeconomic justice above everything else. His main target was the country's lower class, the *mostazafin* in Khomeini's lexicon, whose economic conditions had deteriorated under the outgoing Khatami administration. Although Ahmadinejad did not make the issue of nationality rights part of his campaign, he was certainly not an unknown figure among the Kurds. In the early years of the postrevolutionary

era, Ahmadinejad was assigned to the Ramazan base of the Revolutionary Guards, with responsibility for military operations in Western Iran, including the Kurdish regions of the country. Ahmadinejad later served in other capacities in Western Iran, including a stint as a principal advisor to the Governor General of Kurdistan.²³

Given the negative connotation of the activities of the Revolutionary Guards in Kurdistan, it was not surprising that the Iranian Kurds participated minimally in the country's presidential election of 2005. Between the two finalists in the second round of the election, Ahmadinejad received 17,248,782 votes, while his opponent Ali Akbar Hashemi Rafsanjani garnered 10,460,701 votes.²⁴ According to figures released by Iran's Interior Ministry, 62.66 percent of eligible voters participated in the election, with the highest turnout (80.43 percent) in the Ilam province and the lowest rate of participation (37.37 percent) in the province of Kurdistan. West Azerbaijan, which includes the cities of Mahabad and Uromiyah with their large Kurdish population, recoded the second lowest participation rate (44.02) in the country.²⁵ In short, the Iranian Kurds expressed their dissatisfaction by boycotting the 2005 presidential elections in large numbers.

Moreover, the military confrontation between the Kurds and the Iranian government forces has intensified since 2005. In particular, Iranian forces and guerrillas of the newly formed Kurdish Independent Life Party (PJAK), an offshoot of Turkey's Workers' Party of Kurdistan (PKK), have engaged in low-level military confrontation inside Iranian Kurdistan and along the Iran-Iraq borders near the Qandil Mountains, with mounting casualties on both sides. The involvement of outside groups in Kurdish affairs in Iran has added an unpredictable twist to the war of attrition in Iranian Kurdistan.

The most significant development in Iranian Kurdistan in the post-Khatami era has been the grassroots uprisings and other acts of civil disobedience in several Kurdish cities throughout the country. The spark that ignited the Kurdish challenge to the post-Khatami Iranian government was generated by the July 11, 2005, shooting of Shavaneh Qaderi, a young Kurdish activist from Mahabad. Subsequently, a number of websites posted photographs purporting to show Qaderi's mutilated body, which contributed to street demonstrations not only in Mahabad but also in several other Kurdish cities, including Baneh, Bukan, Sanandaj, and Saqqez. In addition, several Kurdish groups, including university students in Tehran, issued statements supporting the Mahabad demonstrations and condemning the actions of the Iranian security forces, especially those of the Revolutionary Guards, in suppressing demonstrations in support of Kurdish grievances.

The conditions were further exacerbated by the crackdown on two popular Kurdish-language weeklies, *Ashti* and *Asou*, and the arrest of Roya Tolooi, the editor of the monthly *Rasan* and a well-known activist in Iranian and Kurdish women's rights groups. In mid-2008, a number of Kurdish nationalists, including Farzad Kamangar, Farhad Vakili, Ali Heydarian, Anwar Hossein Panahi, Adnan Hassanpour, and Hiwa Butimar, received death sentences that were challenged by several human rights organizations.²⁶ These are reflective of a pattern of human rights abuses that have affected the Kurds in recent years.²⁷

On the other hand, a number of reformist Kurdish groups and civil society organizations have continued to challenge the boundaries of government authority and push for the recognition of Kurdish rights within the confines of the existing sociopolitical system in Iran. This trend has been reflected in the myriad magazines and newspapers that reflect the vitality of Kurdish intellectual life in the country. For example, the weekly *Sirwan*, which published sophisticated analytical articles on Kurdish politics and society, and the equally analytical biweekly *Hawar* provided objective information in a manner that one does not find by reading highly-politicized Iranian Kurdish publications in Europe and North

America. Unfortunately, both of these publications, which are no longer in print, as well as other similar publications, have to continuously engage in a losing battle for survival in today's Iran.

Furthermore, large-scale arrests of Kurdish civil activists have intensified since Iran's 2009 controversial presidential election which solidified the grip of conservative forces on Iran's governing structures. For example, In February and March 2013, the Mahabad Intelligence Office arrested a score of young Kurdish activists, including Farzad Samani, Rasoul Khezr Morovat, Ghassen Ahmadi, Vafa Ghaderi, Ali Azadi, and Khosrow Kordpour, the Managing Editor of the highly popular *Mukrian News*.

Finally, the election of the "pragmatist" Hassan Rouhani as Iran's president in 2013 initially brought an optimism that his administration's policies would bring about changes in state-society relations in the country. In fact, Rouhani has taken special steps to address the grievances of Iran's marginalized groups. With respect to the Kurdish issues, Rouhani has made investing in manufacturing and infrastructural projects as one of his policy priorities. He has also appointed a special envoy for ethnic affairs. On several occasions, Rouhani has highlighted Iran's multiethnic nature and has stated that the country's ethnic diversity is a point of strength, not a threat to Iran's national security.²⁸ However, there are still numerous issues that have yet to be addressed by the Rouhani administration, and it is too early to pass a definitive judgment on the efficacy of President Rouhani's ethnic and nationality policies. Although many Kurds were disappointed with Rouhani's performance, he was rather easily reelected president in May 2017 with considerable Kurdish support.

Notes

- 1 For details of the Mahabad Republic and its aftermath, see Nader Entessar, *Kurdish Politics in the Middle East* (Lanham, MD: Lexington Books, 2010), pp. 14–23; and Archie Roosevelt, Jr., "The Kurdish Republic of Mahabad," in Gerard Chailand (ed.), *People without a Country: The Kurds and Kurdistan*, translated by Michael Pallis (London: Zed Press, 1980), pp. 135152.
- 2 Hassan Arfa, *The Kurds: An Historical and Political Study* (London: Oxford University Press, 1966), pp. 102–103.
- 3 For an analysis of the role of language in Kurdish nationalism, see Amir Hassanpour, *Nationalism and Language in Kurdistan, 1918–1985* (San Francisco: Mellen Research University Press, 1992), pp. 1–48; and Mehrdad R. Izady, *The Kurds: A Concise Handbook* (Bristol, PA: Crane Russak, 1992), pp. 172–175.
- 4 Abdul Rahman Ghassemlou, "Kurdistan in Iran," in Gerard Chailand (ed.), *People without a Country*, p. 122.
- 5 Ibid., p. 124.
- 6 Ibid., p. 125.
- 7 *Matn-e Kamel-e Qanoon-e Assassi-e Jomhoori-e Eslami-e Iran* [The Complete Text of the Constitution of the Islamic Republic of Iran] (Tehran: Hamid Publications, 1983), p. 28.
- 8 Shaul Bakhash, *The Reign of the Ayatollahs: Iran and the Islamic Revolution* (New York: Basic Books, 1984), p. 73.
- 9 Ayatollah Hossein Ali Montazeri, *Matn-e Kamel-e Khaterat-e Ayatollah Hossein Ali Montazeri* [The Complete Text of the Memoirs of Ayatollah Hossein Ali Montazeri] (Essen, Germany: Union of Iranian Editors in Europe, 2001), p. 252.
- 10 Ibid., pp. 252–253.
- 11 Ayatollah Haj Sheikh Sadegh Khalkhali, *Khaterat-e Ayatollah Khalkhali, Avalin Hakem-e Shar'-e Dadghahaye Enghelab* [Memoirs of Ayatollah Khalkhali, the First Religious Judge of the Revolutionary Courts] (Tehran: Sayeh Publications, 2001), pp. 293–294.
- 12 For the complete text of Khomeini's November 16, 1979, letter to the Kurds, see *Ettelaat*, November 17, 1979.
- 13 Nasser Mohajer, "Ensheab dar Hezb-e Demokrat-e Kordestan-e Iran" [A Division within the Kurdish Democratic Party of Iran], *Aghazi Nou*, no. 7, Summer 1988, pp. 25–29.

- 14 Ibid., p. 27.
- 15 For a complete account of the Mykonos verdict and documents related to this case, see Mehran Payandeh, Abbas Khodaghali, and Hamid Nozari, *Hanooz dar Berlon Ghazi Hast: Terror va Dadgah-e Mykonos* [There Is Still a Judge in Berlin: Terror and the Mykonos Court] (Essen, Germany: Nima Verlag, 2000), and Parviz Dastmalchi, *Mykonos: Matin-e Ra'ye Dadgah* [Mykonos: The Court's Verdict] (Los Angeles, CA: Dehkhoda Bookstore, 2001).
- 16 Mohammad Khatami, *Islam, Liberty and Development* (Binghamton, NY: Institute of Global Cultural Studies, Binghamton University, 1998), p. 4
- 17 See Abdul Rahman Ghassemlou's interview in *MERIP Report*, no. 98, July–August 1981, p. 17; and Nader Entessar, “The Kurds in Iran: The Quest for Identity,” in Ofra Bengio (ed.), *Kurdish Awakening: Nation Building in a Fragmented Homeland* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 2014), pp. 233–251.
- 18 See *Kurdistan* (Organ of the Central Committee of the Kurdish Democratic Party of Iran), no. 278, December 1999, p. 4.
- 19 Mostafa Chamran, *Kurdistan* (Tehran: Foundation of Martyr Chamran, 1985), p. 153
- 20 Hamid Reza Jalaipour, *Kurdistan: Elal-e Tadavom-e Bohran-e An Pas Az Enghelab-e Eslami* [Kurdistan: Causes for the Continuation of its Crisis After the Islamic Revolution] (Tehran: Institute for Political and International Studies, 1993), pp. 164–165.
- 21 For details, see *Kurdistan*, no. 294, October 6, 2000, pp. 1 and 4–5, *Kurdistan*, no. 297, November 20, 2000, pp. 1–3, and *Kurdistan*, no. 304, March 5, 2001, pp. 1 and 5.
- 22 Ataollah Mohajerani, “Entekhab-e Talabani” [Talabani's Election], *Emrooz*, April 7, 2005.
- 23 Kasra Naji, *Ahmadinejad: The Secret History of Iran's Radical Leader* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2008), pp. 29–31.
- 24 “Final Results of the Ninth Presidential Election,” Interior Ministry, The Islamic Republic of Iran, www.moi.gov.ir.
- 25 Ibid.
- 26 Nader Entessar, “Human Rights and the Kurdish Question in the Middle East,” in Mahmood Monshipouri (ed.), *Human Rights in the Middle East: Framework, Goals, and Strategies* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2011), pp. 95–110.
- 27 International Campaign for Human Rights in Iran, “Large Scale Arrest of Kurdish Civil Activists in Mahabad and Sanandaj,” www.iranhumanrights.org/2013/03/kurds_mahabad.
- 28 For example, see *Arya News*, March 26, 2017, www.aryanews.com/Print/120170325214309038.



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PART XII

The Kurdish diaspora



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THE FUTURE OF THE KURDISH DIASPORA

Östen Wahlbeck

The Kurdish communities outside of Kurdistan increasingly constitute a global diaspora. Well-established Kurdish communities are found all over the world, and they form new ethnic minorities in the countries of settlement. Yet these communities continue to be characterised by the various political developments in Kurdistan, including wars, genocide and forced migration that have occurred in the Kurdish regions in Iran, Iraq, Turkey and Syria. The successive waves of Kurdish political refugees that have arrived in the Kurdish diaspora have significantly influenced the processes of community formation and social integration of the diaspora.

Large numbers of refugees have been forced to flee Kurdistan since the 1960s, and the largest communities can be found in Europe¹, especially in Germany². Thus, the focus in this chapter is on Europe, but the developments in Europe also have a relevance for the increasing numbers of Kurds in the rest of the world. According to diaspora theories, time has to pass in order to assess whether a minority community forms a diaspora, or whether the community follows another integration or assimilation trajectory. Diasporas have been defined as expatriate communities that are characterised by their specific relation to a real or imagined homeland.³ Yet the “homeland” has to be understood as an idea; it is actually dislocation and relocation in relation to an idea of a homeland that characterises the diaspora.⁴ Thus, the concept of diaspora has been useful to describe the processes of social organisation, transnational relations and community formation connected to dislocation and exile⁵. The perception of the “homeland” and the political projects connected to it are often significantly influenced by some type of traumatic collective history, which in various ways can be interpreted by members of the diaspora community. The Kurdish diasporas have been characterised by a discourse focussed on the Kurds as victims of persecution, a discourse that is central in maintaining the politicised aspects of the Kurdish diasporas and can be used to motivate transnational political mobilisation⁶. In short, the history of forced migration and the political mobilisation of the community are central for an understanding of the global Kurdish diaspora.

In the case of the Kurds in Europe, the communities already have a long migration history, which is briefly outlined in this chapter from the post-war period up until the European refugee crisis of 2015. The existing research on the Kurdish diaspora in Europe indicates that the communities have been significantly influenced by the continuous arrival of new groups

of Kurdish migrants and refugees, as well as the subsequent transnational social, political and cultural relations between the diaspora and Kurdistan. The continuous transnationalism of a global Kurdish community has enabled the formation of a politically, socially and culturally informed community, which fulfils the traditional characteristics of a diaspora group. Subsequent generations of Kurds tend to continue to identify as Kurds and display a diasporic relationship to Kurdistan. This all indicates that there will be sizeable and permanent Kurdish diasporas in Europe in the future as well. Yet it can also be foreseen that the relative importance of Europe as a centre of the diaspora will diminish in the future because of the increasing number of Kurdish refugees and migrants worldwide.

The chapter describes changes in migration patterns as well as the integration of the Kurdish communities as distinct social, cultural and political communities in Europe. This development also has a significance beyond the case of Europe, and it can be assumed that similar patterns in the formation of Kurdish communities can be found in countries all over the world. The case of Europe provides a possibility to foresee the future developments of the global Kurdish diaspora. The first part of the chapter provides an overview of the major migration patterns and an estimate of the size of the Kurdish population in Europe. The chapter concludes with a discussion of the possible future developments of the Kurdish diaspora.

From labour migrants to asylum seekers

Kurdish labour migrants from Turkey began arriving in Western Europe in the late 1950s and in larger numbers in the 1960s. Most of the migrants came to Germany, but the Netherlands, France and a number of other Western European countries also actively recruited workers from Turkey.⁷ Because of this labour migration, Kurds originating from Turkey constitute a majority of the Kurds in Europe. Nevertheless, many Western European countries also have substantial communities of Kurds from Iran and Iraq, as well as smaller numbers from Syria. In addition to labour migrants from Turkey, Kurdish students and academics from Turkey, Iraq, Iran and Syria have arrived in small numbers in Europe since the 1960s. These intellectuals have been significant in the political and cultural activities of the Kurds in exile, but in terms of numbers, they only constitute a small minority.

The active recruitment of migrant labour came to an end in all European countries in the early 1970s,⁸ but this did not constitute an end to the migration of Kurds to Europe. In addition to family reunions and visiting students, an increasing number of Kurdish refugees and asylum seekers arrived in Europe. Because of various political and humanitarian crises in different parts of Kurdistan, successive waves of Kurdish political refugees have been forced to seek asylum outside the Middle East, and Western Europe has until today been the main destination. In the 1980s and 1990s, the arrival of large numbers of Kurdish asylum seekers significantly increased the number of Kurds in Western Europe. Although a clear majority of the Kurds in Europe originate from Turkey, the Kurds from Iraq have since the 1990s dominated the influx of asylum seekers, and refugees from Iran also have a long history in Europe. A more recent development is the humanitarian disaster in the wake of the wars in Syria and Iraq in the 2010s, which may have various consequences for the migration patterns of Kurds. Clearly, the emergence of a Kurdish diaspora cannot be understood without a consideration of the political developments in the Middle East.

The change in the legal status of the migrants, from the status of labour migrants in the post-war period to the status of asylum seekers from the 1990s onwards, was not necessarily connected to a historical change in the characteristic of the Kurds arriving in Europe.

Economic and political factors are always intertwined, and both factors have influenced the early labour migrants, as well as the later asylum seekers. Rather, the increase in the proportion of refugees can largely be seen as a consequence of the changing immigration policies in the European countries. Kurds applying for asylum would previously have been able to arrive as labour migrants without the extra effort connected to asylum applications. Due to increasingly restrictive European migration policies, including a complete halt to labour migration, applying for asylum has been the only possible way for Kurds to migrate to Europe since the 1980s. Thus, the specific reception and resettlement policies of the respective country of settlement play a large role for the Kurdish diaspora.

The labour migration from Turkey has been the single most important historical event that explains the size of the Kurdish communities in Europe, but the presence of large numbers of political refugees has had a great social, cultural and political impact on the Kurdish communities in Europe.

Some Turkish citizens arrived as refugees in Europe as early as in the beginning of the 1960s,⁹ but the number of Kurdish asylum seekers from Turkey significantly increased in the late 1980s and early 1990s. The increase in this number was related to the development of the violent conflict between the Kurdistan Workers Party (PKK) and the Turkish army. Various crises and wars in Iraq have also produced a large number of Kurdish refugees. Previously, these refugees were often able to find asylum in the Middle East. However, in the late 1990s, growing numbers of Kurds from Iraq arrived to seek asylum in Europe. In the autumn of 2000, Iraqi citizens became the largest group of asylum seekers in Europe, outnumbering refugees from war-ridden Yugoslavia. Due to the influx of large numbers of refugees in the late 1990s, the proportion of Kurds from Iraq significantly increased in the Kurdish communities in Europe.¹⁰ The relatively peaceful situation in the Kurdish areas in Northern Iraq in the 2000s diminished the number of asylum seekers, but refugees from Iraq continue to constitute one of the largest groups of refugees in Europe in the 2000s, and this group continues to include Kurds. In total numbers, Iranian Kurds have not been as numerous as Kurds from Turkey and Iraq, but there has been a steady flow of refugees from Iran since the revolution in 1979. Some Western countries (e.g., Canada, France, Germany, Sweden and the United States) have experienced large numbers of refugees from Iran. The number of Syrian Kurds in the diaspora has been much smaller than the number from Turkey, Iraq and Iran, mainly because of the smaller number of Kurds in Syria.

