

EDITED BY
MEHMET GURSES, DAVID ROMANO,
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THE KURDS IN THE MIDDLE EAST

*ENDURING PROBLEMS
AND NEW DYNAMICS*



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Enduring Problems and New Dynamics

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and Michael M. Gunter

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Acknowledgments

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The real work of a volume like this comes from the individual authors who contribute chapters, of course. We editors simply have the pleasure of learning from these chapters and suggesting ways in which they might be improved and how they tie certain themes together. We would therefore like to give a heartfelt “thank you” to all our author contributors to this volume, who come from diverse international backgrounds ranging from North America and Europe to Kurdistan and other parts of the Middle East. Thank you especially for remaining patient with us!

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Introduction

Mehmet Gurses, David Romano,
and Michael Gunter

Metin Serbest—a Kurdish American lawyer who had earned his Master of Law Degree (LLM) from Northwestern University—sponsored his second international conference on the Kurds in June 2018. The conference was held under the auspices of the Buffett Institute of Northwestern University. An impressive variety of scholars participated in the two-day gathering. In his introductory remarks, Metin Serbest explained how he was very pleased to “give back” by hosting an international, interdisciplinary conference on several aspects of the Kurdish issue. Sponsoring this major event, said Serbest, “brought back boyhood memories in Turkey when I attended school where Turkish only was used. Speaking only Kurdish, I could not understand the teacher.” However, when he used certain words common to both languages, commented Serbest, “I gleefully responded in Kurdish only to be reprimanded and threatened that if I spoke that language again I would be beaten.”

While we may have moved past those days of “being reprimanded” for speaking Kurdish, much remains to be done to address the multifaceted and transborder Kurdish question in the Middle East. The prominent Kurdish human rights activist Musa Anter, *Apê Musa* (Uncle Musa) to many Kurds, tells of how the Turkish government changed the name of his village in the late 1970s–early 1980s. “Our village Zivinge,” which means Winter Depot in Kurdish, “was Turkified overnight to become *Eski Magara* (Old Cave).” Our old Zivinge, he continues, “which goes as far back as to the Neolithic age” was assigned a new Turkish name by the government “the same way someone would name their dog.”¹ Today, events such as the Kurdish studies conferences sponsored by Mr. Serbest serve as part of the modern response to the attempted erasure of all things Kurdish.

In this up-to-date and wide-ranging collection of chapters, we aim to bring together a variety of fresh, new scholars to consider and relate change and

continuity in the Kurdish experience. Many of these scholars originally presented earlier versions of their chapters at the Serbest conference, while the three editors also solicited several others. The result is a unique collection of penetrating analyses of change and continuity in the Kurdish issue that will reward the scholar, government practitioner, and interested lay public with rich insights.

We start with Kurdish–Turkey relations for a number of reasons. Turkey is not only a powerful state but also home to the largest Kurdish population in the world. In addition, it has engaged in a long and still unresolved conflict with arguably the most powerful Kurdish insurgent group, the Kurdistan Workers’ Party (*Partiya Karkeren Kurdistan*, PKK). While the Turkish state has yet to recognize the Kurds in Turkey as distinct people, much has changed in the past several decades.

No doubt, the key change in Turkey has to do with the rise and evolution of the PKK in the past four decades. What began as a feeble revolt in the early 1980s had become “the Achilles heel of the Turkish state”² by the 1990s. The past decade has seen the PKK acquiring a truly transborder reality as the war in Syria inadvertently turned the Kurdish-led forces in Syria, who share a common history and culture with the Kurds of Turkey and an ideology with the PKK, into an indispensable ally of the United States. The Kurdish-led Peoples’ Democratic Party (*Halkların Demokratik Partisi*, HDP), an invention of the imprisoned PKK leader Ocalan as a new platform, aimed at bringing together pro-democracy forces in Turkey to promote his new paradigm of “democratic unity,” likewise quickly became a key political player in Turkey.

The ongoing Syrian civil war of 2011 created circumstances for the emergence of a Kurdish-led political entity in northern and eastern parts of the country. The Kurdish-led Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF), the armed wing of the nascent de facto autonomous administration in North-East Syria, has increasingly become part of the United States’ overall strategy to counter Islamist groups and the Iranian influence in the region.

Reflecting this interconnectedness, sections I and II respectively include chapters on varying aspects of the Kurdish question in Turkey and Syria. Section I begins with a chapter on the complex and important question of Kurdish political representation in Turkey. Who really represents the large Kurdish minority in Turkey? The PKK and its affiliates or such traditional forces as religious and tribal leaders? In chapter 1, Cengiz Gunes draws attention to the changing context and new trends. Ekrem Karakoc and H. Ege Ozen, building on two national samples from 2011 to 2015, tackle a similar question in chapter 2. They analyze Kurdish public opinion on the PKK, cultural rights, autonomy, secession, and more to discover what the Kurds in Turkey want. Section I concludes with a chapter in which Veli Yadirgi offers a rich account of “de-development” of Kurdish regions as a way of controlling and

preventing Kurdish society in Turkey from developing an indigenous economic base independent of the Turkish state.

Section II consists of four chapters that shed considerable light on the complex and shifting political terrain of Syria. Sean Lee (chapter 4) offers a theoretically grounded discussion of the monumental changes that the Kurds in Syria are undergoing. While the Kurds of Syria emphatically argue for a “stateless” bottom-up democratic confederation of peoples, they nonetheless seem to have engaged in what amounts to state building in parts of Syria under their control. Lee attempts to reconcile this seemingly contradictory theory and practice. In chapter 5, Massoud Dryaz Sharifi points out the de facto *state-like* structure in north and east Syria, with an eye on the ideology and the Democratic Union Party’s (PYD) relationship with the PKK. In chapter 6, Ozum Yesiltas, building on in-depth interviews with leading members of the Syrian Democratic Council, the political arm of the SDF, outlines opportunities as well as risks involved in the Kurdish attempts to concoct a “third way.”³ Section II concludes with an up-to-date summary of the rise and evolution of the Kurdish-led administration in North-East Syria. Building on his own personal observations, Wladimir van Wilgenburg examines the prospects of the nascent Democratic Federation of Northern Syria (DFNS) (chapter 7).

The twenty-first century also ushered in a new era for the Kurds in Iraq as they solidified their gains of the 1990s and won official recognition in Iraq’s 2005 constitution. While this is a key achievement for the Kurds in general and Kurds in Iraq in particular, serious domestic, regional, and international obstacles remain. Section III thus includes two chapters. In chapter 8, Peshawa Muhammed provides an overview of the historical challenges and development of Kurdish autonomy in Iraq. Alan Mumtaz Noory in chapter 9 provides an in-depth examination of intra-Kurdish conflict within Iraqi or South Kurdistan. Focusing on the lesser-known issue of disputes over land tenure in Iraqi Kurdistan, Noory demonstrates how this problem plays a prominent role in explaining divisions, rivalries, and conflicts between the major Kurdish parties there.

As Kurds in Iraq seem to have consolidated their autonomy despite ongoing internal conflicts, the Kurds in Iran, who constitute the second largest Kurdish group in the world, have yet to overcome their internal divisions and form even the semblance of a unified opposition to the Iranian regime. Section IV addresses Iranian Kurdish developments, which appear to be characterized by continuity rather than change. In chapter 10, Ahmet Y. Hamza surveys the political history of the Kurds in Iran, bringing a much-needed understanding about the background and present situation of these often-ignored people. In chapter 11, Carol Prunhuber narrows her focus to Abdul Rahman Ghassemlou, a famous, charismatic Iranian Kurdish leader whom

the Iranian regime treacherously assassinated in Vienna on July 13, 1989 under false pretensions of negotiation.

In addition to examining the changing nature of the Kurdish Question in these “four Kurdistans,” we also include a separate section that tackles the increasingly relevant Kurdish diaspora in the West. This section, entitled “Imagining Kurdistan from Abroad,” begins with chapter 12 by Vera Eccarius-Kelly on how Kurdish diasporas are not mere extensions of their homeland communities, but rather should be recognized as increasingly independent sociopolitical and cultural entities involved in imagining and shaping the future of Kurdish regions. In chapter 13, Barzoo Eliassi examines the Kurdish diaspora in the United Kingdom and Sweden from both theoretical and interviewee perspectives. He draws interesting conclusions concerning the Kurdish struggle to maintain their threatened ethnic identity from assimilationist powers. In our last chapter, Janroj Keles studies the return of highly skilled young British Kurdish people to Iraqi Kurdistan. He finds that this transnational mobility is less driven by economic considerations than by the collective trauma of displacement and the political aspirations and attachment of the displaced to their imagined homeland.

Taken together, all the chapters in this volume offer readers a snapshot of the most interesting and relevant issues faced by today’s Kurds and the states whose borders encompass the different Kurdistans. In some cases, such as Syria and Iraq, the changes over the past several years have been nothing short of breathtaking. Particularly in Syria but also in Iraq, many of the recent positive changes (from various Kurdish perspectives) remain fragile. In Turkey, just as it started to look like change was coming—in the form of groundbreaking peace talks between the Turkish state and the PKK in 2013—the old conflict dynamic suddenly returned to confound optimists. In Iran, continuity continues to bedevil a largely unhappy but fractured and mostly quiescent Kurdish population. Meanwhile, the Kurdish diaspora keenly watches all these changes (or lack thereof) in their native homelands, hoping to positively affect the political dynamics there when possible.

Roughly one hundred years have passed since the Treaty of Sèvres held out the possibility of establishing a Kurdish state in the Middle East. Some Kurdish parties, particularly in Iraqi Kurdistan but also elsewhere, still hope to resurrect this promise and turn it into a reality. Others, particularly in the PKK-aligned Kurdish parties, seem to feel that 100 years is enough time to relinquish the Kurdish dream of statehood. Eschewing the language and ideology of nation-statehood, these groups turn to concepts such as “democratic autonomy” even as they build a de facto state in northern Syria. Still other Kurdish parties focus more on issues other than statehood or anarcho-socialist autonomy, attempting to make the most of the states and political circumstances within which they presently find themselves.

It should in fact not surprise anyone to see a wide variety of political perspectives, circumstances, and visions for the future among Kurds. If most Kurds see a kind of grim continuity in Kurdistan's geography, its historical difficulties, and an often unsatisfactory or fragile status quo, they likewise harbor a myriad of different hopes for change. The contributions in this volume together aim to provide readers a good appreciation for such complexities.

NOTES

1. Anter, Musa. 2016. *Hatiralarim* [My Memoirs]. Diyarbakir: Aram Yayinlari, p. 23.

2. Olson, Robert. 1996. *The Kurdish Nationalist Movement in the 1990s: Its Impacts on Turkey and the Middle East* (ed.). Lexington, Kentucky: The University Press of Kentucky, p. 1.

3. Authors of the chapters that include interviews received oral permission from the interviewees to use their words. With the exception of elite interviews, all other identifying factors are removed to guarantee the safety of interviewees. For elite interviews, while such permission is already taken to exist in general according to common practice in the field, authors of these chapters that include elite interviews confirmed that interviewees knew they were being interviewed and that their words would be used for the purposes of this book.

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- Anter, Musa. *Hatiralarim* [My Memoirs]. Diyarbakir: Aram Yayinlari, 2016, 23.
- Olson, Robert. *The Kurdish Nationalist Movement in the 1990s: Its Impacts on Turkey and the Middle East* (ed.). Lexington, Kentucky: The University Press of Kentucky, 1996, 1.

Section I

**CONTINUITY AND CHANGE IN
TURKEY'S KURDISH QUESTION**

Chapter 1

Kurdish Political Representation in Turkey

The Changing Context and New Trends

Cengiz Gunes

Turkey's transition to democracy took place in the period 1945–1950 and the general election on May 14, 1950 is considered the country's first competitive election. Since then, Turkey has been holding regular elections but the extent to which these elections have been “free and fair” is debatable and the country is yet to consolidate a pluralist functional liberal democracy capable of representing its diverse population. Nevertheless, the transformation to democracy created opportunities for the Kurdish religious and tribal elite to participate in politics and the institutions of the state. These Kurdish political representatives acted as intermediaries between the government, the state, and the Kurdish population and dispensed patronage in exchange of votes and were co-opted into center-right Turkish political circles.

From the 1970s onward and as a result of the spread of education and increase of urbanization in Turkey and the Kurdish majority regions, the strong connection between the traditional elite and political representation started to weaken. The rise of Turkey's left-wing movement and the Kurdish national movement from the early 1970s onward further weakened the influence of the Kurdish elite, with a broader section of the Kurdish society beginning to take part in political activism and a wider set of Kurdish political demands beginning to be voiced. Since 1990, Kurdish political representation in Turkey took a new dimension with the establishment of the pro-Kurdish democratic movement, but the repression that they have been experiencing, particularly during the mid-1990s and since 2015 onward, bears testimony to the difficulties Kurds face as they try to represent themselves via legal political channels and in the institutions of the state.

Suzanna Dovi defines political representation as “the activity of making citizens' voices, opinions, and perspectives ‘present’ in public policy-making

processes. Political representation occurs when political actors speak, advocate, symbolize, and act on the behalf of others in the political arena.”¹ Political actors here refer to persons holding elected position, such as members of parliament and district and provincial mayors and those who are formally involved in the representation of their constituency. This definition is based on Hanna Pitkin’s seminal study *The Concept of Representation* and draws attention to two different conceptions of political representation: “descriptive” and “substantive” representation. Descriptive representation refers to a situation where representatives “stand for” the represented “by virtue of a correspondence and connection between them, a resemblance or reflection.” Representatives share a descriptive likeness with the represented and in the debate on the representation of minorities, this often refers to similarities in terms of ethnic, religious, or cultural background. In contrast, substantive representation is based on the notion of representation as “substantive acting for” others and here the importance of representatives advocating the “best interest” of the represented is emphasized.² These two views of representation are distinct, they are not mutually exclusive and in many ways are connected and impact on each other. For example, an increase in descriptive representation can and often leads to an increase in substantive representation. This argument has been advanced by Jane Manbridge who argues that descriptive representation enhances the substantive representation of a group’s interests “by improving the quality of deliberation.”³

If we derive a conception of representation based on descriptive representation, then we can identify a long list of Kurdish representatives in Turkey who have taken part in Turkey’s national politics. However, having Kurdish descriptive representation did not lead to the development of Kurdish substantive representation as most of these political actors remained loyal to their political parties and on the main refrained from articulating overtly Kurdish political demands. The strong influence of Turkish state nationalism on the country’s political institutions and culture placed significant barriers on the accommodation of the demands the Kurdish political parties and movements have been raising and on the representation of the Kurdish group rights.⁴ This chapter will first provide an account of the Kurdish political representation via Turkey’s center-right political parties before moving on to discussing the rise of the pro-Kurdish democratic movement since 1990 and how it has transformed the debate on Kurdish political representation in Turkey.

KURDISH DESCRIPTIVE REPRESENTATION THROUGH THE CENTER-RIGHT TURKISH POLITICAL PARTIES

Since 1950, party competition created suitable conditions for Kurds to engage in politics, leading to an increase in Kurdish descriptive representation. This

process was initiated by Adnan Menderes and his Democrat Party (*Demokrat Parti*, DP), which ruled Turkey during the 1950s and chose the locally influential Kurdish tribal and religious leaders as their parliamentary candidates to strengthen its base in the Kurdish-populated provinces in the east and south-east of Turkey. Kurdish tribal chiefs and religious leaders who were exiled by Kemalists to western Turkey during the 1930s were allowed to return and the DP utilized the Kurdish tribal and religious elite in its attempt to mobilize the Kurdish electorate during the 1950s.

An attempt by the Kurdish traditional elite to pursue a more independent line was made when the New Turkey Party (*Yeni Türkiye Partisi*, YTP) was established in 1961. The YTP's establishment was an important development for Kurdish political representation in Turkey because the party included several high-profile Kurds among its founders, such as Yusuf Azizoğlu, who was a medical doctor from a landholding family in Silvan, Diyarbakır, and was active in DP prior to his involvement in the YTP. The YTP managed to gain significant support from the Kurds in the 1961 general election and served as a junior coalition partner in the government between 1962 and 1965. In addition, its leading figures campaigned to address the disproportionate inequality the Kurds were experiencing in Turkey.⁵

Almost all Kurdish political representatives during the 1950s and 1960s were drawn from the tribal and religious elite and several leading tribal and religious families have been active in Turkey's center-right politics. These include the Kartal family in the province of Van, who are a leading family in the Bruki tribe. Kinyas Kartal (1900–1991) was a member of parliament (MP) from the Justice Party (*Adalet Partisi*, AP) for the Van province between 1965 and 1980. His son, Nadir Kartal, was an MP for the Van province from the center-right True Path Party (*Doğru Yol Partisi*, DYP) between 1991 and 1995. His nephew, Remzi Kartal, was also elected an MP in 1991 for the Van province as part of the People's Labour Party (*Halkın Emek Partisi*, HEP) listed under the Social Democratic Populist Party (*Sosyaldemokrat Halkçı Parti*, SHP).

Similarly, the Zeydan family in Hakkari, who are a leading family of the Pinyanişi tribe, have played an important role in the politics of the Hakkari province in the past fifty years. Ahmet Zeydan was an MP for the Republican People's Party (*Cumhuriyet Halk Partisi*, CHP) during the 1960s and 1970s; Mustafa Zeydan was the mayor of Yüksekova district from 1969 to 1989 and an MP for the DYP during the 1990s and for the Justice and Development Party (*Adalet ve Kalkınma Partisi*, AKP) between 2002 and 2007; Rüstem Zeydan was an MP for the AKP between 2007 and 2011.⁶

The Cevheri family of the Şeyhanlı tribe is another example of tribal elite dominating politics in the Kurdish majority regions. Ömer Cevheri was elected as a DP MP for the Şanlıurfa province in 1950. In the subsequent

years, other members of the Cevheri family have also been influential in the politics of Şanlıurfa province and served as MPs. These include Necmettin Cevheri who served as an MP for the AP from 1963 to 1980 and subsequently for the DYP from 1991 to 2002; and Sabahattin Cevheri who was an independent MP for the Şanlıurfa province between 2002 and 2007 and an MP for the AKP between 2007 and 2011. Another leading figure in the Şeyhanlı tribe, Seyit Eyyüpoğlu, was active in the Motherland Party (*Anavatan Partisi*, ANAP) and served as an MP for the Şanlıurfa province from 1991 to 1999. In 2007, he was elected as an independent MP but later joined the AKP and in 2011 was reelected from the AKP.

Similarly, a leading figure in the Kirvar tribe, Abdulrahman Odabaşı, served as an MP for the DP in the Şanlıurfa Province between 1957 and 1960. Another leading figure of the tribe, Ahmet Karavar, was elected an MP from the Islamist Welfare Party (*Refah Partisi*, RP) in 1995 and again from the FP in 1999. The chief of İzol tribe, which is another influential tribe in the Urfa province, was an MP from Islamist political parties between 1995 and 2011. Mehmet Celal Bucak and Sedat Edip Bucak, who are leading figures in the Bucak tribe in the Siverek district of Şanlıurfa province, were active in the national politics: the former was an MP for the AP during the 1970s and the latter was an MP during the 1990s for the DYP.

Abdulkadir Timurağaoğlu, a leading figure in the Kikan tribe in Mardin, was elected as an MP at the 1977 general election from the National Salvation Party (*Milli Selamet Partisi*, MSP). Members of the other leading families of the tribe have been elected as MPs in other mainstream political parties, including Mahmut Duyan from the DYP and Ömer Ertaş from the ANAP at the general elections held on December 24, 1995. Ömer Ertaş was re-elected as an MP from Turgut Özal's ANAP at the general elections held on April 18, 1999. Mahmut Duyan was elected as an MP from the CHP at the general elections held on November 3, 2002.⁷ The leader of the Delmamikan tribe, Süleyman Çelebi, was an MP for the AKP from the Mardin Province between 2007 and 2011.⁸ The Ensarioğlu family in Diyarbakır have been active in the center-right parties during the past two decades. Salim Ensarioğlu was an MP for the DYP and served as a state minister in the mid-1990s.

While Kurds supporting center-right political parties has been the dominant trend until the 2015 election, it is worth highlighting that many Kurdish political actors have also taken part in the left-wing political parties. The rise of Turkey's left-wing movement during the 1960s and later the Kurdish movement in Turkey from the 1970s onward further weakened the power of the Kurdish elite and reduced their influence over Kurdish society. A Kurd active in left-wing political parties is Ahmet Türk, who is a tribal leader in the Mardin area and has been active within the CHP between 1974 and 1980, the SHP between 1987 and 1991, and within the HEP and other pro-Kurdish

political parties since then serving as an MP between 1991 and 1994 and again between 2007 and 2014.

The state-tribe relations took a new dimension with the establishment of the village guard system in 1985 as a paramilitary group to fight against the guerrillas of the Kurdistan Workers' Party (*Partiya Karkerên Kurdistanê*, PKK).⁹ The state began to work with the leading tribal families and offered them concessions and money to persuade them and the members of their tribe to join the village guard system. Initially, tribal leaders signed to become village guards and through the tribal leader people from lower levels of tribal hierarchy were recruited into the scheme. Some of the well-known tribes that were recruited as village guards include the Bucak, İzol, and Karakeçili tribes in Urfa, the Ertuşi tribe in Van and Hakkari, and Pinyanişi and Jirki tribes in Hakkari. The concessions included forgiving the crimes committed by the tribal leaders; a good example would be that of the leader of the Jirki tribe in Hakkari, Tahir Adıyaman, being pardoned for several crimes he was charged with or investigated for in exchange of accepting and persuading the members of his tribe to join the village guards.¹⁰

It was not only the tribal leaders who become political actors, but sheikhs and other religious figures also established themselves from 1950 onward as important political actors and integrated into the center-right political networks. The promise of support and distribution of funds have played a key role in enhancing the religious orders' ability to fulfill its patronage role. Many sheikhs or junior members of sheikh families were active in politics from 1950 onward. For example, Kasım Küfrevi, who was a member of the family that manages the Küfrevi Sufi lodge, was an MP for the DP from the Ağrı province between 1950 and 1960. He was reelected in the 1965 election from the YTP list and again in the 1969 election from the Republican Reliance Party (*Cumhuriyetçi Güven Partisi*, CGP). Another dominant figure in Kurdish politics was Abdülmelik Fırat, who was the grandson of Sheikh Said and served as an MP for the DP between 1957 and 1960, and for the DYP between 1991 and 1995. Muhyettin Mutlu was an MP for the Bitlis province from the ANAP between 1987 and 1991, and Abdulhaluk Mutlu served as an MP for Bitlis between 1995 and 1999, both of whom are members of the Tağiler family who have a strong connection to the Naqshibandiyya order in the town of Norşin, Bitlis province. Another member of a sheikh family, Abdülkerim Zilan, served as an MP for the Siirt province from the CHP between 1973 and 1980 and subsequently as an MP for Batman province from the SHP between 1991 and 1995.