The fact that politically active refugees continuously arrive in Europe has significantly politicised the Kurdish diaspora. Furthermore, the continuous migration between various parts of Kurdistan and the diaspora has established continuous and extensive social, political, cultural and economic ties between Kurdistan and the Kurdish diaspora. The Kurds maintain contacts with friends and relatives all over the world. There are various social, economic and political relationships and transnational networks between Kurds in the diaspora and in Kurdistan, as well as between members of Kurdish communities in different countries. Contacts are maintained through social media, telephone communications and personal visits. Kurds also continue to have links to Kurdistan through the international Kurdish mass media, including newspapers, radio and satellite television.¹¹ Thus, the Kurdish communities provide a good example of the concept of transnationalism, which among migration scholars has been an attempt to explore migrants' simultaneous embeddedness in more than one society, since contemporary migrants maintain various kinds of ties to their "homelands" at the same time that they are incorporated into the countries that receive them.¹²

The size of the Kurdish diaspora

In most European countries, there is exact data available about the official number of migrants and refugees arriving in the country. The official number of asylum seekers may vary rapidly, because asylum seekers often move independently from one country to another. However, the national authorities in most European countries keep relatively accurate statistics about the permanently settled population of migrant origin, since most countries have register or census data about the population residing permanently in the country. Unfortunately, most of the existing statistical data refer to citizenship (or, in some cases, country of origin or country of birth). Only a few countries in Europe collect any form of information about ethnic identity or native language. In fact, in many European countries, ethnic monitoring is commonly regarded as a rather suspicious activity which the authorities avoid doing. Furthermore, in countries with ethnic monitoring, the fixed categories that are used are often unsuitable for people of Kurdish origin. For example, the ethnic categories commonly used by British authorities, ("Asian," "British," "Black," "White," "Mixed," "Chinese" or "Other") are categories that the Kurds in the UK have difficulties to identify with and choose between.¹³ Furthermore, unlike many other ethnic groups, specific religious beliefs or practices are not issues that tend to define the Kurds as an ethnic group, which makes it impossible to use any information about membership in religious congregations as an indication of the size of the community.¹⁴

As a consequence, there are very few official figures about the size of the population that would identify themselves as Kurds. According to Hassanpour and Mojab, formal figures about the size of the *Kurdish-speaking* population are available in the case of Australia, Canada, Finland, New Zealand and Switzerland.¹⁵ However, the number of those who would identify themselves as Kurds may be larger than the official Kurdish-speaking population. Not all of those who define themselves as Kurds necessarily speak Kurdish as their first language, which largely is a consequence of assimilation policies. For example, many Kurds from Turkey speak Turkish as their first language. In addition, it is not certain that all newly arrived migrants know that they can declare Kurdish as their first language.

It is also possible to make some estimates with the help of the available official statistics that are based on citizenship and country of birth. Furthermore, there are estimates presented by Kurdish organisations, which can be used as guidelines, although the Kurdish organisations often seem to be tempted to exaggerate the number of Kurds. By comparing various estimates, and taking into account migration patterns in the late 1990s, Wahlbeck calculated that the size of the Kurdish diaspora in Europe was at least half a million, and might have been well over one million already by the turn of the millennium.¹⁶ His estimate included between 325,000 and 660,000 Kurds in Germany, between 50,000 and 120,000 in France, between 35,000 and 80,000 in the Netherlands, between 20,000 and 60,000 in Austria, between 20,000 and 70,000 in Switzerland, between 20,000 and 50,000 in the United Kingdom, between 16,000 and 40,000 in Sweden and between 10,000 and 60,000 in Belgium as well as sizeable communities of several thousand Kurds in Greece, Denmark, Italy, Norway and Finland. Outside of the Middle East and Europe, there were already at the turn of the millennium significant and well-established Kurdish communities in the United States (25,000–75,000) and Canada (10,000–50,000). After the turn of the millennium the size of the Kurdish diaspora has continued to grow, both in Europe and worldwide. Thus, a modest estimate is that the global Kurdish diaspora includes at least two million people in 2017.

Countries of settlement

In the case of Germany, labour migration from Turkey was already extensive in the 1960s. This was followed by the migration of family members after a halt to labour recruitment in 1973¹⁷. Meyer-Ingwersen estimated that the number of Kurds in Germany in the early 1990s was 580,000, and that 550,000 of these originated from Turkey.¹⁸ About one-fourth of the two million Turkish immigrants in Germany are of Kurdish descent, which is a proportion that most researchers seem to agree upon.¹⁹ The Kurdish national movement and political mobilisation have had a great impact on the Kurdish communities in Germany, which includes a second and third generation of Kurds in Germany. The identification as Kurds became more explicit in the 1980s and 1990s, and it has been suggested that very few of the Kurdish labour migrants would have called themselves Kurdish in the early 1970s.²⁰ The ethnic mobilisation of Kurds seems to have happened largely as a response to the discrimination they face in Germany. The Kurds in Germany experienced problems being accepted as an ethnic group, distinct from the Turks. German scholars suggested that in the 1980s there was a negative stigmatisation of Kurds in Germany as “less-worthy Turks.”²¹ In the 1980s and 1990s, refugee migration replaced labour migration in Germany. Since the 1980s, Germany has received by far the largest number of asylum applications of all countries in Europe. Germany has been the main destination of refugees from Turkey, Iraq and Iran in most years since the 1990s. Not surprisingly, Germany was also the main receiving state during the European asylum crisis in the year 2015, receiving more than one million asylum seekers. Most asylum seekers in Europe in 2015 came from Syria (the proportion of Kurds among the asylum seekers in 2015 is not known, but at least some of the asylum seekers from Iraq and Syria were Kurds). In any case, the number of Kurds continues to grow rapidly in Germany in the 2000s.

The large numbers of Kurds in France, the Netherlands, Austria, Switzerland and Belgium can also be attributed mainly to previous labour migration from Turkey. Thus, a clear majority of the Kurds in these countries originate from Turkey, and there is a rapidly growing second and third generation of Kurds. However, the Kurdish populations in these countries have also been significantly affected by subsequent refugee migrations. In France, the proportion of Iranian Kurds is relatively high in comparison to many other European countries. France has received many students, and after 1979, refugees from Iran. Correspondingly, since the 1970s, the United Kingdom has been a significant host to students from Iraq, who were later followed by Kurdish asylum seekers from Iraq. Kurds from Turkey have mainly arrived in the UK since the late 1980s.²² In the 2000s, Britain continue to be a destination for refugees from all parts of Kurdistan.

In Sweden, Denmark, Norway and Finland, the Kurdish communities are mainly a consequence of refugee migration, which has been occurring in relatively large numbers since the 1980s. It should also be noted that several thousand refugees from Iran and Iraq have been resettled in the Nordic countries under the UNHCR resettlement programme; these resettled groups include a substantial number of Kurds. Thus, the proportion of Kurds from Iran and Iraq is larger in these Nordic countries than in the countries that were the principal destinations of earlier labour migration from Turkey. There are also many other European countries with significant Kurdish populations in the 2000s. Italy, Greece, Slovenia, Romania and the Czech Republic have experienced an arrival of many Kurdish asylum seekers since the late 1990s, but these countries tend to be transit countries rather than destination countries.

In the 2000s, large numbers of Kurds arrived in countries that were unaffected by the arrival of Kurdish and Turkish labour migrants in the 1960s and 1970s. Consequently, although the Kurds are the most numerous in countries with a history of Kurdish and

Turkish labour migration, today significant numbers of Kurds can be found in a wide variety of countries. This change in the character of the migration patterns is also clearly visible in industrialised countries outside Europe. Refugees have to a large extent replaced labour migrants in traditional immigration countries like Canada, the United States and Australia. Kurds from Turkey arrived as labour migrants in Australia already in the second half of the 1960s.²³ Since the second half of the 1980s, the majority of Kurds arriving in Australia have been from Iraq and Iran; many of them were resettled by the UNHCR resettlement programmes. Likewise, Iranian and Iraqi refugees have arrived in large numbers in North America. In the United States, Kurdish refugees arrived from Iraq after 1976, followed by Kurdish refugees from Iran after 1979.²⁴ According to media reports, a large and vibrant Kurdish community of more than 10,000 Kurds is found in Nashville, Tennessee. It is still not clear how the Kurds will be affected by the more restrictive refugee policies in the United States during the presidency of Donald Trump. In general, because of the increasingly restrictive immigration and asylum policies in many of the traditional destination countries, Kurdish refugees may increasingly be forced to seek asylum globally in the future. For example, there are media reports that Kurdish migrants and refugees arrive in increasing numbers in South America in the 2000s, and many Kurdish asylum seekers from Turkey have arrived in Japan since the late 1990s.

Because of the increasingly global character of refugee migration, Kurdish refugees can be found in almost any country of the world. European countries are still the home of most Kurds living outside of Middle East. The established Kurdish communities in Europe and the transnational social ties of the communities tend to make Europe the preferred destination also among new migrants and refugees. However, the increasingly restrictive immigration and refugee policies in Europe in the 2000s have made it more difficult to reach Europe and have increased the relative importance of other destinations worldwide.

The restrictive refugee policies in Europe in the 2000s

The hostile policies in Europe to refugees and immigration are characterised by a decline in the acceptance rates of asylum applications as well as different measures to prevent asylum seekers from reaching the borders of the European Union. In another move to discourage asylum seekers, welfare benefits for asylum seekers have been cut in many European countries. Furthermore, visa restrictions are imposed in order to minimise the influx of asylum seekers. There are also international agreements made with transit countries in order to stop individuals travelling without proper visas and passports before they reach Western Europe. The agreement between Turkey and the EU in 2016, to stop the arrival of Syrian refugees in Greece, is only one example of these agreements made by the EU.

For most refugees and displaced persons, obtaining a passport and visa is, in practice, impossible. Furthermore, the most efficient measure taken to prevent refugees from applying for asylum has been the heavy fines imposed on transport companies for each person they bring into the country, intentionally or unintentionally, without proper documentation. In this way, migration control has largely been transferred from state authorities to private airlines and shipping companies. The tendency to prevent asylum seekers and so-called “illegal immigrants” from entering a country is a general trend in Europe, and there is also an explicit ambition amongst the European Union member states to harmonise immigration policies in this respect. The European countries are still parties to the United Nations Refugee Convention, but extensive measures are imposed to prevent people from applying for asylum.

The desperate attempts to reach Europe made by refugees across the Mediterranean Sea have to be seen as related to the aforementioned policies. Refugees have to rely to a great extent on the help of expensive “travel agents” in order to be able to reach Western Europe. Refugee “trafficking” has become a profitable illegal business. Many refugees do not survive the dangerous trips to Western Europe and drown on the open sea or suffocate in trucks. The restrictive migration policies have been accompanied by an increasing number of deaths at the borders of Europe. In 2016, the number of people who drowned fleeing to Europe via the Mediterranean reached more than 5,000, according to the official data of the UNHCR.

Thus, the number of asylum seekers arriving in Europe is not indicative of the number of people who are in need of asylum. Only a few have the possibility to apply for asylum in Europe. It requires a lot of money, effort and good luck for a Kurdish refugee to arrive in Western Europe in the 2000s. The situation today is very different from in the 1960s, when many refugees would have been able to travel to Europe as labour migrants without even having to apply for asylum. Furthermore, the restrictive asylum policies have diminished the possibilities to get asylum in Europe, which undoubtedly will increase the proportion of Kurdish refugees in other parts of the world.

Social and economic integration

The economic and political landscape of Europe has changed significantly since the labour migrants arrived in the 1960s. Unemployment and hostile migration policies are clearly more salient today. The attitude towards refugees often came as a surprise to the asylum seekers, who are not prepared for the bureaucratic procedures and all the other difficulties they encounter in Europe.²⁵ Furthermore, newly arrived migrants experience a difficult economic integration in the labour market, which the labour migrants did not experience in the post-war period.

A key question for the future of the Kurdish diaspora is the pattern of economic integration in the society of settlement. Among migrants in general, the first generation tend to have a precarious labour market position, and for the future of the diaspora it is essential that later generations find better possibilities of economic integration. Recently arrived migrants often find themselves integrated at low levels of the labour market. However, the Kurds can often use their own informal social networks to create or find jobs. For example, in many countries in Western Europe, there has been a separate Turkish and Kurdish ethnic labour market in which the Kurdish refugees from Turkey were able to find some form of employment.

There is variation in the reception, resettlement and integration policies among the European countries, which is largely due to fundamental differences in the way the welfare, health and social services in general are organised. The economic and social situation of Kurds may vary depending on the policies of the country of settlement. However, a well-established Kurdish community always plays a positive role for integration through the support networks and voluntary associations within the community. With the help of social networks in the community, newly arrived migrants may become integrated in the labour market, although this integration initially may occur on the lowest socioeconomic level.

The variation in integration policies is also reflected in the role played by Kurdish organisations in respective countries. For example, in the Nordic countries, refugee reception and resettlement are organised by the public sector within the framework of an extensive welfare state in a relatively centralised system of governance. In this type of society, NGOs

play a less central role in providing services to refugees. Thus, the Kurdish organisations in the Nordic countries are often small local organisations with mainly cultural activities. In contrast, countries that largely rely on charities and NGOs to organise the resettlement of refugees also provide a possibility for Kurdish organisations to play an active role in helping newly arrived refugees. For example, this is the case in Britain, where the Kurdish community centres in London have a number of important activities for refugees and migrants.²⁶

Political activity and Kurdish diaspora organisations

The Kurdish communities can be regarded as highly politicised in terms of homeland politics. The growth in both the total number and the proportion of political refugees among the Kurds in Europe has changed the character of the Kurdish diaspora. Although the Kurds in Europe have always been politically active, the influx of political refugees has further emphasised the politicisation of the communities.²⁷ The political and cultural mobilisation of the community has been supported by the continuous migration from Kurdistan. In many ways, the Kurdish diaspora continues to be influenced by contemporary political developments inside Kurdistan. The struggle for recognition and a homeland of their own in the Middle East greatly influences Kurdish identity in exile. The transnationalism of the community and the diasporic Kurdish identity seem to be characteristic features common among Kurdish communities all over the world. Clearly, political developments in Turkey and the Middle East have a direct bearing on social relations and political activities among Kurds in the diaspora. Thus, the ethnic mobilisation and political activism of Kurdish refugees in Europe cannot be properly understood unless we take into account the transnational context in which these occur, a fact that has been described in different ways in several studies of the Kurdish diaspora in Europe.²⁸

The homeland orientation seems to have many different and varied functions for the Kurdish communities. This political activity serves the function of reinforcing a Kurdish identity and also provides an opportunity for Kurds to unite and work for the improvement of their situation, both in Kurdistan and in the diaspora. An indication of the Kurdish political activities in the diaspora is the multitude of different organisations and associations among the Kurds in most countries. There are both well-organised organisations with a more specific and transnational political agenda, and small local organisations with social and cultural activities for the local community. In the initial stages, Kurdish organisations in exile are often connected to Kurdish political movements in Kurdistan. The political parties in Kurdistan are very broad in their activities and constitute an integral part of the everyday life and the social structure of Kurdish society. The connection to Kurdish politics can therefore be either explicit, or more diffuse and indirect, but the Kurdish organisations are in the initial stages always in some way influenced by the political and social divisions and allegiances in Kurdistan. In the 2000s, some well-established organisations display elaborate transnational political networks of importance both in Europe and the Middle East.²⁹

On the one hand, a political activism often leads to internal divisions in the refugee communities. On the other hand, the same issues that divide the refugee community as a whole can unite smaller groups of refugees who share the same political beliefs and background in the country of origin. Thus, small local organisations thrive and multiply in refugee communities. Political disagreements are often a source of serious conflicts within the Kurdish communities, but political mobilisation has still enabled the establishment of well-functioning organisations of a more limited nature.³⁰

The ambition of Kurdish organisations is often to represent the Kurdish community as a whole, but most organisations are actually small local organisations. The activities of the local organisations are often concentrated on cultural and social activities for fellow Kurds. The Newroz (Kurdish New Year) celebration is a common example of these cultural activities. The Newroz celebration is important for the Kurds in the diaspora, as it gives them an opportunity to celebrate a Kurdish identity and culture. This ancient spring celebration among the Kurds and the Persians today has become a political manifestation. Most Kurdish associations strive to organise their own Newroz parties, and the celebration is often also a political manifestation of the strength of the political party that the association supports. Important dates in the recent history of the Kurdish political parties might also be publicly celebrated or remembered. For example, among Kurdish refugees from Iraq, the remembrance of the massacre in the town of Halabja on March 16, 1988, has been an annual event. These various occasions constitute “community moments”³¹ that include some and deter others, through a sense of unity around central cultural symbols.

A transnational community and a future global diaspora

The relationship to Kurdistan is strengthened by the continuous transnational social ties between country of settlement and country of origin. The continuous arrival of new refugees from Kurdistan in many ways keeps the relationship with the “homeland” topical and vital. The unsolved political crises in the Middle East and a continuous persecution of Kurds can be expected to create refugees also in the future. It can also be expected that a constant arrival of new refugees will support the ethnic and political mobilisation of the Kurdish diaspora in the future as well. The orientation towards the “homeland” should not be seen as a hindrance to integration. A strong community among the Kurds can also be transferred into a resource facilitating integration into the new country of settlement. The transnational social relations and a diasporic identity constitute resources both for the community as a whole and for individual Kurds. The transnational political and cultural mobilisation brings people together and creates strong social ties among people with the same background and with similar experiences. The strong social networks can also be used as a resource for integration into the society of settlement. One example is how social networks can be utilised to find employment. The social relations that have developed as a consequence of political activism may in this context be utilised for a completely different purpose.