The Gaydalı (also known as İnan or İnan Gaydalı) family has been quite dominant in the politics of Bitlis province and a number of its members served as MPs. The family's origins are traced to a well-known Naqshibandiyya sheikh Sibgatullah Arvasi who played an important role in the religious

life of the region in the nineteenth century. The family's involvement in politics began when Selahattin İnan Gaydalı was elected as an MP for Bitlis in 1950 from the DP list. He was reelected on two occasions and remained as an MP until 1960. From the 1970s onward, his sons began to involve in politics. His older son, Abidin İnan Gaydalı, was elected an MP for the Bitlis province in the 1969 general election from the AP. He was re-elected in the 1973 general election after the return of civilian rule following the military coup of 1971 and once more in the 1977 general election. Selahattin İnan Gaydalı's younger son, Kamran İnan, was elected as an MP from the ANAP list for Bitlis province at the 1983 election and served until 1999. Between 1999 and 2002, he was elected to parliament from the Van province. Other members of the family who played an active role in the politics of the province include Edip Safter Gaydalı who was an MP between 1991 and 2007. He was first elected in 1991 from the ANAP list and in 2002 he was elected as an independent candidate.

Religious orders continue to play an important role in the politics of the region. Like the center-right political parties in the second half of the twentieth century, using the existing tribal and religious networks to win the support of the electorate in the Kurdish majority regions has been utilized effectively by the AKP throughout the past fifteen years. This has strengthened the power and influence of religious orders in Kurdish society, but the AKP's approach to providing greater recognition of Kurdish identity seems to have also had an impact on winning the support of the religious orders. The AKP incorporated Kurdish conservative elements and it successfully used Kurdish religious and tribal networks to mobilize voters. Social welfare and other forms of assistance programs (jobs, promise for jobs), and AKP's more tolerant policy compared to other Turkish political parties is also factor in its ability to mobilize Kurdish voters, especially until 2013.¹¹

The AKP has been drawing strong support from the Kurds since its establishment and it can be argued that no mainstream Turkish political party has been as successful as the AKP in mobilizing the Kurdish voters. Its Islamist discourse and democratization reforms received strong support from the Kurdish voters throughout the 2000s. The Islamist parties that preceded the AKP also had a strong presence in the region and many religious Kurds shifted their support to the AKP when the party was established in 2001. The Kurds' association with the AKP has been strengthened through the inclusion of several prominent Kurds in its ranks and it managed to utilize the existing religious networks to increase its support base. Similar to the center-right political parties before it, the AKP too used the existing tribal networks and recruited members from the tribal hierarchy in order to strengthen its social base among the Kurds. This system of representation by the tribal and religious elite is well entrenched and has been utilized effectively by the AKP

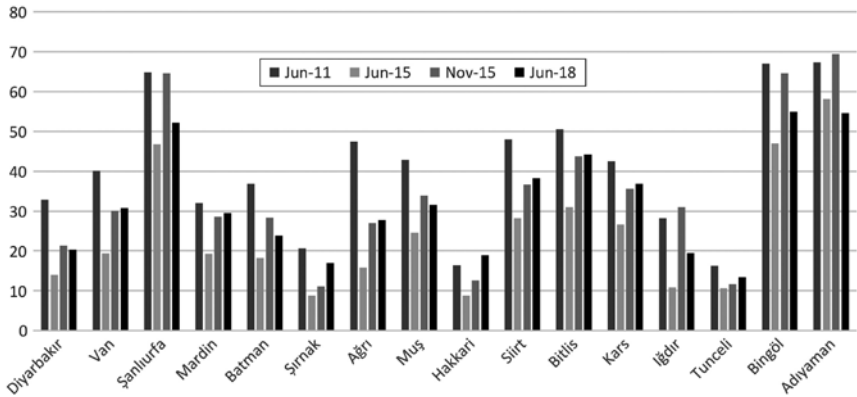


Figure 1.1 AKP's Performance in Kurdish-Majority Provinces in General Elections since 2011. *Source:* The author created this figure using election data from Secim.Haberler.com (2019) "Secim Sonuclari" (<https://secim.haberler.com/>) (last accessed June 5, 2019).

throughout the 2000s and 2010s. In the Kurdish-majority provinces where tribal relations and religion remain strong, such as Şajority provinces, and Bingöl, the AKP has been performing very strongly (figure 1.1).

There were many Kurdish figures active within the AKP and some have risen to become ministers, such as Hüseyin Çelik, who served as the minister for National Education between 2003 and 2009; Mehmet Mehdi Eker, who served as the minister for Agriculture in successive AKP governments between 2003 and 2015; and Mehmet Şimşek, who was the minister of Finance between 2009 and 2015. Other Kurds active within the AKP included Abdulrahman Kurt, who served as a MP for the Diyarbakir province between 2007 and 2011; Mehmet Metiner, who served as an MP for the Adiyaman and Istanbul provinces between 2011 and 2018; and Orhan Miroğlu, who served as an MP for the Mardin province between 2015 and 2018. Galip Ensarioğlu, who is a tribal leader from Diyarbakir, was elected an AKP MP for the Diyarbakir province between June 2011 and June 2015 and again between November 2015 and June 2018.

THE RISE OF THE PRO-KURDISH DEMOCRATIC MOVEMENT

At the 1977 local elections, the pro-Kurdish candidates, Edip Solmaz and Mehdi Zana, won the provincial mayoralty of Batman and Diyarbakir provinces, respectively. Edip Solmaz was killed in 1979 and Mehdi Zana was arrested in 1980 and imprisoned until 1991 at the Diyarbakir prison.¹² Since June 1990 and with the establishment of the HEP—the first representative of

the pro-Kurdish political movement—the pro-Kurdish political representation in Turkey took a more organized form. Then on, despite the repression they had been facing, the pro-Kurdish political parties provided the Kurds with a channel to represent themselves. The HEP managed to get twenty-two MPs elected into the parliament in 1991 through the SHP's list and became the focal point of the advocacy of Kurdish rights in Turkey until the Kurdish parliamentary opposition was eliminated in 1994.¹³ The pro-Kurdish movement's articulation of Kurdish rights has made it the target of state repression and one of the key barriers the pro-Kurdish parties experienced during the 1990s and 2000s was that they were perceived by the mainstream Turkish political parties and society as a threat to Turkey's territorial integrity.¹⁴

The decade following the elimination of the pro-Kurdish movement was spent in rebuilding the movement and expanding its organizational network. Although the People's Democracy Party (*Halkın Demokrasi Partisi*, HADEP) and Democratic People's Party (*Demokratik Halk Partisi*, DEHAP) enjoyed a degree of success at the local level, their efforts to secure parliamentary representation were not successful due to the 10 percent electoral threshold. In the municipal elections held on April 18, 1999, the HADEP obtained 1.95 million votes and managed to win the control of thirty-seven towns and cities across the majority Kurdish regions, including the municipal councils of Ağrı, Batman, Diyarbakır, Hakkari, Mardin, and Van.¹⁵ In the 2004 municipal elections, the DEHAP took part in the election in an electoral alliance with the SHP and increased the number of the councils it held to fifty-four, winning the municipal councils of Batman, Diyarbakır, Hakkari, Mardin, and Şırnak. The pro-Kurdish political parties HADEP and DEHAP took part in the general elections held in 1999 and 2002 and obtained 4.75 and 6.14 percent of the national vote, respectively.¹⁶ Since the late 1990s, the pro-Kurdish parties have been the main political parties with a mass membership and following in the Kurdish-majority regions.

Despite the repression and the electoral threshold preventing the pro-Kurdish parties from winning parliamentary representation, the pro-Kurdish democratic movement managed to build its support base at the local and regional level and at the general election held on July 22, 2007, the then pro-Kurdish party the Democratic Society Party (*Demokratik Toplum Partisi*, DTP) managed to get twenty-two of its independent candidates elected and form a political bloc in the Turkish parliament. In western Turkey, the DTP supported Turkish pro-democratic socialist candidates mainly from the Labour Party (Emek Partisi, EMEP) and the Freedom and Solidarity Party (*Özgürlük ve Dayanışma Partisi*, ÖDP). One DTP MP, Sebhat Tuncel, was elected in the city of Istanbul with another of its Istanbul candidate and its candidate in the province of Mersin losing narrowly. The election of the DTP into the parliament—after thirteen years of absence—restored the pro-Kurdish parliamentary opposition in

Turkey and brought new momentum to Kurdish political activism in Turkey. It has also placed the DTP in the center stage of Kurdish politics in Turkey. In the municipal elections held on March 29, 2009, the DTP consolidated its position as the leading party of the Kurdish regions by winning more than 50 percent of the votes in many towns and cities and a respectable 2,339,729 votes nationally. In total it won ninety-nine councils including the municipalities of Diyarbakır, Van, Batman, Tunceli, Iğdır, Şırnak, Siirt, and Hakkari.¹⁷

Having parliamentary representation provided the DTP with a legal democratic platform where Kurdish rights and demands can be raised. Being represented in the national assembly and having the experience of running many of the local authorities in the Kurdish regions has enabled the DTP to establish a strong regional and national presence. This allowed for the establishment and sustenance of links and associations with various other social and political groups in Turkey, which fostered the exchange of views and better understanding. Having an institutional base also enabled the DTP to intensify its efforts to campaign for a democratic and peaceful solution to the Kurdish question in Turkey. The DTP remained active until it was closed down by the Constitutional Court on December 12, 2009. From then onward, the Peace and Democracy Party (*Barış ve Demokrasi Partisi*, BDP), which was established on May 3, 2008, took the task of Kurdish representation in Turkey. In April 2011, the BDP in alliance with seventeen other political parties and nongovernmental organizations formed the pro-democracy “the Labour, Peace and Democracy Bloc” and supported independent candidates in the general elections scheduled for June 12, 2011. It campaigned on a platform advocating broad democratic demands, such as gender equality, better working conditions, comprehensive constitutional reform, and a peaceful end to the Kurdish conflict. In total, thirty-five pro-Kurdish MPs were elected as independent candidates. The BDP took part in the local elections held in 2014 and it consolidated its position by winning a total of ninety-seven councils.¹⁸

The pro-Kurdish movement is currently represented by the Peoples’ Democratic Party (*Halkın Demokratik Partisi*, HDP), which was officially founded on October 15, 2012. As a precursor to the HDP’s establishment, the Peoples’ Democratic Congress (*Halkların Demokratik Kongresi*, HDK) was established on October 15, 2011, to bring together various political movements, parties, and civil society organizations that represent different social and minority ethnic and religious groups 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.

In the general election held on June 7, 2015, the HDP managed to win 13.1 percent of the popular vote and secure eighty seats in the parliament in Ankara. By choosing parliamentary candidates from a wider network and 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. Given the June 2015 election was the first parliamentary election that the HDP contested, it is difficult to make a direct comparison with any previous election results. Also, in the previous election independent candidates were fielded in only certain provinces. In contrast, participating in the elections as a party meant that the HDP fielded candidates in all the provinces and therefore was able to gain votes across Turkey. Overall, the HDP's support increased significantly in the traditional heartlands of the pro-Kurdish movement in the Southeast of the country, and it was the number one party in the following provinces: Ağrı, Batman, Bitlis, Diyarbakır, Hakkari, Kars, Mardin, Muş, Siirt, Şırnak, Tunceli, and Van.¹⁹

Soon after the election, however, the HDP has come under increasing pressure and state repression. The intensification of violence in the conflict between the PKK and the state security forces in Turkey's majority Kurdish regions from summer 2015 onward has led to an increase in instances of violent attacks by Turkish nationalists against the HDP. The anti-HDP fervor reached its height on September 8, 2015, when large-scale mob attacks targeted and vandalized the HDP's offices in many cities in western Turkey, including its headquarters in Ankara and many of the district offices in Istanbul. In addition, Islamic State in Iraq and Syria (ISIS) terror attacks targeting Turkey's pro-Kurdish peace network in Suruç and Ankara, on July 20, 2015 and October 10, 2015 respectively, made running a campaign for the November election very difficult for the HDP.²⁰ As a result, there was a reduction in the HDP's vote in the repeated election on November 1, 2015; in spite of that, it still managed to obtain 10.75 percent of the popular vote and fifty-nine seats in the parliament.