Studies indicate that the Kurds in Europe uphold a strong Kurdish identity, and the Kurdish communities have developed into new ethnic minorities in the countries of settlement. In many different ways the Kurds in diaspora also have a continuous relation to Kurdistan as a “homeland,” either as a region or as an idea. The transnationalism of the community, together with a strong political homeland project, suggests that there is reason to describe the Kurds as a diaspora. A diasporic identity is not limited to the first generation, but also later generations continue to identify as Kurds, although the meaning of the Kurdish identity changes in later generations. Among later generations the Kurdish identity can be strong, despite the fact that it is no longer rooted in the geographical region of Kurdistan but connected to identity politics in the societies of settlement.³² Thus, the awareness of belonging to a separate people with a specific identity and history might even become stronger and more visible among the Kurds living in the diaspora. The continuous dispersal of Kurdish refugees and migrants worldwide will create diaspora communities that together will constitute a well-established global diaspora in the future.

Notes

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- 2 Birgit Ammann, "Kurds in Germany," in *Encyclopedia of Diasporas*, pp. 1011–9.
- 3 William Safran, "Diasporas in modern societies: myths of homeland and return," *Diaspora* 1 (1991), pp. 83–99; Robin Cohen, *Global Diasporas: An Introduction* (London: Routledge, 2008).
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- 8 Stephen Castles, Hein de Haas, and Mark J. Miller, *The Age of Migration: International Population Movements in the Modern World* (London: Macmillan, 2013), p. 102–11.
- 9 Jochen Blaschke, "Kurdische Communities in Deutschland und Westeuropa," in *Kurden im Exil* (vol. 1) (Berlin: Edition Parabolis, 1991), pp. 2.1.1–15.
- 10 Wahlbeck, "Kurds in Europe," pp. 79–80.
- 11 Janroj Yilmaz Keles, *Media, Diaspora and Conflict: Nationalism and Identity Amongst Turkish and Kurdish Migrants in Europe* (London: I.B.Tauris, 2015); Jowan Mahmod, *Kurdish Diaspora Online: From Imagined Community to Managing Communities* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2015).
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- 14 Wahlbeck, *Kurdish Diasporas*, p. 160–1.
- 15 Hassanpour and Mojab, "Kurdish Diaspora," p. 214.
- 16 Wahlbeck, "Kurds in Europe," p. 76.
- 17 Castles, de Haas and Miller, *The Age of Migration*; Abadan-Unat, *Turks in Europe*.
- 18 Johannes Meyer-Ingwersen, "Die kurdische Minderheit," in *Ethnische Minderheiten in der Bundesrepublik Deutschland*, ed. by Cornelia Schmalz-Jacobsen and Georg Hansen (München: C.H.Beck, 1995), p. 318.
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- 23 James Jupp, "Kurds," in *The Australian People: An Encyclopedia of the Nation, Its People and Their Origins*, ed. by James Jupp (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001), p. 549.
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 - 32 For example, Susanne Schmidt, *Kurdisch-Sein und nicht -Sein: Einblicke in Selbstbilder von Jugendlichen kurdischer Herkunft* (Bonn: NAVEND, 1998); Susanne Schmidt, *Kurdisch -Sein, mit deutschem Pass!* (Bonn: NAVEND, 2000); Barzoo Eliassi, *Contesting Kurdish Identities in Sweden: Quest for Belonging among Middle Eastern Youth* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2013); Mari Toivanen, *Negotiating Home and Belonging: Young Kurds in Finland* (Turku: University of Turku, 2014); Minoo Alinia and Barzoo Eliassi, “Temporal and generational impact on identity, home(land) and politics of belonging among the Kurdish diaspora,” *Nordic Journal of Migration Research* 4 (2014), 2, pp. 73–81.

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DIASPORIC CONCEPTIONS OF THE KURDISTAN REGION OF IRAQ

Barzoo Eliassi

Introduction

Diaspora conceived as a transnational community informs political, social, emotional and economic engagement with the country of origin and settlement.¹ The concept of diaspora offers an important perspective on how different migrant groups experience dislocation and relate to the country of settlement and origin. The questions of movement, connectivity and return are accordingly central to diasporic identity formation.² Diasporas are not homogeneous, and their members often hold different or conflicting views on the political order of their country of origin due to their social locations based on gender, ethnic and religious identity, political party affiliation, ideological orientations, class and generation. An important distinction that needs to be made in a world of nation states is that diasporas are either state-linked or stateless. While state-linked diasporas might defend the official narratives and ruling institutions of their nation states when faced with subaltern claims about shared sovereignty and equality, stateless diasporas often challenge and pursue a redefinition of the state to be more inclusive of their political, cultural, religious and ethnic differences. In addition, stateless diasporas can also affirm and/or challenge authoritarianism within their own societies. Nonetheless, this is not to say that members of state-linked diasporas (e.g., Turkish diaspora) do not oppose authoritarian regimes or political parties in the countries of origin, but when it comes to the question of state identity or sovereignty that is often challenged by stateless diasporas, the issue becomes thorny and intricate.³

Different studies have shown that diasporas are important non-state actors in international relations and affect the nation- and state-building processes in their imagined or real homelands.⁴ Diasporas have either been one-sidedly criticised for supporting an irresponsible militant long-distance nationalism⁵ or viewed as key actors in building peace and/or perpetuating conflicts.⁶ The Kurdish diasporas in Sweden and the United Kingdom (UK) that inform the empirical context of this chapter have adopted both roles in homeland politics and resisting authoritarian nation-building states in the Middle East.⁷ In our globalised world, many states also engage with their diasporas in order to secure political advantages since diasporas give “an additional source of power and a sphere of influence that extends beyond the physical borders of the nation”.⁸ Likewise, the Kurdistan Regional Government (KRG), mainly led by the Kurdistan Democratic Party (KDP), has tried to engage with the

Kurdish diasporas and organised conferences inside and outside Kurdistan on how different members of the Kurdish diaspora can contribute to the development of the region and implicitly support its current political framework and governance. This attempt by the KRG is to extend its political power beyond the Kurdistan Region and gain the loyalty of the Kurdish diasporas as well as render them governable for different political and economic motives. In effect, states attempt to reach out to those powerful members of the diaspora who can function as agents of change through their political, educational and economic resources.⁹ States use different means to control and contain the transnational political ties and loyalty of the diaspora. Through establishing ties with powerful and influential members (e.g., politicians, academics, writers and artists) of the Kurdish diasporas, the KRG endeavours to represent itself as the legitimate political home and mouthpiece of the Kurds and reconfigure the nation–people–state trilogy including those who are living outside of Kurdistan.

Betts and Jones claim that diaspora is politically constructed and mobilized, and view the role of animators (e.g., elites) who allocate resources as central to bringing diaspora into existence by using money, networks or ideas.¹⁰ Moreover, Turner and Kleist point out that diasporas remain political not in relation to the rights and recognition that they receive from the states but in regard to their capacities and desires to challenge the hegemony of the states. Regardless of their complicity with the political order or their opposition, states want their diasporas to play according to the rule of the state.¹¹ This is particularly important for weak and non-sovereign political entities like the KRG that need international political, military and economic support in the volatile Middle East, and aspire to avoid international attention and critique on issues related to quality of government, human rights record, gender relations, the situation of journalists and free expression. Containing the political activities of the diaspora has become more urgent for authoritarian states and entities that suffer from democratic deficit. In the context of the Kurdish search for sovereignty, Klein argues that the KRG has understood the political game of statehood and attempts to “sell” a civilised image of Kurds and Kurdistan to the Western world in order to be rewarded with a certificate of statehood, external recognition and sovereignty. As a result, the KRG has invested in numerous campaigns to persuade the West that the Kurdistan Region is the “Other Iraq”, and unlike other parts of Iraq, it respects and values democracy, rule of law, women and minority rights, qualities that the Turkish, Persian and Arab neighbours assumedly lack.¹² And it is this political image that KRG wants its diasporas to endorse and sell to the countries in which they are residing.

The Kurdish diasporas are not entirely autonomous in their activities but are entwined to different political parties from different parts of Kurdistan. However, this does not prevent these political parties from making claims in the name of a unanimous Kurdish nation while formulating and setting their political agenda. Despite their short history in Western Europe, the Kurdish diasporas have been relatively successful in their transnational political and cultural mobilisation. Since 2005, the Kurdistan Region of Iraq has gained considerable political authority and autonomy within the constitutional framework of a federal Iraq where a Kurdish national identity is evolving. The Kurdistan Region has been optimistically described as a state within a state¹³ and sceptically defined as the Kurdish quasi-state.¹⁴ As an autonomous political region, it is equally assumed to be a source of inspiration for Kurds in Turkey, Iran and Syria since it can function “as a political, territorial, and symbolic reference”.¹⁵ Members of the Kurdish diasporas do not share the same political concerns when engaging with political development in their homelands. Following the political rise of the KRG, the political focus of Kurdish diasporas in Western Europe does not merely challenge the centralised Iraqi/Turkish/Iranian power but equally engages with the lack

of legal governance, gender and class inequalities, corruption and undemocratic political arrangement in the Kurdistan Region. There are equally many Kurds in diaspora who see the Kurdistan Region as an economic opportunity and defend the incumbent political leaders and political parties as embodying the universal political interests of the Kurds. Thus, diasporas can be reconfigured following the political, economic and social developments in the country of origin. Diasporic claims and identities engage with contestation, affirmation and negotiation of naturalised political order and relations of inclusion and exclusion in the home countries.

In light of this discussion, this chapter engages with the ways members of the Kurdish diasporas in Sweden and the UK conceive the political rise and the symbolic importance of the Kurdistan Region and KRG in the context of Kurdish statelessness and political subjugation across the Middle East. The chapter will explore how political divisions among Kurdish diasporas and their relationship to nationalism consistently impinge on the ways the Kurdistan Region is appraised, affirmed or rejected. The empirical material of this chapter is based on 50 qualitative interviews with Kurdish migrants in Sweden and the UK, carried out between 2013 and 2015. Through analysing their narratives, we can gain an understanding of diverse, dominating, convergent and divergent political voices that exist within the Kurdish diasporas in relation to the Kurdistan Region and KRG. Moreover, these diasporic narratives can define grievances and claims that legitimise and mobilise action against the KRG and/or in support of the KRG. Many postcolonial states have used the discourse of national security/cohesion/unity to quell dissent, and this issue is more urgent in the Kurdish case where Kurds lack a nation state and are operating in a vulnerable geopolitical context surrounded by four nation states who have been inimical to Kurdish self-determination. Therefore, it is important to investigate how the Kurdish diaspora juxtaposes the urgent issue of democracy within the Kurdistan Region with maintaining stability and unity notwithstanding external threats by the neighbouring countries and constituencies.

The remainder of this chapter is divided into three sections. First, I discuss how the interviewees consider the political and symbolic value of the Kurdistan Region. Second, I examine the ways the KRG becomes an object of criticism by diasporic Kurds who desire a state, but not a state led by political elites who endorse corruption and do not seriously take into account the questions of democracy, transparency, rule of law and feminism. Finally, I conclude with a reflection about the role of critique in diaspora in relation to the KRG and obstruction of authoritarianism that often makes state institutions weak through consolidating personal or family hold on power.

Kurdistan region as the benchmark for Kurdish sovereignty and statehood

It is no overstatement to state that the Kurdistan Region is at a historical conjuncture in modern Kurdish history. The decreasing power of the Iraqi state, politicisation of ethnonational and religious identities, and the geographical and linguistic separation between the Kurds and the Arabs have paved the way for a distinct Kurdish identity. While discussing the importance of the Kurdistan Region, a considerable number of the interviews in Sweden and the UK praised the materialisation of Kurdish political power in the Middle East and viewed it as groundbreaking:

Now that the Kurdistan Region exists, we have our own parliament. I feel that my place exists and I do not feel so lost as I used to before the Kurdistan Region came to existence. Before it was not accepted to say Kurdistan but Iraq. Now people react differently when

you say Kurdistan. Even Arabs cannot deny it although they want to because Kurds control that region and our flag is flying over its territory. We own our home now.

(47-year-old woman Kurdistan Region-Iraq, the UK)

Accordingly, the Kurdistan Region represents and contributes to institutionalisation of Kurdish identity, language(s) and culture. Likewise, it sanctions a place-based Kurdish identity and competes with the state identity of Iraq that has historically been dominated by Sunni Arabs. It is noteworthy to underline that many of the interviewees referred to the Kurdistan Region as validating the existence of the Kurdish identity and rarely referred to the Kurds of Kurdistan Region as a *minority* but as the *master* identity of the region although situated within the framework of the Iraqi state. This is thus a break where Kurds are no longer the tail but the head of the predominantly Kurdish region, which of course has created political frustration among historically dominant Arabs in Iraq who have viewed themselves as the owner of the state.¹⁶ Statelessness is a form of status injury that many Kurds suffer from, and this often leads to a complex of inferiority in a nation state-centric world.¹⁷ The Kurdistan Region is presumed to compensate for this inferiority complex since it has been successful in putting Kurds on the world map and gaining international recognition through foreign representations in the capital of the Kurdistan Region, Erbil. There are currently 31 international representatives in Erbil including countries like the USA, the UK, Japan, France, China, Russia, Turkey and Iran. This political development is viewed as paving the ground for Kurdish independence and for some of the interviewees, the Kurdistan Region is the starter. Thus, it is from here the Kurds are assumed to see the light, progress and creation of a healthy society:

The Kurdistan Region is the beginning of something bigger and means a lot for other parts of Kurdistan in order to achieve the same thing and hopefully one day to be united. I know that it is very hard. If we are united, we have greater chance to succeed. Kurdistan Region is a proof that Kurds can become independent.

(21-year-old-man, Kurdistan Region-Iraq, the UK)

This narrative converges with the fear and anxiety of the neighbouring states Iran, Turkey and Syria, that a strong autonomous Kurdish polity in Iraq can inspire and send political ideas about sovereignty and self-rule to Kurds within their respective jurisdiction. The Kurds often respond that this fear must be encountered with unity, which all Kurdish political parties adhere to rhetorically, but few endorse in their realpolitik. Notwithstanding his critique against the KRG for its governance quality, Michael Rubin describes the political weight and power of the KRG in the following way:

Two decades ago, most US officials would have been hard-pressed to place Kurdistan on a map, let alone consider Kurds as allies. Today, Kurds have largely won over Washington. Kurdish politicians who would once struggle to get a meeting with a junior diplomat or congressman, now lunch with the Secretary of State and visit the Oval Office. There is a growing assumption across the political spectrum in Washington that not only will the Kurds soon win their independence, but that any resulting state will be a beacon of hope in a region where stability, democracy, and liberalism are in increasingly short supply.¹⁸

The political ascending of the KRG cannot be underestimated despite its geopolitical vulnerability and domestic democratic deficit.¹⁹ According to Watts, Kurdish political identity has gained dominance in the Middle East, and this ascendancy has led to Kurdistanisation

of regions predominantly inhabited by the Kurds.²⁰ In this context, the KRG has been a central actor in flagging the Kurdish nation and the name of Kurdistan. It was not only the Kurdish interviewees from the Kurdistan Region who praised the emergence of this Kurdish polity, but also Kurds from other parts of Kurdistan who championed the importance of this entity as a potential home for other Kurds in light of ethnic oppression in Turkey, Iran and Syria. Consider the following quote by a Kurdish woman who had struggled against the Turkish state for speaking Kurdish and spending several years in Turkish prison:

I am proud that part of my nation is living freely in their region. I am thinking that if one day I cannot go to Kurdistan in Iran, Turkey or Syria, I can go to that part and live there. I want to be in a country where people speak Kurdish and are not ashamed of being Kurdish. Kurdistan Region is a symbol for Kurdish existence.

(49-year-old woman, Kurdistan-Turkey, the UK)

The interviewee vividly talked about the pain of Turkish assimilation policy and how it had instilled an inferiority complex and a cultural shame among the Kurds. The Kurdistan Region becomes thus a place where Kurds can regain their confidence and assert their identity without fearing ethnic persecution. In the same vein, another interviewee underlined what this entity means for the states of Turkey, Iran, Iraq and Syria:

The Kurdistan Region is very important and sacred. Now that this place is called Kurdistan, it feels like a knife in the hearts of Turkey, Iran, Iraq, and Syria. Every time they say Kurdistan, it must be painful for these states to hear it. For many years Turks called Masoud Barzani and Jalal Talabani as tribal leaders. Now they are leaders of Kurdistan.