Despite the ongoing repression and imprisonment of many of the leaders of the HDP, the party performed strongly in the Kurdish-majority regions at the 2018 general election. Although its vote decreased slightly in the Kurdish-majority provinces, the results confirm that it is maintaining its support base. In total, the HDP obtained 11.7 percent of the national vote and won sixty-seven seats in the parliament. Almost all of the elected mayors have been replaced by trustees appointed by the government, but as expected, the pro-Kurdish representation at the local level returned in the March 2019 local elections. Despite the decline in its overall share of the HDP's vote, it managed to win the municipal councils of Batman, Diyarbakır, Hakkari, Iğdır, Kars, Mardin, Siirt, and Van provinces.²¹ In addition, it won fifty district councils (figure 1.2).

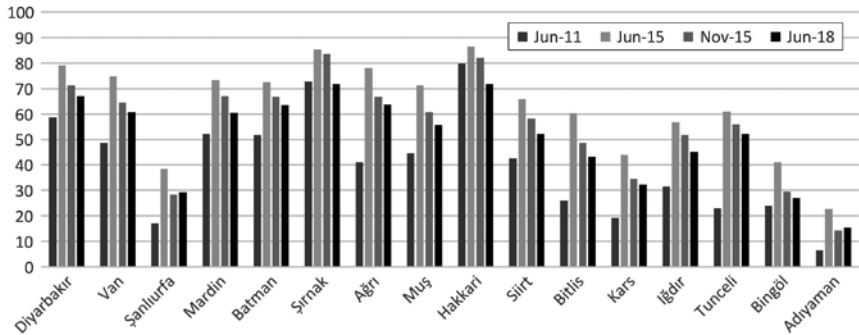


Figure 1.2 Performance in Kurdish-Majority Provinces of Pro-Kurdish Independent Candidates and Political Parties in General Elections since 2011. *Source:* The author created this figure using election data from Secim.Haberler.com (2019) "Secim Sonuclari" (<https://secim.haberler.com/>) (last accessed June 5, 2019).

There was a surge in support for the HDP in Istanbul, where it gained 1,030,761 votes to become the third party in the province and win eleven 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 Bursa²². 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 1.3).

The level of success the HDP experienced in several elections since 2015 is unprecedented in the history of the pro-Kurdish democratic movement in Turkey.²³ The legal reforms the government carried out to meet the European Union (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 transformation of the conflict between the PKK and the state security forces in Turkey since the early late 1990s is also a significant factor in the rise of the HDP. Although violence in the conflict returned after 2004, its intensity was far less than the violence of the 1990s. This transformation in the conflict created space for

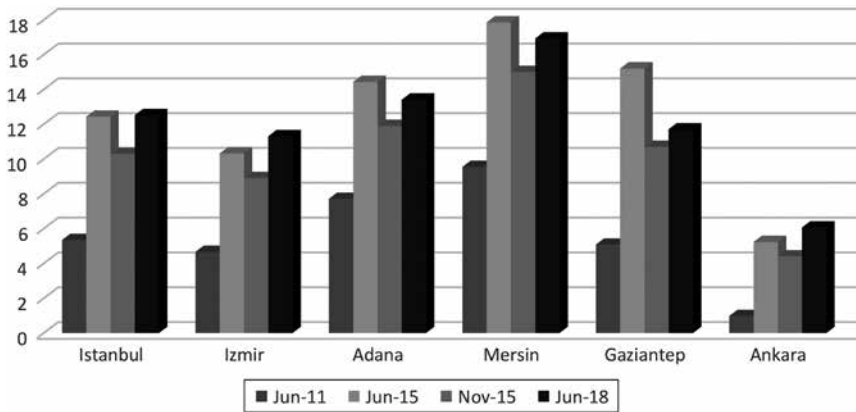


Figure 1.3 Percentage of Votes the Pro-Kurdish Candidates and Political Parties Obtained since 2011 in the Western and Southern Provinces of Turkey. *Source:* The author created this figure using election data from Secim.Haberler.com (2019) "Secim Sonucları" (<https://secim.haberler.com/>) (last accessed June 5, 2019).

the pro-Kurdish political parties to promote reconciliation and a democratic solution to the Kurdish question. Being represented in the national assembly and having the experience of running many of the local authorities in the majority Kurdish regions enabled the pro-Kurdish movement to establish a strong regional and national presence.

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. It produced some milestones such as the ceasefire from March 2013 to July 2015 and a ten-point route map for the future negotiations that was made public on February 28, 2015 jointly by an HDP delegation and government representatives in Istanbul's Dolmabahçe Palace. The HDP MPs involved in the dialogue process and its leaders addressed the mainstream media throughout the dialogue process, which gave more visibility to the HDP and provided it with an important opportunity to disseminate its political discourse to a much larger audience. The performance of the HDP's coleader 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. Demirtaş proved to be a very strong media performer and his confident and calm approach has won much appraisal. The election strategy that the HDP followed also significantly contributed to its success. In western Turkey, the party selected candidates that represent and appeal to

different sections of society and political movements. For example, a leading figure in the Pinyanişi tribal hierarchy, Abdullah Zeydan, was elected as the MP for the Hakkari province from the HDP. Similarly, Mahmut Celadet Gaydalı, whose family has been dominating the politics of Bitlis Province, was elected from the HDP list in the 2015 general election.

A number of other Kurdish political parties are active in the Kurdish-majority regions and some take part in the elections. These include the Rights and Freedoms Party (*Hak ve Özgürlükler Partisi*, HAK-PAR, 2002), the Islamist Free Cause Party (*Hür Dava Partisi*, Hüda-Par, 2012), the Participatory Democracy Party (*Katılımcı Demokrasi Partisi*, KADEP, 2006), Kurdistan Freedom Party (*Partiya Azadiya Kurdistan*, PAK, 2014), and the Kurdistan Democratic Party-Turkey (*Türkiye Kürdistan Demokrat Partisi*, TKDP, 2014). None of these parties has managed to win sufficient votes in either the parliamentary or the local elections. The HAK-PAR obtained 58,645 votes in the June 2015 general election and increased its votes to 109,722 in the November 2015 general election.²⁴ In the June 2015 general election, the Hüda-Par fielded independent candidates in nine provinces. Its leader, Zekeriya Yapıcıoğlu, stood as an independent candidate for the Diyarbakır province and received 22,923 votes.²⁵

CONCLUSION

Turkey's transformation to multiparty electoral democracy in 1950, created opportunities for Kurdish political representation. Historically, the center-right parties have been more open to engagement with the Kurdish tribal and religious elite. This began with the DP in 1950 and led to a significant increase in the descriptive representation of the Kurds, with many Kurds being elected to a public office as MPs and district or provincial mayors. The dominant position of the traditional elite in Kurdish society has been challenged by the rise of the Kurdish national movement in Turkey since the 1970s. The establishment of the pro-Kurdish democratic movement in Turkey in 1990 has enabled the Kurds to challenge the existing political order in Turkey with more force. Consequently, the past two decades have witnessed an improvement in the substantive representation of the Kurds, leading to Kurdish political actors openly calling for widespread political reforms to broaden the political space available to the Kurds and the state to recognize Kurdish identity and collective national rights, including Kurdish self-government and language rights in Turkey.

Currently, there are several Kurdish political actors that are involved in the representation of the Kurds in Turkey, but the main contest in the past decade has been between the political parties belonging to the pro-Kurdish

democratic movement and the AKP. The balance of power has been shifting in favor of the pro-Kurdish movement since 2011, and at the general elections held in June 2015 the current representative of the pro-Kurdish movement, the HDP, managed to establish itself as the undisputed representative of the Kurds in Turkey. The level of support the HDP obtained in June 2015 is unprecedented in Turkey's history and set the ideal context for political reforms to accommodate the Kurdish rights in Turkey. However, rather than taking measures to move Turkey toward peace and recognition of national diversity and political pluralism, the governing AKP's response has been to intensify its repression and elimination of Kurdish representation, which has reversed the gains the pro-Kurdish movement has made in the past decade. Many Kurdish elected representatives have been removed from their positions and are currently imprisoned while the courts hear their cases. While repression of Kurdish political representatives in Turkey was always present to a certain degree, since the summer of 2015 we have witnessed an unprecedented level of repression of Kurdish political activities in Turkey. Also, as part of its redesign of Turkish politics and as a counterweight against the pro-Kurdish representatives, the AKP has been empowering Islamist and traditional Kurdish actors, such as the Huda-Par and tribal and religious elite. However, despite the severe repression, so far, the HDP has been maintaining its electoral base and status as the undisputed representative of the Kurds in Turkey.

NOTES

1. Suzanna Dovi, "Political Representation," *Stanford Encyclopaedia of Philosophy* (CA: Stanford University Press, 2017). Available at <https://plato.stanford.edu/entries/political-representation/> (accessed April 6, 2017).

2. Hanna Fenichel Pitkin, *The Concept of Representation* (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1967), 61 and 115.

3. Jane Manbridge, "Should Blacks Represent Blacks and Women Represent Women? A Contingent 'Yes,'" *Journal of Politics*, 61:3 (1999): 628.

4. For a detailed discussion of the influence of Turkish nationalism on the politics and law see: Derya Bayır, *Minorities and Nationalism in Turkish Law* (London and New York: Routledge, 2013).

5. Kendal Nezan, "Kurdistan in Turkey," in *A People Without a Country: The Kurds and Kurdistan*, edited by Gerard Chaliand (London: Zed Books: London, 1992), 66–67.

6. Yüksekova Haber, "Ahmet Zeydan Vefat etti" (2010). Available at <http://www.yuksekovahaber.com/haber/ahmet-zeydan-vefat-etti-26283.htm> (accessed September 19, 2015).

7. A. Vahap Uluç, *Güneydoğu Anadolu Bölgesinin Toplumsal ve Siyasal Yapısı: Mardin Örneği'nde Siyasal Katılım* (Unpublished PhD dissertation, Istanbul University, Istanbul, 2010), 211.

8. Safiye Ateş-Durc, *Türkiye’de Aşiret ve Siyaset İlişkisi: Metinan Aşireti Örneği* (Unpublished MA dissertation, Hacettepe University, Ankara, 2009), 43.

9. For a more detailed discussion see: Semra Özar, Nesrin Uçarlar, and Osman Aytar, *From Past to Present a Paramilitary Organization* (Diyarbakır: Diyarbakır Institute for Political and Social Research (Disa), 2013).

10. Ateş-Durc, *Türkiye’de Aşiret ve Siyaset İlişkisi*, 42; Martin Van Bruinessen, “Kurds, States and Tribes,” in *Tribes and Power: Nationalism and Ethnicity in the Middle East* (London: Saqi, 2002), 175.

11. For a more detailed discussion of the use of social welfare policies to contain Kurdish nationalism, see: Erdem Yörük, “Welfare Provision as Political Containment: The Politics of Social Assistance and the Kurdish Conflict in Turkey,” *Politics & Society*, 40:4 (2012): 517–47.

12. Cengiz Gunes, *The Kurdish National Movement in Turkey: From Protest to Resistance* (London: Routledge, 2012), 152.

13. Gunes, *The Kurdish National Movement in Turkey*, 161–4.

14. For a detailed discussion see: Derya Erdem, “The Representation of the Democratic Society Party (DTP) in the Mainstream Turkish Media,” in *The Kurdish Question in Turkey: New Perspectives on Conflict, Representation and Reconciliation*, edited by Cengiz Gunes and Welat Zeydanlioglu (London: Routledge, 2014), 47–67; Derya Bayır, “The Role of Judicial System in the Politicide of the Kurdish Opposition,” in *The Kurdish Question in Turkey: New Perspectives on Violence, Representation, and Reconciliation*, edited by Cengiz Gunes and Welat Zeydanlioglu (London and New York: Routledge, 2014), 23.

15. YSK, “Belediye Başkanlığı Seçimi Sonuçları” (1999). Available at <http://www.ysk.gov.tr/tr/18-nisan-1999-mahalli-idareler-genel-secimi/2805> (accessed August 23, 2018).

16. Gunes, *The Kurdish National Movement in Turkey*, 166–7.

17. Gunes, *The Kurdish National Movement in Turkey*, 170.

18. Cengiz Gunes, “The Rise of the Pro-Kurdish Democratic Movement in Turkey,” in *Routledge Handbook on the Kurds*, edited by Michael M. Gunter (London and New York: Routledge, 2018), 262.

19. The figures presented here are collated from the website <http://secim.haberler.com/>.

20. Cengiz Gunes, “Turkey’s New Left,” *New Left Review*, 107 (2017): 27–8.

21. Secim.Haberler.com, “31 Mart 2019 Yerel Seçim Sonuçları” (2019). Available at: <https://secim.haberler.com/2019/yerel-secimler/> (accessed May 2, 2019).

22. The figures are collated from the website Secim.Haberler.com (<https://secim.haberler.com/2015/>).

23. For a more detailed discussion on the rise of the pro-Kurdish democratic movement in Turkey see: Gunes, “Turkey’s New Left”; and Gunes, “The Rise of the Pro-Kurdish Democratic Movement in Turkey.”

24. The figures are collated from the website Secim.Haberler.com (<https://secim.haberler.com/2015/>).

25. Time Türk, “Hüda-Par’ın bağımsızları ne kadar oy aldı?” (2015). Available at <https://www.timeturk.com/huda-par-in-bagimsizlari-ne-kadar-oy-aldi/haber-11971> (accessed August 19, 2018).

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Chapter 2

Kurdish Public Opinion in Turkey

Cultural and Political Demands of the “Kurdish Street”

Ekrem Karakoç and H. Ege Özen

What do Kurds want? As the conflict has continued to persist for more than three decades, both the Turkish state and Kurdish political movements claim to represent the interests of Kurds, particularly cultural and political demands of Kurds in Turkey. Despite the long life of this conflict, and the claims of political actors from both sides, we still do not know how the interests and demands of ordinary Kurds align with specific political actors or, more importantly, with the Turkish government. The competing claims to represent ordinary Kurds cause the major actors in the conflict, whether prostate or pro-Kurdish, to reinforce their positions and intensify the conflict, resulting in greater suffering for the very people they claim to speak.

However, these claims of representation are not empirically verified, and the risk of self-serving bias and distortion is obviously great. The major political parties, including the Justice and Development Party (*Adalet ve Kalkınma Partisi*, AKP), People’s Democratic Party (*Halkın Demokratik Partisi*, HDP), or Kurdistan Workers’ Party (*Partiya Karkerên Kurdistanê*, PKK), all claim to understand Kurds’ needs and be most responsive to and representative of their cultural and political preferences. Unfortunately, neither scholarship nor the media provide much empirical evidence for Kurds’ demands. Does the AKP government’s offer of optional Kurdish language courses in schools—the most they have managed to secure yet—satisfy Kurds? Or do Kurds have further demands, both political and cultural? What about their views toward the PKK or legal Kurdish parties? Do all Kurds agree with the government’s description of the PKK as a “terrorist” organization, and how many see it as a resistance organization fighting for independence?

This chapter investigates these questions by analyzing nationally representative public opinion survey in Turkey. This survey captures cultural and

political demands of Kurds in 2011 and in 2015, respectively, before and after peace negotiations begun between the AKP government and the Kurdish political movement. First, we trace the trajectory of the state policies toward the Kurdish conflict, followed by an examination of proposals, by both the state and Kurdish movements, to “solve” the problem. Then we use an original public opinion data to test the extent to which ordinary Kurds share the views of the main political actors. These surveys conducted before and after the peace talks will help us to capture the change in attitudes between these two different political contexts regarding the Kurdish conflict. While presenting what the Kurdish street wants, we will limit the number of issues to the perception of interethnic equality in the cultural and political sphere as well as attitudes toward Kurdish parties such as the HDP and the PKK.

Our analysis suggests that while Turkish governments have relatively recently implemented reforms to expand Kurdish rights, these have remained limited, and still does not recognize Kurdish identity as a collective cultural and political identity. However, the Kurdish ethnic identity has grown increasingly important to many Kurds as a result of the politicization of their identity during the three-decades-long civil war.¹ Our findings confirm this assessment: The majority of Kurds want education in their mother tongue, to listen to sermons in Kurdish, to restore villages and town to their Kurdish names, and want to be served in Kurdish in hospitals, courts, and other public institutions. As to their political demands, half of the Kurds polled demanded a regional parliament and flag, the establishment of Kurdish as an official language, and political autonomy. Political developments between 2011 and 2015, including the peace talks, the Roboski Massacre on December 28, 2011, the siege of Kobani in October 2014, and the AKP’s indifferent reactions to these events have further complicated an already fraught situation. They have served both to increase support for cultural and political autonomy and secession, and to empower Kurdish parties that have gained the reputation as the true representatives of the Kurdish street a few months before the peace process officially ended in the aftermath of the June 7, 2015 elections.

FRAMING KURDS AND KURDISH CONFLICT

To understand and analyze public opinion on salient social, economic, and political issues, we need to investigate how elites across the political spectrum construct a political discourse and function as society’s gatekeepers, using media and educational institutions as intermediary agents. Political behavior literature suggests that ordinary people turn to the elites for their cues in forming their opinions on political issues, whether these elites are party leaders, labor unions, the Church, or others.² In other words, one’s

ideological stance, as well as ethnic and religious identity, affects which elites they will turn to and process information or cues while the elites compete to shape public opinion to their own purposes. In this regard, the Kurdish conflict in Turkey is typical rather than exceptional and illustrates how social and political elites shape public opinion on the Kurdish conflict, and to what extent the Kurdish street is receptive or resistant to the competing discourses and policies of elites, particularly Kemalist elites.

The next section discusses how the state and mainstream political parties approach and frame the Kurdish problem, with a particular focus on the post-1984 era. It investigates their discourses and policies the Turkish mainstream media dutifully propagated. Then, it turns to the Kurdish political movement that offers an alternative discourse, pointing to political and economic discrimination of Kurds, and demanding political and economic equality.

FROM BROKEN PROMISES TO DENIAL

Even though there are different phases of the Kurdish conflict, the state's responses to the Kurdish problem between 1923 and the early 1990s can be identified as the denial of the Kurds and Kurdish "problem." It is true that the Kurdish problem did not start with the formation of the nation-state, but goes back to the centralization policies under the Ottoman Empire; however, for the sake of space, this article will focus on the post-1923 era.³ The denial policies in this era have dominated the political discourses of both Turkish actors and institutions. The causes of this denial lie, to a certain extent, in the (inherent) colonial/hierarchical mindset of Turkish elites, derived from the institutionalized belief that to catch up to the civilized world, a modern nation-state must be created around a secular Sunni Turkish identity. The ruling elites of the new republic, mostly former generals or bureaucrats originally from the Western provinces of the Ottoman Empire, had shared the belief that adopting political reforms for (religious) minorities or giving political autonomy to them in the nineteenth century had not stopped the disintegration of the empire. Disturbed by this experience, despite the founding elites of the republic promised and even played with the idea of local autonomy for Kurds during the independence war, the Turkish political elites discounted any political reform that would have granted cultural or political autonomy to Kurds. Rather, they formulated policies that viewed Kurdish ethnicity as an existential threat to be either assimilated or repressed.⁴

To assimilate a Kurdish population largely residing in the southern part of the country into the new Turkish national identity in the early 1920s, the state banned the Kurdish language in public spaces and replaced street, village, and town names with Turkish ones.⁵ Parents could not give Kurdish

names to their newborn children, and in the eastern and southeastern region of Anatolia, Kurdish schools (mostly religious schools called *medrese*) were closed.⁶ Turks received preferential treatment in hiring at public institutions in Kurdish-dominated cities, and many Kurdish-speaking officials critical of the state's repressive policies were either fired or sent to the western part of Turkey.⁷ Starting with the Sheikh Said rebellion in 1925, and especially after the 1934 Settlement Act, Law Number 2510, Kurdish elites and tens of thousands of ordinary Kurds were forcibly displaced and resettled in the Western cities of Turkey, while migrants from the Caucasus and other regions replaced them in selected provinces.⁸ This resettlement policy was phased out after 1950, but its backbone, the rejection of Kurds and their language, remained in effect until the 1990s.

The official discourse and popularized public perception in Turkey were that Kurds are not a distinct ethnic group; these Easterners (*Doğulular*) are "mountain Turks," who had lost the linguistic and cultural similarity with the rest of the population, and they needed the modernizing hand of the state. The state's modernization policies aimed to re-acculturate this population so that it could catch up with the western cities of the country, and the country as a whole could in turn catch up with the civilized western world.⁹ The inferiority complex toward the West is matched by a superiority complex toward Kurds, along with the right to control and assimilate this less-developed people into Turkish society and culture. In this framework, the conflict becomes a struggle between a modernized state and the culturally backward periphery. Intellectuals, academics, and political elites can thus easily justify downplaying Kurds and assimilationist policies, preferring to focus on the political cleavage, the split between secularism and religion, and the debate between socialism and capitalism/imperialism. With the exception of some socialist movements that incorporated the Kurds into their discourse of class struggle and anti-imperialism, most parties, movements, and major political figures were silent about the Turkish state's denial of an ethnic group's existence and the ban on Kurdish language, music, and culture.

In an attempt to refute the accusation that the state's policies were assimilationist, Heper (2007) claimed that the Turkish state neither denied nor assimilated Kurds, only mistreating them in times of exceptional "trouble."¹⁰ Under normal circumstances, according to the official line as defended by Heper, state policies were geared toward re-acculturing Kurds into Turkish society. In that way, both Kurds and *Kurdified* Turks could be reconciled to the rest of Turkish society, thereby preserving the integrity and unitary nature of the state. Heper conveniently overlooks practices like "skull measuring anthropological attempts to identify 'real Turks'" and the creation of a new Turkish history and theory of language centered around ethnic Turks.¹¹ Nor does he discuss the thousands of people who died in the name of re-acculturation or

the inequality and discrimination in public employment and the social sphere. He asserted that such policies were products of times of particular “trouble,” and assumed that the state was otherwise impartial. To the contrary to Heper (2007)’s claim, as Tezcür and Gürses (2017) empirically show, these discriminatory policies have not gone away in recent decades, but rather have continued to imprint interethnic inequality in the country’s political system.¹²

The denial of Kurds persisted long after the suppression of the last major rebellions against the state in the late 1930s. As Turkey developed a multi-party political system, Kurdish elites found themselves forced to navigate conventional party politics, running as candidates for mayors or parliaments in the Democrat Party (*Demokrat Parti*, DP), Justice Party (*Adalet Partisi*, AP), New Turkey Party (*Yeni Türkiye Partisi*, YTP), center-left Republican People’s Party (*Cumhuriyet Halk Partisi*, CHP), socialist Workers’ Party of Turkey (TIP), and Güven Party, as well as independent candidates in the 1950s and 1960s. The relatively free atmosphere of the 1960s provided opportunities for Kurdish nationalists to form their own left-leaning organizations and demand solutions to the socioeconomic problems of the East and the discriminatory policies of the state. Disinterested Turkish leftist groups and organizations viewed the Kurdish problem as a by-product of class conflict and imperialism, gradually alienating Kurdish activists and leading them to form their own Kurdish organizations (e.g., Eastern Meetings) starting with the late 1960s.¹³