(46-year-old man, Kurdistan-Turkey, Sweden)

The politics of naming is central to Kurdish politics and resistance towards the states in which they are inhabiting and resisting. For many years, Turkey refused to refer to the Kurdistan Region by its name but used “Northern Iraq” to label the Kurdish-dominated region. Many of the interviewees talked about the resistance they encountered in putting the name of Kurdistan on the map when people asked them about their origin. According to the Kurdish interviewees, the name of Kurdistan was harshly contested by some Turkish, Persian, Arab and Assyrian migrants who asserted that the very name of Kurdistan was insidious, divisive and secessionist. Peteet argues that the choice of words in the context of territorial disputes functions as political interventions, and those words that circulate most effectively are often those that belong to the dominant forces. To name a territory as Turkish or Kurdish is to make a public claim. The Kurds for instance normalise the name of Kurdistan through repeating and standardizing it and thus displacing former names that were or are imposed on the territory in question.²¹ Naming and renaming become a discursive weapon and function as a way of taking possession.²² As Jacques Derrida has insisted, “Mastery begins, as we know, through the power of naming, of imposing and legitimating appellations”.²³ Thus, it is in the field of power that names and words circulate and different actors attempt to win the struggle in the hierarchy of credibility. Moreover, different actors involved in territorial disputes endeavour to make their narratives as the most accepted, objective and legitimate, and excluding other competing narratives through describing them as propaganda or acts of “terror”.²⁴

While elucidating the functions of names, Bhatia shows that “the struggle over representation is directly a struggle over the legitimacy of violent acts. Indeed, a site, territory, or

people are first colonised by words and names before being physically occupied by soldiers, trading companies and statesmen”.²⁵ The name of Kurdistan is no longer as subversive as it used to be in the Middle East; many Western leaders have embraced the name, and the political attitude of the neighbouring countries vis-à-vis the Kurds has gradually changed, although impassively. According to Küçük and Özselçük, the word *Kurd* no longer only invokes positions such as “victim” and “criminal” due to the Kurdish resistance and struggle against the cruelty of the Islamic State (ISIS) in Syria and Iraq since the Kurdish movements in Iraq and Syria view themselves and are viewed by many Western states as fighting in the name of humanity.²⁶ However, this does not mean that the neighbouring states have stopped naming the Kurdish movements as “terrorists” (Turkey) or “Zionist toys” (Iran) that assumedly want to serve Western and Zionist interests and split the Islamic world.²⁷ The function of naming in this context becomes a device of gathering supporters and justifying acts²⁸ against the Kurdish right to political authority and power-sharing.

While comparing the situation of the Kurdish region in Iran with the Kurdistan Region, this young interviewee underlined her impressive experience of the Kurdistan Region:

My family urged me to visit Southern Kurdistan and they even paid my trip so I could see Kurdistan and see the feeling of living in a country where to be Kurdish is not a negative thing. When I landed in Hawler/Erbil airport, I saw the Kurdish flag everywhere. It was Kurdish police and not Iranian police as in Eastern Kurdistan. This is the first time history is on the side of the Kurds. The police officers were very polite. In Iran, a man must accompany me when I go into town, and the men were gazing at me all the time. They also made comment about me. Kurds are living under Islamic and Iranian laws and the Kurds have adopted the Iranian laws. But when I was in Southern Kurdistan, I did not have the same feeling and people were not acting in the same way and did not comment [about] my body. I was with a female friend and we were in town by ourselves and nobody was telling us what we were doing there. We have to become like Southern Kurdistan. Imagine the feeling that police officers speak Kurdish to you and it is the first time in history that it is to your benefit as a Kurd. Public signs are in Kurdish and not in Persian as in Eastern Kurdistan. It makes me happy to see my identity visible everywhere. You feel at home because it feels that it is Kurdistan and not a foreign country as in Iran with a different language and TV all the time.

(26-year-woman, Kurdistan-Iran, Sweden)

This interviewee raises important issues that have been central to the political struggle of the Kurdish movement. She refers to stigmatisation of the Kurdish identity, about how the police function as a punitive institution against the Kurds in Iran and how Islamic and Iranian laws stigmatise women in Iran under the cover of protecting women from sexual harassment. The same interviewee talked about the devalued status of the Kurdish language in Iran where speaking Persian was viewed as “classy” and much more valued than the Kurdish language. Through coercive assimilation policies, the Iranian state has managed to impose and inculcate a dominant national language, while rejecting other languages as local or dialects. However, due to the proliferation of communication technologies and satellite channels, the Kurds of Iran are becoming more aware of the cultural freedom that exists for the Kurds in Kurdistan Region:

I know many Kurds from Eastern Kurdistan/Iranian Kurdistan that go to Southern Kurdistan in order to enjoy its identity and celebrate Newroz because nobody suppresses

you for being Kurdish. Many of them go in different squares in Hawler/Erbil and take pictures where the Kurdish flag is flying behind them and post it on Facebook.

(31-year-old man, Kurdistan-Iran, Sweden)

An important distinction that the interviewees made regarded the ways they referred to the places they visited. While Kurds from the Kurdistan Region talked about visiting or traveling to Kurdistan, Kurds from other parts did not mention Kurdistan but the names of the states of Iran, Turkey and Syria. They argued that they use different names for their places of origin due to the political status of their regions. Unlike the Kurds of Iraq who control their own regions, the Kurds in Iran, Turkey and until recently Syria are subsumed under the universality of these states.

Some of the interviewees talked about the magic of visiting the Kurdistan Region, and these experiences made them dream intensively about political and cultural freedom in their own regions:

My father visited our village and he usually stays there for three months. So he visited the Kurdistan Region and the first thing he did when he entered the Kurdistan Region was to go and kiss the Kurdish flag on the uniform of a Kurdish border officer and kissed the ground. He told them: "I love you, arrest me, do whatever you want to do with me. I am proud of seeing you guarding the borders and the territory of Kurdistan".

(30 year-old man, Kurdistan-Turkey, Sweden)

This narrative shows how the political oppression of Kurdish identity and search for sovereignty as a device of attaining freedom reinforces romantic nationalism. While this narrative assumes that the KRG welcomes all Kurds and functions as an inclusive entity, in reality Kurds from other parts of Kurdistan are still hailed as "Turkish", "Iranian" and "Syrian", despite continuous Kurdish media usage of terminologies like "Southern Kurdistan" (Iraq), "Northern Kurdistan" (Turkey), "Western Kurdistan" (Syria) and "Eastern Kurdistan" (Iran). When Kurds residing in the Kurdistan Region from other parts of Kurdistan criticise the political elites of the KRG, they are often reminded that they are "guest" here and should not transgress the "red lines". Accordingly, the hospitality of the KRG *vis-à-vis* Kurdish brethren across borders is easily transformed into hostility. Despite the romanticisation of the Kurdistan Region, Kurds in diaspora do not necessarily or uncritically embrace the idea of a Kurdish statehood when the KRG cannot guarantee democracy, rule of law and effective citizenship, issues that will be addressed in the following sections.

Desiring a state but not an authoritarian one!

While the earlier section dealt mainly with the positive appraisal of the Kurdistan Region as a potential political home for the Kurds, this section focusses on the quality of governance in the Kurdistan Region. It is in this context that we will see that Kurdish nationalism is losing ground due to the prevailing political corruption and authoritarianism in the Kurdistan Region. The oppositional parties within the geographical boundaries of the Kurdistan Region and the transnational political and guerrilla activities of the PKK pose persistent challenges to the political order of the KRG. I focus now on those Kurdish voices that are critical of the Kurdish authorities in the Kurdistan Region and position themselves in different ways outside of the ontological jurisdiction of the Kurdistan Region constituted by the two ruling parties, the KDP and PUK. Although the majority of the interviewees welcomed Kurdish

statehood, they were not sure that the Kurdistan Region embraces all Kurds. A young Kurdish woman from Kurdistan of Turkey illustrates how her conception of Kurdistan Region has changed:

At the beginning it was a very positive injection and gave hope about a better future for the Kurds. The last years, they have become more and more isolated and are just taking care of their own business. Many Kurds from other parts are disappointed and think that the Iraqi Kurds have liberated themselves and do not care about other parts of Kurdistan. I share this idea because the Kurdistan Region did not open up its border for Kurds of Rojava (Syria). You expected them to be more welcoming toward the Kurds. I became very disappointed with them.

(24 year-old woman, Kurdistan-Turkey, Sweden)

This young woman endorses the official PKK rhetoric that denounces the KRG as the political home of the Kurds. The PKK goes so far as to accuse the KDP of carrying out anti-Kurdish politics with its close political and economic ties with Turkey. Another interviewee argued that the emergence of the Kurdistan Region has contained the political activities of Kurds from other parts of Kurdistan in order to maintain its security and existence.

For Kurds from Eastern Kurdistan, Northern Kurdistan and Western Kurdistan, when they visit the Kurdistan Region, they see the Kurdish police, Kurdish flag and nobody oppresses your Kurdish identity. This become like a dream for them. It is an important experience. But the Kurdistan Region has done many mistakes because it does not support Northern Kurdistan or Western Kurdistan. It is now closing its border against Western Kurdistan in the same way as our enemy Turkey is doing. *The Kurdistan Region is not only an inspiration but also a problem for other parts of Kurdistan* because it wants to silence other parts of Kurdistan for its own existence and appease the neighbouring states.

(49 year-old man, Kurdistan Region-Iraq, Sweden, emphasis added)

This interviewee is aware of the positive aspects of the Kurdistan Region for safeguarding Kurdish identity and language; however, this does not prevent him from seeing also a danger in sanctifying the Kurdistan Region as impeccable if not complicit in containing the political struggle of other parts of Kurdistan. This is particularly true for the Kurds of Iran whose political activity has for decades been checked by the Patriotic Union of Kurdistan (PUK) and which has even collaborated with the Iranian regime in maintaining the security of the Iranian borders. In order to appease Turkey, the KDP fills the same function in regard to the political and guerrilla activities of the PKK in the Kurdistan Region and Rojava. Turkish governments led by Recep Tayyip Erdogan have tried to neutralise the PKK's dominance in Turkey through backing up political forces close to the KDP and Masoud Barzani. In this context, a supporter of the PKK expressed her aversion *vis-à-vis* the KRG in the following way:

The KRG is no different for me than the Turkish government. When the KRG was formed, they did not think about other Kurds in other parts of Kurdistan. The only differences now are that the government carries the name Kurdish and its leader is Masoud Barzani. Are women recognized in the Kurdistan Region? Can you see the women's movement allowed to fight for the liberation of women in Kurdistan? No, they are not. There are female Kurdish politicians in the Kurdistan Region, but they do not have

power, functioning only as a façade. The Kurdistan Region is not an inspiration for me. My movement is the PKK because women representation is very important for us.

(32-year old woman, Kurdistan-Turkey, the UK)

The PKK has emphasised the representation of women as central to its ideological struggle, which challenges the traditional order of the Kurdish society and politics often run by men. Women appear in Kurdish politics in the Kurdistan Region, but they are often used in ceremonial contexts to appease international and Western representations with the mere illusion that the KRG endorses women's rights and political representation. The PKK and KDP are the two main political actors of Kurdish politics, and they try to extend their political clout to all four parts of Kurdistan. Eccarius-Kelly argues that the KRG poses a strong challenge to the PKK's dominance in Kurdish regions of Turkey by gaining credibility among the Kurdish population in Turkey through creating political and economic benefits.²⁹ This empowered position has gradually changed due to the economic crisis in the Kurdistan Region as a result of the budget cut from the central Iraqi government and the assaults of ISIS.

By monopolising the KRG, the KDP has the benefits of international recognition and economic and military support. While the PKK is labelled as a "terrorist" organisation by the West, the KDP enjoys open diplomatic relations with influential Western leaders. Until now, the PKK has succeeded in preventing the emergence of a shared political space to organise and represent differences in Northern Kurdistan/Turkey and Rojava/Syria. In contrast, the KDP has not been able to do the same in the entire Kurdistan Region due to the presence of powerful adversaries like the PUK, Gorran movement and Islamic parties. The question of Kurdish statehood has become the KDP's central discursive strategy to quell oppositional parties and political dissent. The discourse of national unity or social cohesion in Kurdistan is strategically used by both the KDP and PUK to denote the democratisation process and pluralism.

Unlike the KDP, the PKK views statehood as an inadequate solution to the political subjugation of the Kurds since statehood reproduces a new master identity that leads to oppression of "new" minorities and creation of ethnic strangers. Accordingly, the PKK views the sovereign power as inherently problematic since the nation state constructs "core" members through exclusion of groups that are not viewed as organic members of the nation. The PKK's imprisoned leader Abdullah Öcalan has formulated a project about democratic autonomy that according to him is anti-national. Without denying the legitimacy of the already existing states, democratic autonomy promotes the idea of a highly decentralised governance where all constituents can partake in organising their political, economic and social life and ruling themselves. This implies that the Kurdish movement in Northern Kurdistan has moved from a one-dimensional political movement to a multidimensional social movement.³⁰

Relatedly, Watts contends that democratic autonomy is not anti-national but micro-national since Kurds are still defined as a nation along with other nations. However, the political nationalist struggle is situated within feminist and radical democracy movements,³¹ where the nation state, capitalism and patriarchy are described as the three ills of our world.³² Thus, democratic autonomy seeks to decolonise "the hierarchically instituted social relations that lead to the constitution of oppressive and privileged communities".³³ Despite different approaches to the question of Kurdish statelessness, talks of democracy and uniqueness of the Kurds in the Muslim Middle East, the KDP, PUK and PKK have not endorsed a reliable political order based on pluralism of ideas, shared democratic space and peaceful contestation.

These three political parties explicitly use regional states to strengthen their party interests, and this implies that they choose, despite their Pan-Kurdish rhetoric, to ally with regional governments over the Kurds across borders. This is not to underestimate the progress made in Kurdish society in light of geopolitical vulnerability and the short self-rule that Kurds have been experiencing in the Kurdistan Region.

While many interviewees passionately desired a Kurdish state as the solution to the collective oppression of the Kurds, several interviewees were not sure that the current political template of the Kurdistan Region can function as a liberating or an opportunity-enhancing vehicle for the stateless Kurds:

A state is like a home and home is a place where you want to feel free. State means freedom. But I do not like the ruling parties in Kurdistan because if you do not join them, you will not have a place in that society. I want to have a democratic Kurdish state and not a dictatorship. What should I do with a Kurdish state if I am not free? I want a Kurdish state but democratic like the UK. I hope that the ruling parties do not lie too much, but work for an equal and democratic society.

(26 year-old man, Kurdistan Region-Iraq, the UK)

Although stateless nations often view statehood as a political answer to their political homelessness in a nation state-centric world where they can win their political freedom and live their differences, this interviewee illustrates that members of stateless diasporas do not necessarily embrace a blind nationalism by endorsing statehood regardless of its mode of governance. The ruling parties in the Kurdistan Region have not been very successful in crafting a national identity through promoting bonds of solidarity between the people and the social institutions where different constituents regardless of their political, gender, ethnic and religious backgrounds can exercise equal political agency. Many of the interviewees talked about the difficulty in institutionalising democracy in light of the two ruling parties, the KDP and PUK:

The Kurdistan Region has been free for more than two decades. When we were under Saddam's regime, we did not expect good things from him because he was our enemy. But when it comes to a Kurdish power and rule, you must expect the best from it. The Kurdish power instead of fostering Kurdishness, they have prioritised party politics and cemented the power of [the] KDP and PUK. This is the greatest problem of the Kurds in [the] Kurdistan Region. In many countries people talk about political pluralism and multiparty system but in our country there is multiparty system but no democracy. It is all a façade for the two ruling parties. These two parties fought each other from 1994–1998 and many people were killed due to their wars. When they got power, instead of undermining the power of feudalism and religion, they have reinforced them. If you criticise the ruling parties, you will be harassed and called a traitor for undermining the national unity of the Kurds. You cannot have democracy without critique. Kurdish power should remember the days of suffering and make democracy the standard of the Kurdish society. When I visited Kurdistan, I expected something better but I saw corruption was eating up the society and it is becoming more like a culture in order to survive. The families of the leaders of these political parties are becoming like lords who are getting richer and richer and talk about national unity if they are criticised. I am suffering when I see that my country is not democratic and they want to copy the political system of the Arab states where the sons take over the power when their fathers

are gone. If Kurdish soil is liberated but its people are politically oppressed, Kurdistan loses its meaning for me. I want both my soil and its people to be free.

(42 year-old man, Kurdistan Region-Iraq, the UK)

A recent study by Paasche illustrates that corruption obstructs reintegration of the Kurdish returnees from Europe and undermines the sense of belonging to the Kurdish nation and nation-building project.³⁴ Despite their appraisal of the Kurdistan Region, many interviewees in my study experienced disillusionments when they encountered the cultural norms of the Kurdish society where corruption shaped their encounters with social institutions. In order to build a democratic political culture and create trust between the citizens and the social institutions, it is crucial that institutions endorse impartiality in the exercise of public power and counteract corruption, favouritism, clientelism, patronage and nepotism. Such just and impartial institutions need administrative efficiency and meritocratic recruitment based on competence and knowledge in running the state apparatus³⁵ and not grounded on what party loyalty the employees have, as it is the case in the Kurdistan Region.

Whereas in most democracies, party leaders are also members of the parliament, political elites of the PUK and KDP without being elected as representatives in the Kurdistan Parliament continue to rule the Kurdistan Region and bypass the parliament and diminish its legitimacy. Despite being politically degraded and disempowered, the Kurdistan Parliament functions as a political stratagem by the KDP and PUK to appease domestic and international (Western states) calls for democratic rule and representation in the Kurdistan Region. The democracy that the KDP and PUK rhetorically adhere to is in practice based on non-democratic means such as electoral fraud and a dysfunctional parliament and political repression of dissent.³⁶ Authoritarian regimes often exploit the economy as a means to increase support and distribute benefits to those who manifest their support and loyalty to them,³⁷ which can be applicable to the Kurdish contexts where the ruling political parties attempt to “buy” the votes of the voters during election campaigns. The armed forces in the Kurdistan Region are politicised and used by the KDP and PUK to settle political disputes and contain or co-opt political dissent and opposition. Accordingly, the democracy represented by KDP and PUK is a façade democracy since there is no rule of law, political transparency and accountability.