The repressive political atmosphere of the 1970s led some socialist movements that included Kurdish youth and students to believe that taking arms against this authoritarian state was the only option, while others remained committed to working inside the system to transform it. Beginning in 1978, martial law was declared in several Kurdish provinces, and in that same year, Turkey’s rejectionist and assimilationist policies sparked the formal establishment of the PKK, a Marxist/Leninist group of Kurdish students active in the leftist and Kurdish student movements, headed by Abdullah Öcalan.¹⁴ As most of the Kurdish political movements came to existence throughout the 1960s and 1970s, the PKK built its resistance on anti-colonialism, and the ultimate objective of the movement was to form a single (united) independent state called “Kurdistan.”¹⁵ A secondary objective was a “reunification” or “reestablishment” of the left.¹⁶ Although the PKK engaged in armed struggles against Turkish security forces and prostrate Kurdish landlords, its future was not certain as it initially had little popular support among Kurds in the region. As Bozarslan (2001) argued, however, the military coup of 1980 facilitated the popular acceptance of the PKK’s political discourse after the new government banned Kurdish language and music in public spaces, changed the Kurdish names of villages and towns, and implemented other repressive policies, especially against Kurdish political elites.¹⁷ The PKK’s first major

deadly attack came only months after the military transferred power to civilians on August 15, 1984, and Kurds, especially those in southeastern Turkey, saw the strikes against the security forces as a legitimate response to the state's repressive and assimilationist attitudes toward them.¹⁸

RECOGNITION WITH A STICK

The denial policy finally ended in 1991 when the government sent the bill to remove the ban speaking "languages other than Turkish." The change in the denial policy was the result of the intense fight between the PKK and the security apparatus and the then-president Turgut Özal's realization that this problem could not be solved only through the military means. The PKK had posed itself as a formidable actor against exploitative landlords and the military over time, proving itself as an effective movement from the relatively easily crushed Kurdish rebellion in the 1920s and 1930s. Özal and some civilian elites were aware of a growing threat to the integrity and economic development of the state. For example, a former state minister, Adnan Kahveci had presented a secret report to Özal that it was the Kurdish issue, rather than any economic or other political issue, that posed the greatest problem for the state. Suleyman Demirel, the then prime minister, spelled the possibility of a constitutional citizenship in 1992, and Tansu Çiller, replacing Demirel as prime minister in 1993, briefly suggested the Basque model as a possible solution.¹⁹ Özal contemplated different ideas to end the conflict, including an amnesty to the PKK. However, these ideas were rebuffed by the Kemalist military and bureaucracy, the guardians of the traditional Kemalist regime. Rejecting any sort of accommodation or compromise paved the way for the return of the securitization policies that emphasized a military means to ending the PKK and the Kurdish problem as a whole. The hope of finding a peaceful solution finally ended with the death of Özal in 1993. While recognizing "the Kurdish reality" and Kurdish identity in 1991, the Turkish state had moved from the denial to recognition with a stick, and Kurdish problem is now defined as "separatism/terrorism."

The political discourse of social, political, and economic elites as well as the Turkish public followed the footsteps of the Turkish military and state institutions over time. In this telling, the Kurdish conflict does not emanate from the denial policies that condoned and even justified repression and human rights violation, but rather from violence/terrorism, supported by foreign powers that have sought Turkey's division since the Sevres Treaty of 1920. Stated simply for the public's benefit, the state is again under siege by imperialist powers, and the PKK is a terrorist organization used by those powers to recruit and brainwash the poor and ignorant or to kidnap children

from their families. As a transitional public discourse from the denial to the unwilling recognition is the claim that the PKK has nothing to do with the Kurds; that in reality, its leader Abdullah Öcalan is of Armenian (read: evils) origins, as are most of his militants.²⁰

This narrative regarding the PKK was gradually replaced by various combinations of discourses of terror, foreign powers, and underdevelopment in subsequent years: Kurds or Easterners are poor and ignorant, easily deceivable by the “terrorist” organizations and foreign powers.²¹ Mainstream Turkish media, pro-government or not, have popularized the state narrative and worked to discredit the Kurdish political movement. Prior to the 1990s, newspapers rarely used phrases like “Kurds” or “Kurdish” in news reports or columns. In the 1990s, newspapers began using those terms, implicitly acknowledging the reality of the Kurdish situation and a Kurdish ethnicity while still aligning with the state discourse. For example, although the media began discussing the Kurdish language, they did so in a pejorative sense that portrayed it as a primitive language cobbled together from Arabic, Persian, and Turkish. The papers in question even cited public opinion surveys as evidence that Kurds were primarily concerned about employment opportunities and were relatively unconcerned about learning or speaking Kurdish.²² The condescending attitude toward Kurdish becomes evident when the newspapers used terms like “so-called Kurds” or claimed that Kurdish language was too primitive to permit sophisticated forms of literature, culture, or politics.

As the government, military, and media promoted the official position, neither the left-wing nor right-wing parties provided a substantive challenge to the accepted narrative, with some limited exceptions. The Kemalist left and its parties, Democratic Populist Party (*Sosyaldemokrat Halkçı Parti*, SHP/CHP), did not offer policies or solutions to the Kurdish conflict that differed from the state’s. For them, the problem was socioeconomic; therefore, the solutions remained limited to the eradication of poverty, ignorance, underdevelopment, feudalism and so on.²³ Neither the center-right AP, nor its successor parties went beyond these explanations. When the SHP formed a coalition with the Kurdish party, the Democratic Society Party (*Demokratik Toplum Partisi*, DTP), Çiller’s the Basque model proposal for the Kurdish problem, or Mesut Yılmaz, former leader of Motherland party after Özal, suggested recognizing Kurdish as an official language and offering optional language courses and private Kurdish channels, but they were all quickly rebuked by the military.²⁴ Nevertheless, these attempts signaled changes in the state’s policies in the post-1999 era, when the capture of Öcalan and the European Union (EU) negotiations paved the way for new policies amidst the economic crisis.²⁵

As for the socialist movements, their relationship with the Kurdish movement was more constructive, but their popular base was small and they sought

solutions under the socialist system that they would eventually establish. Like proponents of the idea that “Islam is the solution,” the socialist groups kept the pillar of their faith and asserted that “socialism is the solution” and that social class as an identity supersedes all others, including ethnicity, in the struggle against the bourgeoisie/imperialism. Dissatisfied with the socialist movements, Kurdish elites gradually divorced from them beginning in the late 1960s.

The Turkish left’s position on the Kurdish conflict should be explored both in international and domestic contexts. The left in Turkey has always been deeply fragmented, not unlike leftist movements elsewhere, such as France. Global contexts (e.g., student movements in the West, the growth of U.S. power) as well as local (the 1960 coup and the relatively liberal 1961 Constitution) paved the way for various leftist movements to appear in Turkey. Almost all of these movements began with a critique of U.S. imperialism. The decade under the governance of the DP was seen as a rupture from the Kemalist revolutionary resistance against the Western imperialism, and therefore one of the most common slogans of the 1970s was “Fully Independent Turkey!” However, as Jongerden and Akkaya (2012) claim, the Turkish left was mostly silent regarding Turkey’s status as a colonizing country in the Southeast.²⁶

The military coups of both 1971 and 1980 were highly influential in shaping the relationship between Kurds and the mainstream left or social democrat parties. After 1971, the CHP had a great opportunity to convert the high dynamism among far-left groups into a large voter base for itself because there was a high degree of repression on the leftist revolutionary organizations. To use this opportunity, the CHP took some effective steps in 1973 and 1974 regarding political pluralism, and this gained them many supporters especially among Kurds and Alevi citizens. In addition, starting in the mid-1970s, the volume of political violence reached such a height that the people on both sides, Turks and Kurds, began to fear a possible civil war. Therefore, the CHP was seen as the only option to stop the political violence. And as a matter of fact, the 1970s were significant because of the electoral success of the CHP in Kurdistan, thanks to its advocacy of democracy in Turkey. According to Bozarlan (2012), the breaking point was the late 1970s when Mehdi Zana and several Kurdish figures were elected mayors in Kurdish majority cities.²⁷

After the military intervention of 1980, all of the preexisting political parties were eliminated, and therefore the relationship between the Kurdish movement and the mainstream left ended. However, a new social democrat party was established in 1985. The SHP can be considered a continuation of the Kemalist CHP and yet managed to become the second largest party in the Turkish Parliament after the 1987 elections. The electoral success included several Kurdish representatives, and it was taken as a sign of greater openness to recognizing the claims of Kurdistan. However, this symbiotic relationship came to a halt after some of the Kurdish deputies participated

in the international Kurdish conference in Paris in 1989, which led to their expulsion from the party. Nineteen more deputies resigned from the party in protest, and laid the groundwork for the establishment of the People's Labor Party (*Halkın Emek Partisi*, HEP) in 1990, the first of eight such Kurdish parties that have since been banned by the state. The alliance between the representative actor of the Kurdish movement (HEP) and the mainstream Turkish left (SHP) was given one last shot in the 1991 elections, after which twenty-two deputies from HEP were returned to parliament. However, the controversy regarding the swearing-in ceremony of Hatip Dicle and Leyla Zana ended with the revocation of their parliamentary immunity and jail sentences in 1994 for their alleged membership in the PKK.²⁸

Even though the SHP agreed to make room for Kurdish representation, there was no further advocacy of pro-Kurdish ideas within the party according to Bozarslan (2012).²⁹ Also, there was no explicit mention of Kurds or Kurdistan. The party platform's reference to "Turkey-wide democratization" was carefully formulated; in addition, the removal of Kurdish deputies from SHP following the Kurdish conference in Paris was critical because it meant that Kurds could not integrate into the Turkish political elite class, leaving them only the option of becoming autonomous of Turkish political class.³⁰

Yeğen (2007) divides the relationship between the Turkish left and Kurdish movement into four periods between the early republican era and the 1990s.³¹ While he describes the 1970s as the period of "decay," the 1990s are the years of "rupture" between the Kurdish movement and the Turkish left. For instance, one of the most prominent leftist parties of the 1990s, the Party of Freedom and Solidarity (*Özgürlük ve Dayanışma Partisi*, ÖDP), spoke about the need to solve the Kurdish problem but refrained from making it an important element of the party's platform.³² Leaving the task to Kurdish parties would eventually distance the party from Kurds and Kurds from leftist Turks. Two other important parties representing the Turkish left in the 1990s, the Communist Party of Turkey (TKP) and the Labor Party (İP), failed even more thoroughly to recognize the autonomous position of the Kurdish movement. For instance, for the TKP the Kurdish issue is simply an example of a labor issue. This position is what Yeğen (2007) describes as dating "back to the beginning of the socialist movements in modern Turkey's history," which means that the party would support the Kurdish movement not in their efforts of national and cultural rights and demands, but rather in their class struggle against imperialism.³³ The İP, under the leadership of Doğu Perinçek, completely changed its position toward the Kurdish movement, and in 2005, the party declared that the Kurdish issue had been solved regarding democratic rights that Kurds had been demanding.³⁴ In the following years, the party leadership went even further and adopted a racist and hostile discourse toward Kurds and the Kurdish movement.

On the other hand, the (Turkish) Islamist movements, including the Welfare Party (WP) and their successors have long been attributing the Kurdish problem to secularism and the Kemalist ideology, believing that the secularist policies of “the past” had weakened the religious ties between Turks and Kurds. They courted Kurds with a less nationalistic discourse electoral program. On the one hand, they recognized Kurds as a distinct group with its language and culture in their programs and discourses, but at the same time wanted to subordinate them to a supranational Islamic identity.³⁵ By capturing the state they tried to Islamize the society but failed to offer any substantive changes to existing political institutions, which were the products of hardcore nation-state ideology. As a result, they neither wanted nor needed to craft a meaningful proposal or policy to deal with the Kurdish question.

Ümit Cizre’s work on the Islamist actors in the Kurdish conflict shows how the Islamists portrayed the conflict to their bases in the 1990s. The Turkish-Islamists emphasized the distinctiveness of Kurds. They often highlighted human rights violations in the region, but were careful not to offend the sensibilities of the Kemalist state, emphasizing the integrity of the Turkish state under one flag and motherland.³⁶ The Kurdish Islamists have sought a solution to the problem from claims of Islamic brotherhood and the formula of “Ummah,” but noticed that Turkish Islamists do not share the practical implications of being part of it, noting such glaring absences as constitutional recognition of Kurds or the provision of Kurdish education. The first shock to Kurdish Islamists came with the 1991 electoral coalition of the Welfare Party (WP) with the ultra-nationalist Nationalist Action Party (MHP), which wields significant power and influence among the state’s security apparatus. This coalition showed the “nationalist reflex” of the Islamist WP, thereby increasing skepticism toward Turkish Islamist parties among Kurds. The party’s nationalistic discourse and practices belied their (disingenuous) usage of Islamic brotherhood, resonated less among Kurds, and reduced the total votes for the WP and its successor parties in the region in the subsequent elections even though its national vote increased. However, the post February 28 developments in which the WP-led government was overthrown; the Constitution Court banned the WP, and successor Virtue Party helped Kurds to maintain the benefit of the doubt toward the (Turkish) Islamic movement and its parties.

AKP ERA: HOPE AND HOPELESSNESS

The AKP era initially seemed to deserve the benefit of the doubt from Kurds. The AKP leadership’s statements did not differ significantly from its predecessor, the WP: They blamed the Kurdish problem on the repression

and mistakes of the past secularist regime. The capture of Öcalan, the EU Accession process, along with the abolishment of the death penalty and other changes paved the way for the AKP to launch some reforms. This era has also been an opportunity, especially for religious Kurds, to test the AKP's discourse of "Islamic brotherhood" between Turks and Kurds. Erdogan's message gave hope to Kurds, as he stated the Kurdish conflict was not the cause but the consequences of the repressive policies of single-party era. To the chagrin of the Kemalist establishment in the state apparatus, the AKP governments have passed several reform bills in the parliament, but the implementation of many programs was purposefully delayed or stagnated by an unwilling security and bureaucratic state apparatus. Nevertheless, assisted also by the bill passed several months before it came to power in 2002, the AKP governments restored Kurdish names to Kurdish villages, private bodies were allowed to teach Kurdish, broadcasting Kurdish in public and private channels was permitted, as was the repatriation of some "internally displaced Kurds to their original homes."³⁷

The AKP leader, Erdogan, saw secularism as a cause of division between Turks and Kurds and "highlighted the value of unification and brotherhood on the basis of 'common citizenship' in the Republic of Turkey."³⁸ Erdogan played with the idea of *Türkiyelilik*, that is to say, belonging to the citizenship of Turkey in the early years of the AKP rule, but his references have become sporadic over time. Given the fact that neither CHP nor any other major political actor offered anything beyond the AKP's policy initiatives, there was cautious optimism among supporters of the Kurdish political movement that the AKP as an antiestablishment party was the one that could solve the Kurdish problem despite its leaders' contradictory or ambivalent statements. The military suzerainty over the political sphere, the party closures, the Internet memorandum (e-muhtıra) of April 27, 2007 by the military—despite the changing rhetoric of Erdogan regarding the Kurdish conflict—appealed to Kurds. This helped the AKP win the majority of Kurdish votes in Kurdish-majority cities, even increasing its share of the vote in Diyarbakır from 16 percent in 2002 elections to 41 percent in 2007.

For the Kurdish political movement, despite some "positive" steps and discourse from the AKP, as a result of the Kurdish Communities Union (KCK) operations that started in April 2009, more than 8,000 people were imprisoned, signaling the return to securitization policies of the Kurdish conflict.³⁹ For the Kurdish movement, and later for Kurds outside of the movement, the distinction between the Kemalist state and the AKP government has become hazy, even for secular pro-Kurdish movements which had previously sympathized with the AKP. Furthermore, the AKP's cyclic arrogance toward the Kurdistan Regional Government in Iraq, its harsh response to Kurdish demands for democratic autonomy in Turkey, and its aggressiveness toward

the creation of a de facto Kurdish autonomy in Syria have revealed to traditionally religious Kurds just how limited its discourse on Islamic brotherhood really is.

When it comes to the recognition of collective rights, such as having Kurdish education in public and private schools or the acceptance of Kurds in the Constitution as a separate ethnic group, Erdogan was discreet or quietly unwilling while the Kemalist vanguard organization, the military, was not. As a reaction to the EU Commission president who urged Turkey to reform cultural and political rights for Kurds, in 2008, the then chief of staff, İlker Başbuğ, said the following: “Nobody can demand or expect Turkey to make collective arrangements for a certain ethnic group in the political arena, outside of the cultural arena, that would endanger the nation-state structure as well as the unitary state structure.”⁴⁰

While this skepticism was increasing within the Kurdish political movement, there were still secret negotiations between the AKP governments and the Kurdish movement. News of the Oslo Process, which consisted of secret talks between the PKK and state officials, was leaked by the security apparatus associated with the Gülenist movement that wanted to resolve the Kurdish problem through their own form of Islamic brotherhood. For this purpose, the Gülenist movement actively engaged in opening schools, university preps institutions, and houses for young Kurds.⁴¹ As they competed for Kurdish membership, they not only received support from their members, but also from nonmembers who saw them as a lesser evil than the PKK. The state has also collaborated with major business organizations such as Turkish Industry and Business Association (TÜSIAD) and the Union of Chambers and Commodity Exchanges of Turkey (TOBB), as well as local and national NGOs, to assert its assimilationist policies toward Kurds. These organizations actively drafted programs or participated in “no child behind” policies, “required pre-school initiatives” in order to “enable children in whose houses the spoken language is Kurdish to speak Turkish well.”⁴²

What about the Kurdish movement and the trajectory of their policies toward the conflict? According to Güneş (2013), the PKK began its attempts to adopt a political solution to the conflict in the 1990s, especially following Öcalan’s trial when the organization began to frame the solution to the Kurdish question “on the basis of development and deepening of democracy and the creation of decentralized and democratized political entities.”⁴³ The significant shift regarding the demands and goals of the PKK, from regional autonomy or federalism toward democratic autonomy, was justified by the fact that the Kurdish population in Turkey was geographically dispersed. In 2005, the PKK announced that the original objective of forming a Kurdish nation-state had become an impediment on the route to freedom and the new strategic goal was the establishment of “an interlinked network of councils

as the basis of self-determination and a means of living together.”⁴⁴ This change in discourse does not mean that the PKK gave up on its claims to self-determination; rather, it had developed a new understanding of a radical democracy that will become possible only through the active involvement of citizens.

The Kurdish movement also used religious discourse both to attract religious Kurds and to serve as a counter-move to the religious rhetoric of the AKP. To counter both the government and Islamic movements, the predominantly secular elites of the Kurdish political movement continually softened its secularist stance. This strategic change can also be found in its leaders' writings. While Öcalan considered Islam reactionary and backward in the 1980s, his later writings assigned it a positive role to Islam, in particular, the revolutionary character of Prophet against established order. Sarıgil (2018) describes how in March of 2011 pro-PKK clerics refused to participate in Friday prayers in Turkish, and instead began offering public prayers in Kurdish as a counterweight to the state-controlled mosques.⁴⁵ The Democratic Islam Congress and other affiliated religious bodies have also pursued policies to appeal to religious Kurds. Several prominent political Islamists were also nominated as members of Parliament (MPs), such as Şerafettin Elçi and Altan Tan, and others were chosen as electoral candidates to become either mayor or MPs of pro-Kurdish Peace and Democracy Party (BDP) in the elections of 2011 and on.

Through negotiating with the Kurdish movement both openly and secretly, the AKP resorted to the policies aimed to increase religiosity in the region. Religious schools (Imam Hatips) and mosques have disproportionately mushroomed in the region under the AKP when compared to the rest of the country.⁴⁶ The directorate of Religious Affairs (Diyanet) and their salaried imams and the employment of “meles,” who are the graduates of informal religious schools (madrasas) in the region, have been mobilized with the goal of reducing the influence of the Kurdish movement. Also, the AKP governments have pursued the policies to strengthen rival Kurdish movements in the region. These religious movements ranged from the Gülenist movement to the various factions of Nur and Nakshibendi movements to the Islamist Huda-Par and its predecessors. At the same time, these movements, through normative and resource ties to the governments, expanded their sphere of influences, increasing their activities and associations as well as through media and radio. They have been a major rival to the Kurdish movement in its efforts to increase its sphere of influence to the rest of Kurds in the region.⁴⁷

After continuous disappointments with the government reform promises, the Islamic movements' approach and solutions have started to converge with the Kurdish movement. While still seeing the Kurdish movement a rival anti-religious movement, religious Kurdish movements have had to

adapt their discourse in order to compete effectively in Kurdish cities.⁴⁸ Over time, these movements have also increased their demand for the right to have education in mother tongue, Friday sermons (*hutbe*) in Kurdish, and Kurdish names for villages and towns. Besides, observing the growing nationalist discourse of Turkish Islamists and their disinterest in the Kurdish problem has further reduced the credibility of the solutions based on “Islamic brotherhood.” In contrast, as the findings below suggest, secular and non-secular Kurds have started to converge regarding their linguistic and cultural demands.

In sum, as the AKP was associated with the state, not a party that challenges the Kemalist state, its solutions became very similar to those of the Kemalists, with some minor improvements. The AKP has viewed “the PKK and underdevelopment as the diagnostic,” to solve the conflict it relies on the socioeconomic development policies as well as bestowing some cultural rights as individual rights. It offered to teach Kurdish as an optional course, but not as a collective right that guaranteed an education in the Kurdish language, or that established Kurdish schools.⁴⁹

THE KURDISH STREET AND CULTURAL AND POLITICAL RIGHTS

During the peace talks, the AKP governments reached the limit of its willingness to compromise by offering to recognize the “folkloric identity” of Kurds, that is to say, permitting optional Kurdish language, allowing defendants speaking Kurdish to use translators (but paid by themselves) in courts, opening Kurdish language departments in selected universities, Kurdish TV channels, and so on.⁵⁰ Erdogan was using ambiguous language, regarding education in Kurdish, to court Kurds and not to increase resentment among Kurds until around the peace process was failing in 2015.⁵¹ Erdogan’s press talk, soon after he repudiated the Dolmabahçe talks is revealing. Erdogan disclosed his opinions on “solving the Kurdish problem” when asked about education in Kurdish: “Did we put optional courses in mother language within our education system? Done. What else do you want? Do you suggest that it be required? How come something like this happens? This country has one official language. (If you give this up), you cannot stop other demands.”⁵²

In contrast, the Kurdish movement has demanded the recognition of Kurds in the Constitution, education in the Kurdish language, Kurdish names for places, religious sermons in Kurdish, recognition of Kurdish as an official language, a Kurdish parliament, and so on. Islamist Kurdish movements also share similar positions on linguistic and cultural demands but differ in their

political ones such as regional parliament, flag, and autonomy and secession. While Turkish governments keep defining the PKK as a terrorist organization even while negotiating in secrecy and the HDP as an organic extension of PKK, the Kurdish public views them differently, as the election results and public opinion surveys show.

Is there a convergence between Kurdish public opinion and political actors concerning the issues discussed above? To determine this, we utilized two nation-wide representative surveys conducted in 2011 and 2015.⁵³ The survey was conducted in Turkish and Kurdish (the latter in the Kurdish-populated residential areas). Using a multistage, stratified, clustered random sampling, these surveys reached approximately 6,900 and 7,100 adult participants across Turkey in 2011 and 2015, respectively. Fourteen percent of the respondents in 2011 (901 persons) and 17 percent in 2015 (1,340 persons) identified themselves as Kurdish. The responses display the preference of only the Kurdish respondents in this study.