Conclusions

The Kurdistan Region was generally viewed by members of the Kurdish diasporas in Sweden and the UK as a potential benchmark for a Kurdish state and as a key to Kurdish sovereign freedom and power. Despite this overwhelmingly positive conception of the Kurdistan Region, many interviewees criticised the ruling political parties in the Kurdistan Region for suppressing political freedom and exploiting the economic resources of the Kurdistan Region in the name of Kurdish unity and nationalism. Although the KRG has lost much of its political legitimacy due to lack of legality and institutionalism that act independently without intervention from the ruling families and parties, the emergence of ISIS has provided the KRG with a contingent opportunity to regain legitimacy for its nationalist rhetoric both in Kurdistan and in diaspora. One can say that ISIS strengthened Kurdish nationalism within the Kurdistan Region in a time of Kurdish nationalism crisis.

During 2015 and 2016, Kurdish diasporas in different Western states expressed their support for the Kurdish armed struggle against ISIS and held rallies in support of the Kurdish forces and Kurdish independence. However, time will tell how long this borrowed legitimacy

can last. The KRG has both contributed to strengthening nationalism by flagging a Kurdistan identity in its fight against ISIS and its political opposition *vis-à-vis* the central Iraqi government, but it has also gradually weakened Kurdish nationalism due to its poor quality of government, authoritarianism, corruption and patrimonial power. Instead of Kurdish nationalism, the political party functions in practice as a surrogate for the nation and excludes those forces and voices that challenge its political power through describing them as internal enemies or Trojan horses for foreign plots against the Kurdistan Region. Consequently, members of Kurdish diasporas are divided as to whether Kurdish independence will bring them sovereign freedom in light of prevailing patrimonial power, succession by inheritance and lack of democratic procedures in the Kurdistan Region.

Exile is a hotbed of homesickness and nationalism, but it is also equally a potential site for critique of homeland politics as this chapter has shown regarding the Kurdish diasporas. The ruling parties often repudiate critique against the political order of the KRG under the pretext of safe-guarding the “Kurdish experience” of ruling themselves. Hence, the KDP and PUK resist, punish, mute and reject rival plans for how the political community of the Kurdistan Region can be reimaged through asserting themselves as the legitimate hegemons responsible for value allocation and assignment.³⁸ For a democratic political order to emerge, it is important that critique has a privileged position since it provides the basis of the legitimacy of a government. In this regard, Butler argues,

the state derives its own legitimacy through granting dissent, but to the extent that it cannot control the terms of dissent, it also allows for a deterioration of its own claims, a suspension of its own mandate, and even a withdrawal or compromise of its own sovereignty.³⁹

In other words, dissent provides a powerful means to check and undo the sovereign power. It all depends on whether the state can tolerate the terms of dissent or reject oppositional and critical voices as rogue viewpoints.⁴⁰

On different occasions, the Kurdish diasporas as a transnational community have demonstrated their political loyalty and emotional attachment to the Kurdistan Region and Kurdish identity. However, this transnational political obligation⁴¹ is not limited to loyalty but expanded by parts of the Kurdish diasporas to include the role of critique in identifying alternative ways of ruling Kurdistan and undoing unbearable forms of political arrangement of the Kurdish society. It is worth mentioning that the road to authoritarianism is enabled by citizens who stop questioning their societies and participate in reproduction of authoritarianism through their complicity and silence.⁴² In this regard, the Kurdish diasporas can function as critical agents and obstruct the processes of authoritarianism by holding the power and authority accountable while involving themselves in the struggle for political justice in the Kurdistan Region that until now lacks a shared democratic space for contestation and participation.

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THE KURDS IN GERMANY

Vera Eccarius-Kelly

Introduction

The Kurds in Germany offer a wide variety of responses to the question of what it means to be Kurdish. Depending on their families' experiences with expulsion and migration, and their involvement with political activism, Kurds often lay claim to originating from Kurdistan. Many Kurds protest the denial of their existence and therefore reject the nationality listed on their passports. Sometimes Kurds refer to Kurdistan as "having been served up like a slice of pie" to the regional powers of Turkey, Iran, Iraq, and Syria, but point to the recent successes of establishing Kurdish enclaves in Syria and the formation of the Kurdish region in Iraq. Some Kurds have long professed their commitment to what is called the "myth of return," which allows Kurds to imagine the establishment of a full sociocultural and political life in Kurdistan after violence ends. Other Kurds insist that familiarity with cultural practices (social mores, music, dance, traditional peasant clothing, etc.) is a sign of an authentic commitment to Kurdishness, while most highlight the need for competency in the Kurdish language (predominantly *Kurmanji* in Germany).

Kurdish communities in Germany are heterogeneous in terms of their geographic and regional origins, their tribal heritage, their educational attainment over time, and their religious affiliations. The vast majority of Kurds in Germany came from impoverished southeastern provinces of Turkey during the 1960s and 1970s, but many also departed urban environments in Istanbul, Izmir, and Ankara, for example, following the military coup in 1980. About 85% of Kurds in Germany continue to have family connections in Turkey. The majority of Kurds in Germany are Sunni, but significant communities identify as Alevi, Zaza/Dimili, Yezidi, or belong to other groups. When researchers started to inquire about how Kurds defined their own identities in Germany some 20 years ago, they learned that Kurds often separated "good" Kurds from "bad" ones. Birgit Ammann documented that politically engaged Kurds tended to be characterized as good, while "bad" Kurds were seen as expressing a sense of loyalty to the Turkish state and faced accusations of being collaborators.¹ Such feelings and broad categorizations within Kurdish communities have only intensified over the years.

The gruesome war in Syria continues since March 2011, and far-reaching repression has returned to the predominantly Kurdish provinces in Turkey since 2015. Kurdish communities in Germany have been shaped by both developments. Ali Ertan Toprak, head of

Civaka Kurd li Almanya (an umbrella organization called Kurdish Community of Germany), suggested that about 150,000 ethnic Kurdish refugees from Syria had arrived in the country during 2014–2015.² He suggested that this influx amounted to an increase of 15% of Kurds in Germany. Many among the Kurds from Syria speak predominantly Arabic and experienced profound patterns of repression, which has added a new layer to the challenges for Kurdish integration in Germany. In late 2016, *Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung* (FAZ), one of Germany's most prestigious and influential daily papers, released information that showed asylum applications from Turkey skyrocketing (in part, likely, related to the failed coup d'état against Turkish President Erdoğan in July 2016). The FAZ also remarked on the fact that nearly 80% of the applicants from Turkey were ethnically Kurdish with involvement in politics.³

Once again, a cycle of repression pushed Kurdish refugees out of Turkey. In 2016, however, long-established Kurdish civil society organizations in Germany were significantly more prepared to respond to the suffering of their newly arriving brethren. An estimated four million ethnic Turks and Kurds live in Germany (including their descendants), which is about 5% of Germany's total population, and many exercise the right to vote as they have acquired German citizenship. The exact number of ethnic Turkish and Kurdish voters is not available since Germany does not register citizens based on ethnic heritage. Kurdish immigrants have long pursued access to German citizenship at a higher rate than Turkish immigrants in the country. The underlying reasons, of course, relate to Kurdish experiences with discrimination and violence in Turkey, and the notion that a German passport provides mobility and protection for those who have family members in Turkey. Kurds participate actively in German political life and take note when German-Turkish relations deteriorate significantly. Today German-born and educated ethnic Kurdish lawyers, journalists, writers, politicians, public intellectuals, artists, and musicians focus on exerting pressure on German politicians to shape public debates on issues that relate to Kurdish experiences in Germany and in the homeland.⁴

From Kobanê to the referendum vote: Kurds in Germany from 2014 to 2017

Kurds in Germany have benefited from a progression of unusual political circumstances since 2014. Two developments strengthened political opportunities for Kurds in Germany, namely (1) the recognition of Kurdish militias as an essential element in the strategy to defeat ISIS (Islamic State), and (2) the deterioration of trust in the German-Turkish relationship. Today, Kurds are considered respected allies in Germany, having transitioned from the position of unauthorized challenger community to one of a people acknowledged as a positive force.⁵ The German government (and other European Union members) expressed alarm over the increasingly authoritarian Turkish government, which focused on silencing and eradicating internal dissent. Particularly after the leftist, egalitarian, and pro-Kurdish Peoples' Democratic Party's (HDP) electoral triumph in June 2015 in Turkey, President Erdoğan initiated a belligerent campaign to undermine opposition forces.⁶ The failed coup d'état against the Turkish government in July 2016 provided Ankara with further ammunition to legitimize a large-scale crackdown on vast groups of real and imagined dissidents.

In the early months of 2015, after Kurdish militias triumphantly wrested the town of Kobanê from ISIS, German social media sites circulated heroic testimonies and images of Kurdish militia fighters, the Popular Protection Units (YPG) and the all-female YPJ brigades. When ISIS attacked Yezidi Kurdish communities, shock waves went through Kurdish communities in Germany. Weeks later, ISIS attempted to swallow up the predominantly Kurdish town of Kobanê, located close to Syria's border with Turkey. Hundreds of remote villages were overrun by the jihadists, resulting in some 200,000 displaced

people racing toward Turkey for safety. By October 2014, President Erdoğan announced that Kobanê was about to fall to ISIS, a statement that deeply alarmed diaspora circles as Turkish troops observed the slaughter from a distance.⁷ ISIS maintained a brutal choke-hold on the area until the end of January 2015, when it withdrew after having faced months of sustained resistance by regional Kurdish militias (and US air attacks). For Kurds in Germany, the victory in Kobanê strengthened their sense of pride and honor, but also reshaped public narratives about Kurds in German society. “We don’t have to explain who we are as Kurds any more. Most people understand why we defend ourselves,” asserted a young Kurd at a protest event in Germany.⁸

A complex tapestry of factors emerged and changed the ways in which German society characterized Kurds. In that sense, young Kurds in Germany were accurate to observe that an increasingly authoritarian Turkish government that imprisoned elected Kurdish parliamentarians resulted in Kurds in Germany gaining a stronger voice. In March 2017, while Kurds celebrated *Newroz* (New Year) holiday, a surprising message confirmed that public perceptions about Kurds had changed in Germany. Julia Klöckner, a member of the conservative Christian Democratic Union (CDU), released a *Newroz* video greeting stating that the holiday had been routinely banned in Turkey in the past, but that “Germany is a free and open country [and that] freedom is the right of others to do what is important to them.”⁹ In her highly political commentary, Klöckner referenced a broader Kurdish experience with patterns of cultural and ethnic repression in Turkey. The video message was widely disseminated among Kurds in Germany, but also viewed with interest by German-speaking Kurds living in Switzerland, Austria, Turkey, and the KRG (Kurdistan Regional Government).

Klöckner’s embrace of Kurds in Germany was an unusual step for a member of the CDU and contextualized a considerable political shift. The charismatic politician seemed to signal that younger leaders in the CDU would attempt to compete for ethnic Kurdish voters in upcoming German elections. Left-leaning parties such as the Social Democrats (SPD) and the Green Party had issued *Newroz* messages in the past, but the CDU long maintained a distant relationship with the approximately one million Kurds in Germany. For decades, conservatives championed an assimilationist ideology pressuring Kurds to shed their claims to a separate ethno-national identity. The CDU, led by Chancellor Angela Merkel since 2005, expressly preferred to minimize tensions with NATO member Turkey and therefore limited its engagement with Kurds to asylum- and security-related questions.

Following acrimonious disputes between Berlin and Ankara over providing aid to Kurdish militias to fight ISIS, the relationship between the two countries deteriorated further. Ankara’s repressive strategies spilled over into Germany and distressed Turkish and Kurdish community members in Germany. Particularly explosive were revelations that Turkey had relied on a web of informants to spy on and intimidate members of immigrant communities in Germany. Turkish intelligence provided a list of Turkish citizens living in Germany to the BND (*Bundesnachrichtendienst* or German Intelligence Service) and claimed that they had played a role in the 2016 coup against President Erdoğan. But instead of detaining the listed individuals (as the Turkish government had expected), several German officials warned listed individuals so that they would not travel to Turkey in the future.¹⁰ Not surprisingly, Turkish officials expressed outrage about the disclosures, and trust between the intelligence agencies fell to a low point. Berlin then limited the Turkish government’s access to diaspora communities.

An earlier dispute between Berlin and Ankara related to the high-stakes Turkish constitutional referendum in April 2017. President Erdoğan focused on mobilizing the 1.4 million members of the Turkish diaspora in Germany to vote in his favor in the referendum.

Turkish citizens living abroad (as well as dual citizens) have the right to participate in Turkish elections. Erdoğan calculated that he could increase his near-complete control by creating a presidential system in Turkey that would allow him to determine state budgets, appoint judges, eliminate the position of the prime minister, and permanently rely on the use of emergency decrees. Erdoğan's critics, obviously, warned of a complete deterioration of civil and political rights in Turkey along with an end to democratic structures. By mobilizing nationalist Turkish voters in Germany, the potential for violent clashes between Turkish and Kurdish activists intensified in Germany, which angered German public officials.¹¹

As conflicts between voters in the pro-Erdoğan and anti-Erdoğan camps spilled into the open, Germany limited the ability of Turkish surrogates to hold public events in the country. While venues for political events had been reserved, German officials in coordination with the police cancelled rallies in smaller cities, claiming that the spaces were too small to accommodate the swelling crowds. Officials also maintained that the police could not guarantee the safety of all participants.¹² President Erdoğan interpreted the restrictions as a personal affront and accused Chancellor Merkel of relying on "Nazi methodology against Turkish brother citizens" with the intent to weaken his referendum campaign in Germany. In response, the German foreign minister demanded an apology, along with the immediate release of a detained Turkish-German journalist: Deniz Yüksel, an award-winning reporter for *Die Welt*. He had become entangled in the larger dispute and ended up in a Turkish prison following a critical report about corruption in the highest circles of the Turkish government.¹³

Ankara continued to ratchet up the hostile rhetoric accusing Yüksel of acting as an agent of terror and advocating for the banned Kurdistan Workers Party (PKK). The PKK is a Marxist-inspired guerrilla organization that has engaged in violent conflict with state forces since the late 1970s in pursuit of an autonomous Kurdish region. German officials considered the claim that Yüksel was a PKK agent to be absurd and suggested that he had been detained for reporting on compromising emails originating from Turkey's energy minister Berat Albayrak (Erdoğan's son-in-law). Ankara, of course, rejected suggestions that press freedoms were curtailed in the country. Instead, the Turkish government bitterly complained that German officials had permitted a 30,000-strong Kurdish protest march to take place in the city of Frankfurt. Labeling Germany's handling of the events related to the constitutional referendum "hypocritical," Ankara objected to Kurdish protesters who supported a "No" vote in the referendum being allowed to express their positions in a large-scale event (while some of Turkey's surrogates' events had been cancelled). In particular, Turkey's government was enraged that some Kurdish participants in the Frankfurt protest had displayed banned PKK flags and symbols without facing arrest for expressing support for a terrorist group.¹⁴

German-Turkish relations suffered permanent damage during spring 2017. President Erdoğan's plan to rely on the diaspora vote to further consolidate and personalize his power structure was not entirely successful. Opinion polling indicated that a fair number of Turkish-German voters (and of course Kurdish-German voters) favored a "No" vote in the referendum.¹⁵ But fear of electoral fraud entered conversations in Turkish and Kurdish neighborhoods throughout Germany. At the same time, international tensions between Turkey and Germany created noticeable political space for Kurds in Germany. Large-scale protest events mobilized a new generation of Kurds.

Within this context, Klöckner's *Newroz* message served as an early sign that German parties planned to compete for Kurdish-German voters. In her video, she recognized that Kurds were strong partners in the fight against ISIS and also reliably opposed religious extremism. Klöckner's message resonated strongly with Kurds as she acknowledged their steadfast struggle for democracy and human rights. No longer broadly portrayed as problematic,

illegitimate, and as unwilling to integrate, many Kurds recognized that a worsening relationship between Chancellor Merkel and President Erdoğan could translate into tangible improvements for Kurds.

Kurdistan in Germany

Over 50 years ago, post-war Germany urgently sought to satisfy labor needs during the country's post-war reconstruction period. Despite a relatively large influx of Italian, Greek, Spanish, and Portuguese workers during the 1960s, the German government failed to fulfill the economy's extensive demand for a growing workforce. An acute labor shortage persuaded German officials to launch a temporary worker arrangement with Turkey, a country outside of the traditional labor migration areas from which it had recruited so-called *Gastarbeiter* or guest workers. Between 1961, the initial year of the German-Turkish worker agreement, and 1975, just a couple of years after the recruitment period ended, some 650,000 people holding Turkish citizenship (including ethnic Kurds) had settled into semi-permanent arrangements in Germany.¹⁶

The long-term sociopolitical effects of migration had been disregarded in German society.¹⁷ Politicians insisted that Turkish workers would return home, underscoring a utilitarian attitude that was promoted by business interests.¹⁸ It took several decades before officials acknowledged that integration policies and the future of immigrant communities in Germany deserved attention from among the highest levels of policy-makers.¹⁹ Finally, the country began to grapple with the increasingly unyielding divisions within communities from Turkey, but mostly public officials focused on controlling violent disputes to reduce disturbances.

Multiple intertwined sociopolitical factors contributed to an accelerated formation of a distinct Kurdish identity in Germany. The general public characterized Turkish and Kurdish workers by their country of origin (namely, as Turks) and defined them as Muslim. Infrequent social interactions between Germans and Turkish and Kurdish workers outside of prescribed contacts in places of employment contributed to stereotyping and social exclusion in Germany.²⁰ A mixture of disregard for domestic Turkish conflicts and a high degree of disinterest in the political struggles of the immigrants shaped indifferent German public attitudes toward Kurds. The subjugation of Kurds through a Turkification-focused assimilation policy in Turkey was not considered relevant in Germany. Few public officials understood that language prohibitions existed in Turkey, that Kurdish children had been forced to attend regional boarding schools to "civilize" them, that names of Kurdish villages and cities had been Turkified, and that a homogenization process was underway in Turkey.²¹ Kurds understandably perceived Germans as hostile to them. German attitudes seemed to be similar to those advanced by the Turkish state, particularly once Kurdish activists articulated a pointed position that affirmed a separate Kurdish identity as an essential element of ethno-cultural survival.

German society paid little attention to Kurdish claims, which influenced several generations of Kurdish-German residents and citizens. Aryana, for example, a young woman of Kurdish descent who lived in a small community not far from the Dutch border, explained that her family had arrived from Diyarbakir, Turkey, in the 1970s. In perfect German, she stated "I have a German passport, but in my heart I'm more Kurdish than German."²² Aryana explained that she had never traveled in the Kurdish homeland but didn't perceive her statement to be paradoxical. Aryana's sense of Kurdishness was a result of shared familial memories and the feeling that she did not fully belong in Germany.

At the time of her parents arrival in Germany, many Turkish and Kurdish families hoped to improve their economic status and planned to return to their villages and small towns.²³

But others entered into foreign labor agreements to escape a repressive political and cultural climate in Turkey.²⁴ A separate Kurdish identity formed after labor recruitment from Turkey ended in 1973. The German hiring freeze, which was directly related to the international oil crisis, affected all foreign workers, yet Kurds felt the consequences more intensely. Kurdish workers in Germany lost their direct connection to Kurdish regions when the flow of new Kurdish arrivals was reduced to a mere trickle. Young and predominantly male Kurds felt cut off from regular patterns of communication, which made some of them more susceptible to ethno-national ideas that entered Kurdish circles.²⁵

Turkey's military coup in 1980 created perfect conditions for a rapid emergence of waves of Kurdish radicalization.²⁶ In the decade following the coup, tens of thousands of Turkish citizens, many of them ethnically Kurdish, entered Germany as asylum applicants to escape persecution in Turkey.²⁷ Access to asylum protections facilitated the creation of clandestine political networks by both ethno-national Kurds and leftist Turks. The makeup and structures of Kurdish groups shifted from predominantly apolitical migrant clubs to hierarchical and homeland-oriented challenger organizations. Germany, in particular, registered a significant increase in asylum applications from Turkey during the 1980s.²⁸ Migration experts suggested at the time that one-quarter to one-third of all so-called Turkish asylum seekers actually were ethnically Kurdish and that many of them sympathized with the PKK.²⁹

As militant Kurds arrived and settled in Germany, they reached out to Kurdish laborers to establish broader and increasingly clandestine networks. With the expertise typical of trained cadres, the PKK provided Kurds in Germany with detailed information about the mistreatment of their brethren in Turkey, Iran, Iraq, and Syria. Aliza Marcus argued that the Turkish military's use of violence drove Kurdish communities to support the PKK guerrillas.³⁰ Their exposure to carefully selected information in combination with the PKK's effective recruitment tactics initiated a process of growing cohesion among Kurds in Germany. Simultaneously, Kurds experienced high levels of economic exclusion and strong xenophobic sentiments in Germany which assisted the PKK in its overall strategies. Pro-PKK publications such as *Azadi* and *Kurdistan Rundbrief* regularly accused the German government of embracing "Kemalist perspectives on Kurds" and suggested that "only political activism can change the country's discriminatory and racist policies toward Kurds."³¹

By the 1990s, increasing numbers of Kurds in Germany expressed grievances that were based on ethno-national demands. They protested in the streets of German cities for human rights improvements in Turkey and demanded the formation of an independent homeland called Kurdistan.³² However, among the most crucial factors that led to a rapid formation of a separate Kurdish identity in Germany was the availability of democratic structures. Kurds gathered in neighborhood organizations and cultural clubs to take advantage of the discursive and associational space afforded to them. This stood in dramatic contrast to the Kurdish experience in Turkey where "the denial of Kurdish identity, harsh secularization policies, prohibition of opposition groups, and militarization of the Kurdish regions prevented the continued evolution and open manifestation of nationalist sentiment."³³

In 1993, PKK cadres started to attack and firebomb Turkish-owned businesses in Germany, which resulted in a ban against the organization. Just three years later, in 1996, the PKK directly threatened the German state with extreme violence. Abdullah Öcalan, the PKK's leader, argued that Germany's ban on the organization was equal to a declaration of war, and he warned that "we can fight back. Every Kurd is a potential suicide bomber."³⁴ The vast majority of Kurdish community members and political activists in Germany were repulsed by this threat. Increasing numbers of Kurds started to agitate for less confrontational tactics than those that had been advanced and employed by the PKK.

In 1999, the PKK lost control over Kurdish political organizations in Germany when its leader, Öcalan, was captured and imprisoned.³⁵ Noticeable changes took place in Germany that reshaped the ways in which Kurdish publications covered political events in relation to the guerrillas. PKK-affiliated newspapers and journals such as *Serxwebun*, *Özgür Politika*, and *Rohani* ended the practice of printing long lists of fallen Kurdish martyrs in the war against Turkey, for example. In an interview with a German socialist publication, *Junge Welt*, a PKK spokesperson in Europe stated in 2000 that “the PKK decided to abandon its guerrilla strategy.”³⁶ Despite changes in the PKK’s organizational structure, Kurdish activists never halted their pressure campaigns in Germany and continued to use protest actions including demonstrations and mass gatherings to call attention to the mistreatment of Kurds.³⁷ They organized awareness-raising campaigns and cultural events in public parks or rented soccer stadiums; Kurds marched through the streets of inner cities to slow down traffic and blocked highways; they disseminated pamphlets, propaganda literature, and documentary films; and Kurds utilized social media tools to share information that facilitated new mobilization efforts.³⁸ While aggressive public campaigns had served a clear purpose, Kurds also demonstrated a new preference for insider lobbying strategies and structured political participation on the EU-level.³⁹ Despite the PKK’s ongoing attempt to control the Kurdish national movement in Germany, dissent and alternative interpretations of Kurdishness survived.⁴⁰ Astute Kurdish activists established connections with human rights organizations and lobbying groups to initiate transnational networking efforts. In essence, several political opportunities contributed to the formation of a modern and nonviolent Kurdish transnational movement. Turkey’s interest in joining the EU (actually, the EEC or European Economic Community at that time) had elevated the Kurdish human rights agenda to a transnational level. In December 2002, EU leaders developed plans for Turkish accession, but it became obvious that Turkey had not implemented the required laws. German parliamentarians at the EU level such as Feleknas Uca (of Yezidi-Kurdish heritage) harshly criticized the treatment of Kurds in Turkey and demanded a more judicious EU reporting system for specific human rights violations in a speech to the European Parliament in 2003.⁴¹ In 2006, German EU parliamentarian Cem Özdemir (of Turkish heritage) demanded that the Kurdish ethnic identity be recognized in Turkey and that the country needed to discontinue its assimilation policies.⁴² While emphasizing different aspects related to the poor treatment of Kurdish communities in Turkey, both parliamentarians supported Turkey’s accession to the EU. However, in 2016, the European Parliament voted to freeze EU accession talks with Turkey as a consequence of the growing authoritarianism in Turkey. Among the reasons for the (nonbinding) vote was the arrest and detention of nearly all leading Kurdish HDP parliamentarians and the closure of Kurdish media outlets.

In April 2015, PKK Commander Cemil Bayik apologized to Germany for the PKK’s violent strategies during the 1990s as part of an interview with two influential German TV stations.⁴³ Calling the PKK’s German strategy “a mistake,” Bayik pursued a revised agenda, hoping to eventually remove the PKK from the list of terrorist organizations in Germany.⁴⁴ While Germany did not lift the ban on the organization, a cautious shift could be detected in political discourses. Rolf Mützenich, the foreign policy spokesperson for the SPD, suggested that an evaluation of the PKK’s inclusion on the list would be possible in the future.⁴⁵ Kurdish activists once considered militants in Germany also adjusted their language. Instead of speaking about the pursuit of an independent Kurdish homeland, their grievances tended to emphasize culturally based demands such as the need to study and speak *Kurmanji*, to gain the right to select Kurdish names for their children, to operate independent Kurdish TV and radio programs, and to openly perform various cultural practices.⁴⁶

Free at last?

Surprising information reached German-Kurdish communities in 2012: namely, that a renewed effort to negotiate a peace deal between the Turkish state and the PKK was underway. Imprisoned PKK leader Öcalan released three letters explaining the PKK's goals in the negotiation process: one was sent to Ankara, another went to the PKK guerrillas in their Qandil Mountain encampments, and the third letter reached the European wing of the PKK. The information was carefully studied and widely disseminated among Kurdish activists in Germany. Many Kurds expressed cautious optimism and welcomed the effort to pursue a peace agreement. But the outbreak of the Syrian civil war changed regional dynamics, and Turkey warned about the rise of a hostile autonomous Kurdish region in Syria. Syrian Kurds were closely affiliated with the PKK and led by the Democratic Union Party (PYD) and its militia, the YPG.

When ISIS attacked Kobanê and took over the vast majority of the town, YPG forces stayed to fight. At that moment, Ankara could have decided to aid Kobanê and positively influence the ongoing peace talks. But instead, the Turkish government provided only minimal humanitarian aid to Kurdish refugees and watched the events unfold, announcing an imminent fall of the town to ISIS. The PKK leadership responded that if Kobanê fell to ISIS, it would be clear that the Erdoğan government preferred ISIS over a peace deal with the Kurds. Among the key factors that destroyed a potential agreement at that time, at least from the perspective of Kurds in Germany, was President Erdoğan's effort to destroy the Kurdish autonomous movement in *Rojava*, the Kurdish controlled cantons of northern Syria known as *Efrîn* (in the West), and *Cizîrê* and *Kobanê* (in the East). In fact, rather than fighting ISIS, Turkey's primary goal focused on weakening the establishment of a Kurdish-controlled region on the Turkish-Syrian border, which it saw as a blue-print for an autonomous Kurdish region inside Turkey.

Another factor that upset German-Kurdish communities was the systematic silencing of Kurdish parliamentarians in Turkey, and in particular the imprisonment of charismatic Kurdish politician Selahattin Demirtaş in 2016. As the most recognizable leader of the HDP, Demirtaş had achieved an unprecedented electoral success for the pro-Kurdish party in Turkey by attaining 13% of the popular vote in June 2015. The HDP won 80 seats in the 550-member parliament, while Erdoğan's ruling Justice and Development Party (AKP) lost its majority for the first time since 2002. However, nationalists in Turkey undermined the formation of a successful coalition government, and new general elections were called for November 2015. Unwilling to compromise and increasingly focused on a military solution to the Kurdish challenge in the country, the Turkish government re-employed longstanding narratives about Kurds as disloyal and violence-prone terrorists. In a full crack-down on the Kurdish political movement, the imprisoned Demirtaş was charged with "leadership of a terrorist organization and spreading terrorist propaganda and incitement," which is punishable with up to 143 years in prison.⁴⁷ His party co-leader, Fiğen Yüksekdağ, also jailed, faces up to 83 years behind bars for similar charges, but the actual trials have been postponed until after the constitutional referendum.

Since fall 2016, Kurdish activists in Germany have relied on German allies on the left political spectrum to pursue a pressure campaign against Turkey in the country. Political surrogates began to criticize the German government's lack of spine in its interactions with the Turkish government. Jan van Aken, a parliamentarian with the leftist party in Germany, *Die Linke*, harshly criticized Chancellor Merkel for her lack of support for Kurdish human rights. He accused her of not challenging the Turkish government for fear that Ankara would send thousands of Syrian refugees to Germany to undermine her political chances for reelection

in fall 2017.⁴⁸ Martina Michels, an EU parliamentarian and member of *Die Linke*, suggested that Chancellor Merkel was “pouring oil into the fire” by not pressuring Turkey on Kurdish rights.⁴⁹ Many eloquent public speakers addressed the deterioration of civil and political rights in Turkey. Seyran Ateş, for example, a lawyer of both Kurdish and Turkish heritage in Germany, participated in a lengthy radio interview with *Deutschlandradio Kultur–Tacheles*, in which she discussed how disappointed she was by Chancellor Merkel’s weak response to Turkey’s campaign of repression.⁵⁰

Leftist, secular, Alevi and Sunni, and Kurdish and Turkish opponents to Erdoğan’s constitutional referendum began to openly share in the belief that they had to stand together in Germany to counter support for the constitutional referendum in Turkey. Supporters of the *Hayir* (No) campaign sensed an opportunity to build new alliances; not just to obstruct or potentially close down a path to full-fledged dictatorship in Turkey, but also to form a foundation for a peaceful resolution to the decades of violence between Kurdish and Turkish people. Nurcihan Baş, a young woman opposed to Erdoğan’s efforts to expand his authoritarianism in Turkey, explained in an interview with *Deutsche Welle* that she believed “Erdoğan is afraid of us; he is insecure because he does not know how large the No-Campaign is.”⁵¹

With the arrival of Kurdish refugees from Syria and the increasing number of Kurdish political activists from Turkey in Germany, a growing assertiveness can be detected among Kurdish-German communities. Younger generations of Kurdish voters in Germany demand improved access to educational opportunities, reject social barriers, and compare how politicians address disputes among Kurdish and Turkish factions. Growing numbers of Kurds participate in high-stakes elections in both Germany and in Turkey when they become eligible (after reaching voting age and attaining citizenship). A higher percentage of eligible Kurdish (and Turkish) immigrants in Germany voted for the HDP in June 2015 than in Turkey, for example. The HDP received more than 17% support from eligible voters living in Germany, and just above 13% inside Turkey.⁵² Politically engaged Kurds likely voted “No” in the constitutional referendum in Turkey recently.

Now, many Kurds are waiting to partake in Germany’s general elections in September 2017. As they have gained political momentum within German society, Kurds pay careful attention to the ways in which German parties address the deterioration of civil and political rights in Turkey. It appears that Kurdish-German voters transitioned to a recognized voter bloc within the German political landscape, but the question remains if they can sustain this newly gained political momentum after the fall of ISIS. So far, Kurds in Germany have not been able to establish lasting connections with centrist and conservative parties, which forces activists to continue to rely on long-standing leftist allies and political surrogates.

Notes

- 1 Birgit Ammann, “Ethnische Identität am Beispiel kurdischer Migration in Europa,” in *Kurdologie; Ethnizität, Nationalismus, Religion und Politik in Kurdistan*, eds. Carsten Borck et al. (Münster: Lit Verlag 1997), 223–227.
- 2 Press release issued by the Kurdish Community of Germany 52/0809–2015 (Pressemitteilung der Kurdischen Gemeinde in Deutschland). Accessed March 5, 2017, <https://kurdische-gemeinde.de/zahl-der-kurden-in-deutschland-sprunghaft-angestiegen/>.
- 3 *Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung*, “Tausende türkische Kurden suchen Schutz in Deutschland,” Politics section, December 25, 2016.
- 4 Of course, this is also the case for Germans of Turkish heritage. However, a clear split has emerged within Turkish-German communities as left-leaning activists (and many Alevis) and Turkish nationalists (and many Sunnis) deeply disagree with each other.

- 5 For an examination of webbed Kurdish lobbying activity within EU structures, see Vera Eccarius-Kelly, "Political Movements and Leverage Points: Kurdish Activism in the European Diaspora," *Journal of Muslim Minority Affairs* 22, no. 1 (2002): 91–118.
- 6 Most HDP politicians are secular and left-wing Kurds, but the party also ran candidates who might describe themselves as devout Muslims, as Christians, and as Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, and Transgender (LGBT) activists; many were also women. The HDP managed to overcome the 10% electoral threshold barrier in Turkey by reaching slightly over 13% of popular support.
- 7 *Deutsche Welle* reported President Erdoğan's statement that the "US air campaign was not sufficient to stop ISIS in Kobanê," making no mention of the YPG's sustained struggle. Accessed March 5, 2017, www.dw.com/en/turkish-president-says-kobani-about-to-fall-to-is/a-17981034.
- 8 Bazo, a 17-year-old Kurdish-German high school student, offered these remarks to the author during a protest event in Düsseldorf, Germany, on December 20, 2014. Vera Eccarius-Kelly, "Behind the Front Lines: Kobani, Legitimacy, and Kurdish Diaspora Mobilization," in *Kurdish Issues: Essays in Honor of Robert Olson*, ed. Michael M. Gunter (Costa Mesa, CA: Mazda Publishers), 40–61.
- 9 The video was posted on social media on March 21, 2017.
- 10 It appears that Turkey's intelligence service, MIT, handed representatives of the German BND a list of Gülen supporters. Turkey accuses Gülenists of having carried out the failed military coup against the Turkish government in July, 2016. However, the BND considered the evidence to be insufficient and warned the individuals on the Turkish list. Accessed March 5, 2017, www.focus.de/politik/deutschland/tuerkei-spioniert-in-deutschland-ankaras-geheimdienst-bespitzelt-guelen-anhaenger_id_6843700.html.
- 11 According to *Komnews* and *Deutsche Welle*, the German Federal Office for the Protection of the Constitution (domestic intelligence service), expressed deep concern that Turkish political wrangling had compromised security in Germany. Accessed March 5, 2017, <https://komnews.com/kurdish-turkish-clashes-could-escalate-in-germany-intelligence-chief/>.
- 12 For further details about such cancellations, see "Koeln verhindert Auftritt," *Die Welt*, February 3, 2017. Accessed March 5, 2017, www.welt.de/politik/deutschland/article162525600/Koeln-verhindert-Auftritt-des-tuerkischen-Wirtschaftsministers.html.
- 13 Accessed March 5, 2017, www.dw.com/en/turkeys-erdogan-decries-merkel-over-nazi-measures-as-row-thunders-on/a-38015707.
- 14 "Zehntausende Kurden demonstrieren gegen Erdogans Pläne," *Der Spiegel*, March 18, 2017.
- 15 Leonie Feuerbach, "Ich liebe Erdoğan!" *Frankfurter Allgemeine*, March 25, 2017.
- 16 Ted Robert Gurr and Barbara Harff, *Ethnic Conflict in World Politics* (Boulder, CO: Westview Press, 1994), 67–68.
- 17 Christian Joppke, *Immigration and the Nation-State: The United States, Germany and Great Britain* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1999).
- 18 Martin Baldwin-Edwards and Martin Schain, eds., *The Politics of Migration in Western Europe* (London: Frank Cass, 1994), 135.
- 19 International Crisis Group, "Islam and Identity in Germany," *ICG Europe Report*, n. 181, March 14, 2007.
- 20 "According to a 1996 opinion poll that assessed German sentiments toward four minority communities—Jews, Italians, Aussiedler (ethnic German immigrants), and Turks—Germans consider Turks to have the most alien lifestyles; they are least comfortable having Turks marry into their families or move next door; and they are least willing to see Turks enjoy equal rights," as quoted in Ögelman, Money, and Martin, "Immigrant Cohesion and Political Access," 156.
- 21 Welat Zeydanlioğlu, "Turkey's Kurdish language policy," *International Journal of the Sociology of Language* 217, (2012): 99–125. Lokman Meho, *The Kurds and Kurdistan* (Westport, CT: Greenwood Press, 1997).
- 22 This conversation took place in the region of the *Niederrhein* (Kempfen) in 2007 and was translated from German to English by the author.
- 23 Graham Fuller and Ian Lesser, *Turkey's New Geopolitics* (Boulder, CO: Westview Press and Rand, 1993), 23. In this study, the reasons for Kurdish migration within Turkey and abroad are re-viewed, including finding employment and gaining access to better educational opportunities for children.

Like other Turkish citizens, Kurds migrate abroad, too, in search of work and to accumulate capital to improve their status when they come home, perhaps to the southeast, perhaps to the cities. Kurds from the southeast constitute a significant share of Turkish laborers in Germany.

- 24 Graham Fuller, "The Fate of the Kurds," *Foreign Affairs* (Spring 1993): 111.
- 25 Eccarius-Kelly, "Radical Consequences of Benign Neglect," *The Fletcher Forum of World Affairs* 24 (2000): 161–174.
- 26 Leo Lucassen, *The Immigrant Threat* (Champaign, IL: The University of Illinois Press, 2005), 150.
Until the military coup d'état in 1980, virtually all Turks entering Germany had arrived under the auspices of the guest-worker program, although it was clear that a number of them had political or religious reasons for leaving Turkey as well. This was the case with the communist activists, members of minority Muslim sects (such as the Alawites), and the Kurds. When the military abolished democracy in Turkey in 1980 and started a straightforward repressive policy, the number of asylum seekers increased rapidly.
- 27 Ibid., Lucassen argues that one of the results of the increased refugee migration from Turkey in the 1980s was that the number of Kurds increased by one-quarter of the total Turkish population in Germany, laying the foundations for large scale intragroup violence in the 1990s...
- 28 Statistisches Bundesamt, *Anerkennung Ausländischer Flüchtlinge* (Wiesbaden: Federal Statistical Office, 1980–1990). Available figures indicate that at least 120,000 refugees from Turkey were accepted in this decade.
- 29 Stephen Castles and Mark J. Miller, *The Age of Migration: International Population Movements in the Modern World* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan Press, 1993), 276–277.
- 30 Aliza Marcus, *Blood and Belief* (New York: New York University Press, 2007).
- 31 "Kemalistische Kurdenpolitik in Deutschland," *Azadi* 24, April–June 2001. The same information was reprinted in *Kurdistan Rundbrief* 14, n. 16/17, 8 August 2001.
- 32 Alynna J. Lyon and Emek M. Uçarer, "Mobilizing Ethnic Conflict: Kurdish Separatism in Germany and the PKK," *Ethnic and Racial Studies* 26, 6 (2001): 925–948.
- 33 Denise Natali, *The Kurds and the State: Evolving National Identity in Iraq, Turkey, and Iran* (New York, NY: Syracuse University Press, 2005), 85.
- 34 Yassin Musharbash, "PKK Circumvents Ban in Germany," *Der Spiegel*, October 30, 2007. Accessed March 6, 2017, www.spiegel.de/international/germany/militarism-in-the-kurdish-diaspora-pkk-circumverts-ban-in-germany-a-514379.html.
- 35 Martin van Bruinessen commented on ideological changes within the PKK's structures in the foreword to Wadie Jwaideh, *Kurdish National Movement: Its Origins and Development* (Syracuse, NY: Syracuse University, 2006), xii.
- 36 "Wir wünschen uns einen gesellschaftlichen Kompromiß," *Junge Welt*, 7 January 2000.
- 37 Lyon and Uçarer, "Mobilizing Ethnic Conflict."
- 38 Eccarius-Kelly, "Radical Consequences of Benign Neglect."
- 39 Eccarius-Kelly, "Political Movements and Leverage Points."
- 40 One organization that competed with the PKK is KOMKAR and continues to have a web presence, although it has lost most of its membership. Accessed March 5, 2017, www.komkar.org/selbststar.htm.
- 41 Uca's address is available online. Accessed March 5, 2017, www.europarl.europa.eu/sides/getDoc.do?pubRef=-//EP//TEXT+CRE+20030604+ITEM-004+DOC+XML+V0//EN&language=EN&query=INTERV&detail=3-156.
- 42 Özdemir's full comments are available online. Accessed March 5, 2017, www.europarl.europa.eu/sides/getDoc.do?pubRef=-//EP//TEXT+CRE+20060406+ITEM-011+DOC+XML+V0//EN&language=EN&query=INTERV&detail=4-131.
- 43 Accessed March 5, 2017, www.tagesschau.de/ausland/pkk-103.html.
- 44 A growing number of European politicians and academics have expressed support to de-list the PKK. Accessed March 5, 2017, <http://rudaw.net/english/middleeast/turkey/10062014> and www.diclehaber.com/en/news/content/view/431719?from=3907137032.
- 45 Accessed March 5, 2017, www.dw.de/a-cup-of-tea-with-the-pkk/a-17908851.
- 46 For a fascinating examination of the use of satellite television by Kurdish groups in Europe, see Amir Hassanpour, "Satellite Footprints as National Borders: MED-TV and the Extraterritoriality of State Sovereignty," *The Journal of Muslim Minority Affairs* 18, 1 (1998): 53–72.
- 47 Sibel Hurtas, "Turkey's Top Kurdish Politician Faces up to 143 Years in Jail," *Al-Monitor*, February 8, 2017. Accessed March 5, 2017, www.al-monitor.com/pulse/originals/2017/02/turkey-kurdish-politicians-face-up-143-years-jail.html.
- 48 See the transcript of the interview of Jan van Aken by Christiane Kaess related to the Kurdish conflict in Turkey. Accessed March 5, 2017, www.deutschlandfunk.de/kurden-konflikt-merkel-muss-aufhoeren-die-tuerkei-durch-die.694.de.html?dram:article_id=343068.

- 49 Nicole Sagener, "Kurdenkonflikt in der Türkei: Merkel gießt weiter Öl ins Feuer," *EURACTIV*, October 28, 2016.
- 50 "Ich sehe kein Rückgrat mehr bei Frau Merkel, Seytan Ateş im Gespräch mit Sabine Adler," *Deutschlandradio Kultur*, February 4, 2017.
- 51 "Referendum in der Türkei, Erdogan Gegner in Deutschland machen Front," *Deutsche Welle*, March 21, 2017. Accessed March 5, 2017, www.dw.com/de/erdogan-gegner-in-deutschland-machen-front/a-38050710.
- 52 The election results are available at *Daily Sabah*. Accessed March 5, 2017, www.dailysabah.com/election/june-7-2015-general-elections/germany-election-results.

THE KURDISH DIASPORA IN THE UK

Desmond Fernandes

Introduction

In recent decades, as the “Kurds’ quest for expression of their culture and language has been denied” by the states in which they historically reside, “and Kurdish access to political representation has been quelled by policies of assimilation and repression,”¹ genocide, and other forms of terror and destabilization (detailed in the accompanying chapters of this Handbook), many Kurds have sought asylum in several countries.

The Kurdish diaspora is “thought to be the largest stateless diaspora in the world.”² Chaliand has contended that diasporas have been “born from a forced dispersion, they conscientiously strive to keep a memory of the past alive and foster the will to transmit a heritage and to survive as a diaspora.”³ For Östen Wahlbeck, “There are several features of the Kurdish communities” – inclusive of those within the UK –

which characterize them as a diaspora in accordance with, for example, William Safran’s (1991) precise definition.⁴ The forced displacement of the Kurds, their collective memory of their original homeland, the alienation and discrimination they experience in Europe, their wish to return to Kurdistan, their collective commitment to the restoration of their homeland and finally their transnational social networks, are all features of the diasporic relations displayed by the Kurdish refugees in Europe.⁵

Before the major displacements that led to Kurds seeking asylum in the UK and several other European countries from the 1980s onward, there were two earlier phases which were critical to the formation of the Kurdish diaspora in Europe (inclusive of the UK):

- (i) Toward the end of Ottoman rule: the emergence of Kurdish media and presence of Kurdish students in the European urban centers such as Zurich, Geneva, London and Leipzig; (ii) 1950’s onwards: the economic boom of western Europe demanded to recruit a large number of ‘guest workers’ especially in Germany.⁶

Ipek Demir has additionally observed that “not all Kurds who migrated to the UK have had the Kurdish struggle as central to their journey of migration. Many Kurds came for economic opportunities”⁷ even as “others had moved to the UK as part of ‘chain’ migration.”⁸

The diaspora in the UK has grown in recent decades even as successive British governments have enacted policies that have sought to place under surveillance and criminalize Kurdish communities and deny refugee status to many.⁹ Despite having to contend with such targeting measures, according to the Centre of Kurdish Progress, there are currently approximately 250,000 Kurds in the UK.¹⁰ Zalme argues that “Kurds in the United Kingdom are the second biggest Kurdish migrant population after Germany in Western Europe, as high as 200,000 to 250,000.”¹¹ One BBC report even cites the figure of 200,000 Kurds living in London alone.¹²

However, these figures represent a “guesstimate” as there are no accurate figures: “The statelessness of Kurds has also impacted on their lives in settlement countries where they have been registered according to their nationality but not ethnic affiliation. This policy [has led to] a paucity of statistical data on Kurdish migrants in the UK.”¹³ For the “ethnicity” question in the most recent census, “Kurdish” was not one of the predefined “tick-box answers” that respondents were presented with. Whilst respondents were offered an opportunity to write in a preferred self-designation, many chose to avoid entering their identities in this manner.

In socioeconomic and political terms, given the context in which many Kurds arrived as refugees and have been subjected to forms of institutional and noninstitutional discrimination, Kurdish communities have been assessed as “hit[ting] high on most indicators of social exclusion: high unemployment rates, poor housing, limited English skills and high levels of school underachievement.”¹⁴ “The emergence of the ‘social-cohesion’ agenda has [also] seen a progressive reduction of [public] funding for BME organisations”¹⁵ – such as Kurdish community centers – and this has had a drastic effect upon the level of provision of socio-legal support services they provide.

Many Kurdish workers also “fall into the ‘vulnerable’ category” of nonunionized employment “but, in addition, they may also have problems relating to their immigration status, which increases their vulnerability. Many first-generation Kurds are asylum-seekers and are exposed to greater exploitation in the labor market.”¹⁶ Studies also indicate that many low-wage Kurdish workers “are experiencing discrimination as a result of their ethnicity.”¹⁷ “Gang-related activity” within the diaspora has also been identified as a major problem¹⁸ that is related to the heroin trade.¹⁹ For Janroj Keles, “many young Kurdish and Turkish people have been let down by the education system so getting involved with drugs and gangs” has been a consequence.²⁰

In terms of settlement patterns, for many Kurds, living in an “enclave” “has been a necessary and deliberate part of the struggle to maintain a distinctive national identity,”²¹ while also avoiding extreme racist attacks of the kind that have been reported concerning Kurds living outside of “enclaves.”²² For Alex Fitch, in the case of “Turkish-Kurds,” a self-imposed defensive marginalization from within the enclave functions alongside “a repressive marginalization” that is “determined from the outside, operating to exclude participation in the mainstream.”²³

Living, expressing “Kurdishness,” and protesting in the UK: the nature and significance of transnational networks, organizations, and spaces

Martin van Bruinessen confirms that,

in the course of the past century, voluntary or forced displacement has been the experience of ever more Kurds ... In their new places of residence, a large proportion of them have retained or rediscovered a strong sense of Kurdish identity.²⁴

In so doing,

instead of gradually merging with the host populations or other migrants from the same wider region, they have organised themselves in Kurdish diasporas. Due to a combination of political factors and technological developments, these diasporas have increasingly become (re-)oriented towards the part of Kurdistan and the state of origin. This is, of course, a well-known phenomenon among other migrant groups too.²⁵

With “labour migration from Turkey beginning in the 1960s,” Kurdish communities established themselves in West European countries.²⁶ “Students and political refugees since the late 1970’s played a crucial role in organising and politicising these diasporas,” with the result that, “from the 1980s on, these communities’ orientation towards developments in Kurdistan and Turkey was considerably strengthened, and organizations that transcended local and state boundaries became ever more prominent among them.”²⁷ “Kurdish diasporic brokers,” Ipek Demir notes, “in order to salvage and reconstruct Kurdishness in diaspora,” have “engaged in ‘correcting’ the intense Turkification and assimilation which Kurds have been recipients of in Turkey.”²⁸

In recent years, this sense of “Kurdishness” has not only manifested itself in the teaching of Kurdish language courses and the promotion of “Kurdish” political causes and initiatives. “There has been a shift in naming restaurants reflecting claims to Kurdishness.”²⁹ Various diasporic “brokers” have also been engaged in addressing and attempting to correct (in various contexts) the effects of “Arabization,” “Baathification” and ISIS-linked genocidal programs.

As in Germany, “the formation of cultural associations, typical in migrant communities in host countries and possibly prohibited in the homelands, further led to the consolidation of ... Kurdish identity.”³⁰ The Kurdish Cultural Centre (KCC) was established in 1985 as a voluntary refugee organization providing information, advice, and assistance “in the area of immigration, welfare rights, housing, health, integration, employment and training”³¹ to Kurds who had arrived from primarily South Kurdistan/northern Iraq. By the mid-1990s, London alone had 25 Kurdish associations in existence, many of them catering to the needs of Kurdish communities from Iraq, Turkey, Syria, and Iran, and providing the types of services already mentioned at the KCC.³²

Ten of these were community associations, the two largest of which, the Kurdish Workers Association and Halkevi, were strongly sympathetic to the PKK in the 1990’s. Illustrative of the psychological journey of such organizations, Halkevi had been established in 1984 essentially as a Turkish organization but by the 1990s established its Kurdishness.³³

The Kurdistan Workers Association was established in 1987 and has since become the Kurdish Community Center. The Western Kurdistan Association was established in 1995 to address the needs of Kurds from Syria, while the Kurdish Advice Center was established by members sympathetic to the Kurdistan Socialist Party. From the late 1990s, several more Kurdish community centers were established throughout the UK – for example, in Birmingham, Liverpool, Edinburgh, Glasgow, Cambridge, and Croydon. Many Kurds have also attended Alevi *cemevis* (community houses) as well as Turkish and Kurdish community centers. Kurdish refugees from Iran, noted Wahlbeck in 1997, “were mostly active in Iranian political organizations and community centers,”³⁴ while an organization dealing with the needs of Faili Kurds and a Turkish-Kurdish cultural center perceived by policing

authorities to be sympathetic to the *Devrimci Halk Kurtuluş Partisi-Cephesi* (DHKP-C) was also established in London.

Over the past four decades, the dramatic proliferation of Kurdish cultural organizations has been accompanied by “an increase in their print and Internet publications. These associations,” as Lyon and Uçarer have observed, have “played an important identity-forming and maintaining role by celebrating Kurdish national holidays” as well as “fostering the use and informal teaching of the Kurdish language and providing a gathering point where those who identified themselves as Kurds could convene”³⁵ and debate/protest about and lobby over Kurdish human rights concerns while rallying around the political parties in Kurdistan and Turkey/Iran/Iraq/Syria that they most readily identified with.

“Given the restrictive political conditions for Kurds in their respective countries,” Bilgin Ayata has detailed the manner in which “politics in exile has become an important characteristic of Kurdish mobilization ... A range of transnational activities often directed toward ‘home’... have created a vibrant diaspora in Europe.”³⁶ This is despite the fact that for many Kurds, “economic subalternity, manifested in unemployment or underemployment, is the foremost challenge, effectively subsuming [many] Kurds’ lives as epiphenomenal within the calculus of the dominant neoliberal regimes across Europe.”³⁷

Several Kurdish community organizations in the UK have for years networked with organizations like KON-KURD (renamed the European Kurdish Democratic Societies Congress in 2014), based in Belgium but acting as an umbrella organization for various Kurdish groups worldwide. The Kurdish Advice Centre also established connections with the transnational Kurdish Association for Kurdish Workers for Kurdistan, the first federation of Kurdish workers associations.³⁸ Specialized Kurdish associations and organizations addressing housing, disability, scientific and medical needs have been established even as the Iranian and Kurdish Women’s Rights Organisation and Kurdish Women’s Rights Watch “have been campaigning for many years to bring the true incidence of honor based violence to light and to change public and agency attitudes to it.”³⁹

Numerous Kurdish diasporas run or linked human/civil and political rights campaigning organizations (such as the Kurdish Human Rights Project, Peace in Kurdistan, Kurdistan Solidarity Committee, London Rojava Solidarity, the Centre for Kurdish Progress, the Kurdish Information Centre, Scottish Solidarity with Kurdistan), university student organizations, charities, a satellite TV station (Med-TV), London/Liverpool/Manchester Film Festivals, and print and Internet media/news/blog sites and social networks (using the new media) have also operated in a transnational context over the years.

For Ayata and others, “the founding of the first Kurdish [satellite] TV-station was not simply a cultural activity, but a profoundly political action that not only facilitated Kurdish mobilization in Europe and in Turkey, but also challenged the Turkish state in unprecedented ways.”⁴⁰ The Turkish “state was facing now a new challenge carried out on airwaves from TV studios in Europe reaching Kurdish households in Turkey. This challenge cannot be overstated,” he concludes, “considering that the Turkish media had put themselves overwhelmingly in the service of the Turkish military during the internal war.”⁴¹

“By not presenting Kurds as ‘better’ or ‘different’ in terms of a racial discourse, and by focusing its critique on the Turkish state rather than on ‘Turks’ more generally, the programming content” of Med-TV, he concludes, “may be one important reason why the bloody armed conflict between the PKK and the Turkish military did not escalate into a civil war between Kurdish and Turkish civilians.”⁴² Even as Med-TV promoted “the rights of the Kurds to self-determination,” Hassanpour details the way in which it provided Kurdish educational “instruction to millions of viewers on a daily basis.”⁴³

While Med-TV was controversially shut down by the Independent Television Commission after intense diplomatic pressure from the Turkish government, it has inspired successor diasporic transnational satellite TV ventures that have operated elsewhere in Europe. While some (like Medya and Roj TV) have also succumbed to Turkish-US governmental “diplomacy,” Med Nûçe TV continues, despite intimidation. For Ayata, “not only have these Kurdish transnational activities of Kurdish organizations in Europe” – pioneered by Med-TV while it was headquartered in London and licensed in the UK – “challenged Turkey from without, they have also contributed to substantial policy changes within Turkey.”⁴⁴

Kurdish news websites with UK-based editors and contributors have also formed “a significant platform for Kurdish and non-Kurdish readers, writers and journalists, as well as activists, analysts and academics, whose sharing of news and views” often censored elsewhere “contributes to a collective effort that will help us all make sense of the dialectics of the Kurdish question.”⁴⁵

The London-based Kurdish Human Rights Project’s (KHRP’s) transnational nature was recognized when it was awarded the 2011 Justice Prize by the Gruber Foundation:

KHRP has been able to create civil rights mechanisms to highlight the issues that Kurds are facing around the world and make a significant difference in the lives of millions of people ... KHRP has brought cases on behalf of over 500 applicants [and] ... through its work with the UN and in the European Court of Human Rights, it has helped achieve important reforms.⁴⁶

Roj Women’s Association was established in 2004 by “a group of refugee Kurdish women living in London.”⁴⁷ With a transnational membership base, it “works on community development in the UK and campaigns for far-reaching legal and political reforms in Turkey.”⁴⁸

Many diasporic campaigning organizations have organized human rights fact-finding delegations to regions of Kurdistan and have produced reports, issued press releases, and organized meetings that have been directed toward Kurds worldwide as well as toward governments and government/nongovernment/supra-governmental bodies (such as the European Union, the European Court of Human Rights, the Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe (OSCE), the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR), the Council of Europe, and the United Nations) and other citizens/community/public interest/solidarity/parliamentary groups within the UK and other states where Kurds reside.

Organizations and campaigners have “also aimed to increase the knowledge of Europeans about the Kurdish people through their publications ... Moreover, Kurdish organizations,” since the late 1980s, have “developed a kind of cooperation with left-wing parties, anti-racist initiatives and other organizations led by non-Kurdish activists dedicated to human rights issues.”⁴⁹ These initiatives, to Ucarlar, indicate that Kurds have “not opt[ed] for a separation of the community from the rest of the host society, even if they were” – and are – “linked to the homeland and were” – and are – “concerned with the Kurdish culture and language.”⁵⁰

Diasporic groups and community members, for example, have extended support to wider anti-war, anti-arms trade, and anti-criminalization initiatives within the UK.⁵¹ Many community centers and networks have provided English Language Teaching and employment support services aimed at integrating Kurds into the wider community even as they have supported a host of multicultural activities. Prominent Kurds have equally engaged with

British “domestic” politics, becoming councilors, mayors, MPs, and parliamentary candidates. Youth groups have as their stated aims “the development and integration of the Kurdish diaspora in Britain.”⁵² For Soguk, “the prevailing belief is that Kurdish political aspirations have been firmly established around the pan-Kurdish identity of EuroKurdishness.”⁵³

For van Bruinessen, “the term ‘transnational’ ... is obviously an appropriate term to refer to th[is] network of contacts and the complex of activities connecting Kurdish communities in Germany, Great Britain and Turkey” (and one might add Iraq, Syria, Iran, and the former USSR with other diasporic communities in other European countries, the USA, Canada, Australia, New Zealand, and elsewhere).⁵⁴ As Tölölyan has also concluded, “diasporas are the exemplary communities of the transnational moment.”⁵⁵

The Kurdish diaspora shares with other diasporas “a feeling of ‘necessity’ embedded in their identity; a necessity which Patricia Ehrkamp refers to as ‘transnational belonging,’” that leads to “the creation of transnational social spaces.”⁵⁶ Kurds have accessed news about political and cultural/human rights activities, initiatives, protests, and events in the diaspora, Kurdistan, and the states in which it is located – often via Kurdish community centers, newspapers, networks, shops, national and transnational media outlets and organizations, and via new media forms (Twitter, Facebook, etc.). They have also engaged with various diasporic transnational organizations and networks to extend solidarity and lobby support for a number of initiatives (including protests, demonstrations, hunger strikes, and petitions).

Ayata, indeed, has “conceptualized the myriad institutions and activities of this diaspora as ‘Euro-Kurdistan.’”⁵⁷ Consequently, in demonstrations of solidarity and/or protest, often “millions of Kurds and their supporters can, and do, take to the streets of Istanbul, Berlin, London, Paris, New York and Brussels, whenever there is an issue of concern,”⁵⁸ often in coordinated fashion.

As Kurds have engaged in these activities, they have also “adapted their customary practices, developing an innovative approach to dispute resolution, rather than strictly following official UK legal processes.”⁵⁹ The Kurdish Peace Committee’s (KPC’s) approach to mediating cases, for example, “demonstrate[s] how traditional customary practice has continued to be hybridized in favor of increasing gender equality. The PKK,” to Tas, “has substantially affected the role of Kurdish women in society. Women are now fully involved in the fight for Kurdish freedom. These influences are apparent in how the KPC operates today.”⁶⁰

The transnational activities and initiatives of the Kurdish diaspora in the UK have also had a significant impact in Turkey “both in terms of social remittances (targeting Kurdish political parties and Kurdish civil society) and also in terms of political leverage, putting the Turkish government under considerable pressure regarding its Kurdish policies.”⁶¹ The diaspora in the UK is also considered by the Turkish government and many US-UK-NATO policy analysts and linked agencies and think tanks to be a key funding base for the PKK.⁶² It is also evident to many observers that some Kurds have returned to Turkey and/or Syria to assist with the PKK’s and PYD/YPG’s struggle, be it in a military or nonmilitary capacity. Latif Tas, for example, when conducting ethnographic research, “was told that several hundred young Kurdish men and women have travelled from London and Berlin to fight and help the Kurds in Turkey and Syria. Some of these people are well educated or work in well-paid professions.”⁶³

The late Mehmet Aksoy, for example, filmmaker and director of the London Kurdish Film Festival and editor of the online news portal *Kurdish Question*, recently traveled from London to Raqqa, “working as a press officer for the People’s Protection Units (YPG) before being tragically killed in the conflict by ISIS suicide-attackers ... His job was also to liaise with journalists in Britain and around the world covering the conflict.”⁶⁴

In this context, Tas “challenges Benedict Anderson’s idea that those who live in diaspora keep themselves safe and avoid personal sacrifices (Anderson 1998) ... Even some of those who remained in their new host countries ... have been arrested,” targeted and/or criminalized in a number of contexts “for demonstrating their support for the Kurdish cause.”⁶⁵

Second-generation diaspora members in Europe, observes Nezan, “still attached to their Kurdish identity, structure their actions in various and often innovative ways here in the diaspora to contribute to a better knowledge of the Kurds and their struggle for freedom.”⁶⁶ For Demir, “through such networks and links, Kurdish brokers are trans-nationalizing the Kurdish struggle.”⁶⁷ “Members of the Kurdish diaspora,” Tas confirms, “have for many years tried to remove the PKK from the European Union’s list of designated terrorist groups. Freedom for Ocalan is another key aim for the Kurdish national diaspora movement”⁶⁸ alongside a defense of the existence and functioning of Rojava, a stated Turkish government “PKK”-linked target. Several “brokers” have also expressed their desire to advance conflict resolution initiatives and to engage with relevant governmental, supra-governmental, and nongovernmental agencies to attain such ends.

The Turkish government and related intelligence agencies have viewed many of these transnational perceived “pro-PKK”-inspired activities and initiatives as “national security threats” that need to be countered using all necessary means. Consequently, diplomatic, intelligence and other resources have been mobilized to influence and leverage Facebook,⁶⁹ British governmental, policing, intelligence, customs and excise, immigration and broadcasting regulatory bodies into acting against these “PKK fronts.”

In the south Kurdistan context, “the internationalization of [‘Anfal’] genocide recognition claims” has been bolstered “via diaspora lobbying and the Kurdish Regional Government in Iraq’s bureaux of representation in Europe.”⁷⁰ These initiatives serve to “establish a link to homeland” even as they “provide greater space for lobbying and transnational advocacy networking.”⁷¹

The Kurdish diaspora has also mobilized in the face of humanitarian catastrophes in Kurdistan. In spring 1991, as displaced Kurds were fleeing Saddam Hussein’s genocidal actions, the KCC coordinated a UK-wide online and offline awareness-raising campaign, and Kurdish Disaster Fund appeal⁷² that helped to establish emergency Medical Reception Stations in Kurdistan.⁷³ More recently, there has been mass mobilization in support of the humanitarian and political crisis facing Yezidis and Kurds in southeast Turkey, Kobane, and Rojava.

Surveillance, targeting, and criminalization

Due to the European Union supra-state (“Fortress Europe”), US-UK-Turkey governmental and linked NATO “deep political” and “securitization” agendas⁷⁴ (tied in with “anti-drug trafficking” initiatives)⁷⁵ and British government asylum/immigration policies that have discriminated against particular “suspect” ethnic groups,⁷⁶ the Kurdish diaspora in the UK has been placed under extensive surveillance, targeting, and criminalization since the 1980s, particularly after the armed struggle by the PKK was launched in the wake of the military coup in Turkey.

Successive British governments, alongside intelligence agencies, private sector securitization companies,⁷⁷ “policy making specialists with close relations to US and NATO military strategists,”⁷⁸ and mainstream media outlets have played a not insignificant role in “Othering” particularly “PKK-linked” Kurdish diasporic communities as “suspect” communities in need of “risk management,” surveillance, targeting, and profiling.⁷⁹

As “a mythic image of a deviant and criminal asylum seeking population”⁸⁰ has been promoted, asylum and immigration legislation and policy “that is both repressive and restrictive” has been enacted alongside “anti-terrorism” legislation.⁸¹ “Techniques” have been “employed in order to sort individuals into groups according to the degree of control warranted by their risk profiles.”⁸² Consequently, as asylum policy has increasingly concerned itself with processing these “large aggregates, such as groups of specific nationalities rather than assessing individual cases of asylum,”⁸³ Kurds fleeing persecution and conflict have found themselves subjected to discriminatory profiling and targeting. Concern over these matters was raised by Lord Eric Avebury in a parliamentary debate regarding Kurds as early as 3 September 1998.⁸⁴

The government’s undeclared policy of sending immigration officers on to planes to question Kurds before disembarkation began, flying many forcibly back to Turkey without being allowed off the plane to file any asylum claims was repeatedly exposed in 1989 and during the early 1990s even as campaigners documented the highly questionable detention and deportation regime that was in place targeting Kurds from not just Turkey.⁸⁵ By early 2001, in seeking to keep “out” all Kurds, Barbara Roche, the Home Office Minister, announced that immigration officers would now be openly permitted to officially discriminate against eight nationalities, one of which was “Kurdish.”⁸⁶

Surveillance, targeting, and deportation measures against “failed” Kurdish asylum seekers from Iraq, Turkey, Iran, and Syria have also continued in the post 9/11 period.⁸⁷ By 2005, “many asylum seekers,” inclusive of targeted Kurds, found themselves “unable to access legal representation” and were “facing removal from the UK without key facts in their cases being considered.”⁸⁸ Questionable profiling by policing authorities has also led to Iraqi Kurds (including asylum seekers) being falsely accused of planning a suicide attack at Manchester United’s football ground.⁸⁹

For Fitch,

the attempt to link Turkish-Kurds to ‘terrorism’ has existed from the moment of their arrival in Britain. It has been reinforced by some politicians and influential public figures who have helped to establish a particular profile of the Turkish-Kurdish community. In her Dimpleby lecture, the then head of MI5 Stella Rimmington identified Kurdish groups as a threat to Britain (1994).⁹⁰

Fitch concludes that

parliamentary statements by members of Government can be linked directly to the Turkish-Kurds’ interpretation of the British position concerning the legitimacy of their political struggle and their impression of receiving sanctuary in a country which remained essentially hostile to their cause.⁹¹

With NATO and US-UK governmental policies supporting Turkish government positions that have viewed the PKK and its sympathizers as a “terrorist” and “drug-running” threat during and after the Cold War period, Kurds from Turkey, in particular, have found themselves (alongside linked diasporic organizations and networks they engage with) “risk” profiled, “managed,” targeted, and criminalized. The solicitor Gareth Pierce concluded in 1999 that

the British and Turkish governments, under the rubric of ‘suppression of terrorism,’ have managed to criminalize the Kurdish community of Great Britain. Without engaging

the legitimacy of a Kurdish struggle for national rights, the British police has deliberately worked to cast doubt on every Kurd in the UK as terrorist suspects.⁹²

Cases of “Turkish”-Kurds being subjected during the 1990s to miscarriages of justice, harassment, and arrest for no justifiable reason; attacks by the police during peaceful demonstrations and protest marches; intrusive surveillance as well as blackmail and intimidation have been extensively documented.⁹³ Kurdish businesses, community centers, and charities have also been targeted.⁹⁴ In 1996, the Kurdish satellite station Med-TV was subjected to highly questionable raids that were conducted simultaneously in the UK, Belgium, and Germany as part of a coordinated US-UK-NATO-Turkey anti-terrorism initiative. Med-TV was controversially shut down in 1999 by the Independent Television Commission.⁹⁵

Many Kurdish politicians during the 1990s also discovered that they were barred entry into the UK. In Kani Yilmaz’s (the European representative of the National Front for the Liberation of Kurdistan’s) case, after he had secured legal entry and been invited by British parliamentarians to debate the PKK’s peace initiatives, he was arrested on his way to parliament and was imprisoned for over two years while he questioned the basis of extradition measures against him.⁹⁶

Post-9/11 and after the UK Terrorism Act 2000 (which proscribed the PKK), UK and EU-linked intelligence, immigration, policing, and “securitization” agendas have intensified surveillance, criminalization, and “disruption” initiatives.⁹⁷ Forms of “lawfare” have criminalized “diverse forms of association and support, without requiring intentional acts of violence against civilians. This creates serious consequences for many diaspora in the UK,” including Kurds.⁹⁸

Organizations, businesses, charities, and community centers’ representatives have found themselves being “routinely criminalised and terrorised by the fact of this proscription.”⁹⁹ There have been numerous “MI5 and police raids without charge, compulsory Schedule 7 detention and questioning and stop and search” operations.¹⁰⁰ British civil rights and Kurdish diasporic organizations have protested against these actions¹⁰¹ even as further plans are being made to intensify targeting operations against perceived “PKK-linked” individuals and organizations.¹⁰²

The British government’s stance toward the Democratic Union Party (PYD)¹⁰³ means that Kurds expressing support for the PYD and its linked Rojavan revolution in Syria also face surveillance and potential targeting. Proscription of the DHKP-C has additionally meant that Kurdish (as with Turkish) members of the Anatolian People’s Cultural Centre have been subjected to targeting of the harshest kind.¹⁰⁴

The Turkish government has also reportedly used its diplomatic influence, its intelligence agency MIT, and proxy groups to target and place under surveillance the Kurdish diaspora and perceived “PKK”-connected community centers, businesses, Med-TV, transnational networks, organizations, and individuals. Such targeting – which has reportedly included orders to assassinate Kurdish individuals¹⁰⁵ – all forms part of a wider Turkish government initiative against the “pro-PKK” diaspora in Europe.¹⁰⁶

Conclusion

Several scholars have debated the diaspora definitions and concepts as they relate to Kurds in the UK,¹⁰⁷ and in the past eight years, in particular, there has been a proliferation of academic articles focusing upon various aspects of the Kurdish diaspora in the UK. It is clear that as the diaspora establishes itself in the UK, many Kurds will continue to harbor a sense

of “transnational belonging” and will continue to socially and politically organize through “transnational social spaces” and organizations. Unless there is a marked change in British politics, Kurdish communities will continue to be subjected to various forms of “Othering” and criminalization.

Notes

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