To capture public opinion among Kurds, we first turn to table 2.1 to present the results of the public opinion survey about the extent to which Kurds feel that they are equal citizens of the Turkish state. Table 2.1 suggests that 47 percent of Kurds in 2011 believe that the state discriminates against Kurds. This rate rose to 57 percent in 2015. When the respondents were asked whether civil rights and liberties in Turkey reflect equality between Turks and Kurds, 65 percent of Kurds said no. The same percentage of Kurds perceived interethnic socioeconomic inequality. When we imperfectly compare these results with Ergil's findings, which are based on a public opinion survey conducted in August 2008 in cities where Kurds make up a significant percentage of the population, we see that the perception of discriminatory behavior was also high.⁵⁴ When people were asked in his survey whether they agreed or disagreed with the statement that Kurds experience discrimination in western cities, this perception of discrimination reached 51.2 percent in the then DTP-dominated cities and 29 percent in the regional cities where DTP is not dominant. Imperfect comparison of Ergil's findings with this study, as the sampling methodology and differences in the wordings of the survey questions, suggests that the perception of discrimination and interethnic inequality has remained high among Kurds.

When the second survey was conducted in April 2015, the future of the peace talks looked bleak, yet it was before the urban warfare started in Diyarbakır's historic Sur region and other Kurdish cities, and the Kurdish opening officially ended in August 2015. Between 2013, when the peace was officially celebrated and 2015, when the second survey was conducted, the PKK and the HDP had both increased their popular support among Kurds. The Roboski massacre and the Kobani siege had resulted in great disappointment in the AKP, which was perceived as condoning of the killings of Kurds by the

Table 2.1 Perception of Interethnic Political and Economic Inequality

	2011 (%)	2015 (%)
State discrimination against Kurds	47	57
Inequality in civil rights and liberties	–	65
Inter-ethnic socioeconomic inequality	–	65
<i>N</i>	901	1340

Note: The translations of the questions are as follows: Do you think that Kurds face discrimination from the state? Do you think that Turks and Kurds have the same civil rights and liberties?; Do you think that there is socioeconomic equality between Turks and Kurds? The answers were either yes or no; and some answers were recoded while making this table.

Source: The authors created this table using statistics from two original public opinion surveys conducted in 2011 and 2015.

Turkish military and the Islamic State of Iraq and Syria (ISIS) respectively. The AKP's policies and the political mobilization of the Kurdish movement for the defense of Kobani siege also created sympathy toward the Kurdish movement among the Kurds who had distanced themselves from the PKK. In addition to the Roboski massacre and Kobani, one can argue that peace talks legitimized the PKK in the eyes of skeptical and pragmatic Kurds that do not want to be alienated from the Kurdish political movement for potential political and economic benefits in the aftermath of possible peace process and new political configurations. If the state recognized the PKK, then people hailed the PKK and the Kurdish movement as a powerful political organization of the future. The increasing legitimation of the PKK has become obvious in respondents' answers to three questions. Table 2.2 shows that 30 percent in 2011, and 55 percent in 2015 stated that the PKK represents Kurds. Those who did not recognize the PKK as a terrorist organization increased from 48 percent to 55 percent in 2015. Given the possibility that some Kurds may view the PKK not a terrorist organization, but do not see it as an organization representing Kurds, we operationalize another variable: popular support for

Table 2.2 Kurdish Street and PKK

	2011 (%)	2015 (%)
PKK represents Kurds	30	55
PKK is not a terror organization	48	55
PKK as a legal political party	63*	85/57*
<i>N</i>	901	1340

Note: The translations of the questions are as follows: Do you think that the PKK represent Kurds; is the PKK a terrorist organization? The question for the PKK as a legal party was asked differently in these surveys. The 2011 survey asks "PKK should disarm itself and participate in politics" while the 2015 survey divides the question of the earlier survey and asks as two separate questions: (1) Should PKK disarm itself and end the armed struggle? (2) Should PKK form a political party and participate in politics?

Source: The authors created this table using statistics from two original public opinion surveys conducted in 2011 and 2015.

the PKK. The popular support, that is to say, those who do not view the PKK as a terrorist organization and at the same time view it as an organization that represents Kurds, has increased from 27 percent in 2011 to 45 percent in 2015. Ergil (2010) had found that the percentage of those who do not view the PKK as a terrorist organization was 29 percent in DTP dominant cities and 16 percent in other cities in the region.⁵⁵ However, the high percentage of “I do not know,” 24 percent in the first group of cities and 16 percent in the second group suggest that the actual support may be higher.⁵⁶

Figure 2.1 displays the results of the BDP in 2011 and HDP in 2015. The percentage of people who believed that Kurdish parties represent Kurds increased from 55 to 64. Those who answered negatively to this question declined from 22 to 15 percent in 2015. Taking into account those who view the PKK only partially favorably, the results suggest that both before but more significantly after the peace talks, the Kurdish political movement had reached a high degree of support, more than 64 percent.

Figure 2.2 suggests that the linguistic and cultural demands of Kurds from the state is at a level higher than the Turkish state imagines or is willing to grant. Even before the peace talks, Kurds wanted Friday sermons in Kurdish (70%), education in in their mother tongue (65%), optional Kurdish courses (80%), Kurdish names for villages (80%), towns, and other localities (74%), as well as wanting to be served in Kurdish in state institutions such as municipalities, courts, and hospitals (82%). The support for these linguistic

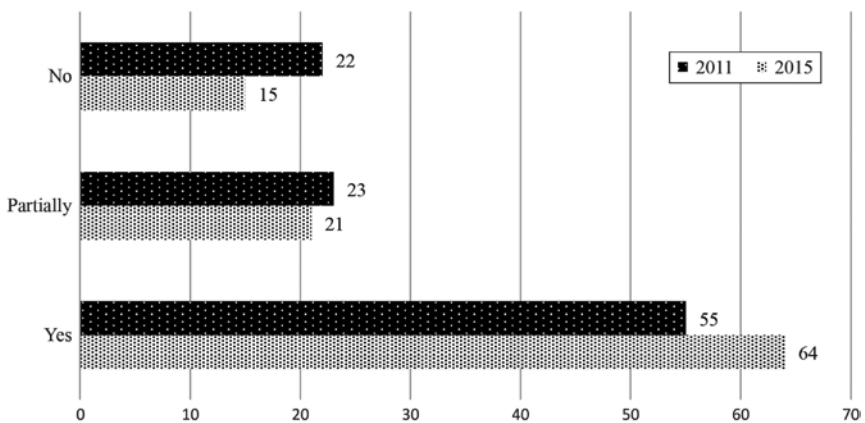


Figure 2.1 Do Kurdish Parties Represent Kurds? (%) Note: The translations of the questions are as follows: Do you think that the successor party of HADEP and DEHAP, the BDP is a party that represents Kurds? (2011); and do you think that the successor party of HADEP, DEHAP and BDP, the HDP, having seats in Parliament, is a party that represent Kurds? (2015). *Source:* The authors created this figure using statistics from two original public opinion surveys conducted in 2011 and 2015.

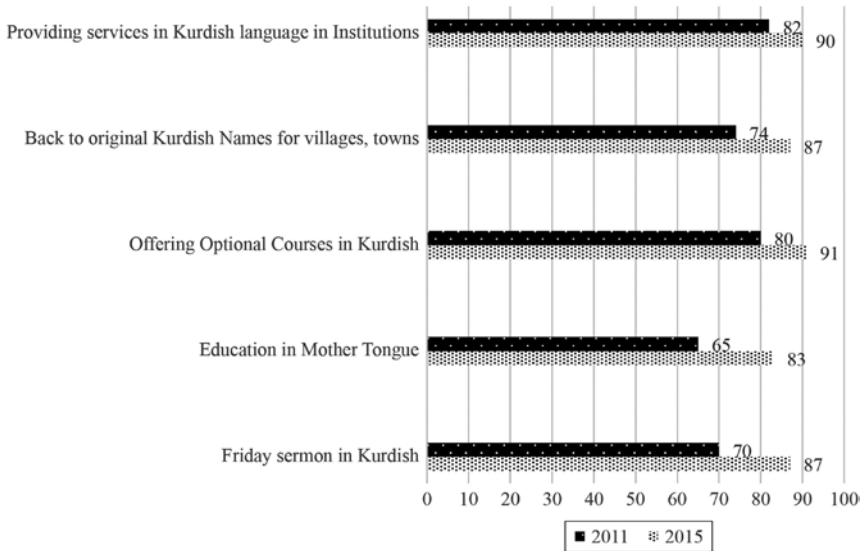


Figure 2.2 Support for Linguistic/Cultural Rights (%) Note: The translations of the questions are as follows: Do you think that municipalities, hospitals, and courts provide services in Kurdish? Kurdish names for locations such as villages, towns, and cities should be allowed; education in mother tongue in primary/secondary and high schools should be allowed if there is a demand? Do you think that optional courses in Kurdish should be offered like English and German? Friday sermon in Kurdish should be provided in the Kurdish-dominant places? Source: The authors created this figure using statistics from two original public opinion surveys conducted in 2011 and 2015.

rights has reached 87 percent and more, except for education in their mother language (83%). Ergil (2010) asks a similar question, whether one supports education in Kurdish.⁵⁷ Fifty-nine percent of Kurds in DTP-dominant cities and towns said yes, but this percentage went down to 16 percent in regional cities where DTP was not the dominant party. However, the high percentage of “I do not know” in the first (14%) and especially in the second category (38%) does not allow us to make a meaningful comparison, but due to the reasons discussed in footnote 6, the results suggest that support for cultural rights have been high among Kurds.

Do these results translate into supporting political autonomy or even secession? Figure 2.3 suggests that more than half of Kurds would like to entertain their linguistic and cultural rights with political autonomy as citizens of the Turkish state. The peace talks increased their demand for regional parliaments (49–64%), a regional flag (40–58%), and Kurdish as an official language (56–74%) as the survey year moves from 2011 to 2015. Having said that, the support for an independent Kurdish state increased significantly,

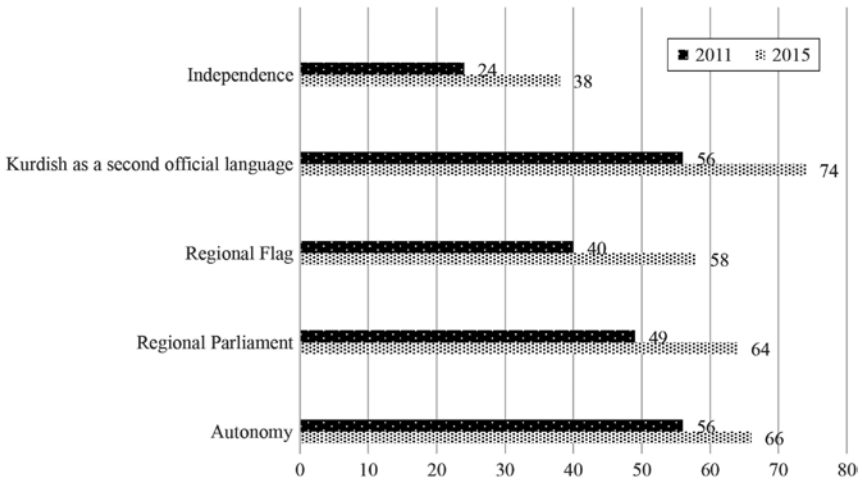


Figure 2.3 Support for Political Rights: Autonomy, Independence and others (%) Note: The translations of the questions are as follows: Do you think that Kurds should secede from Turkey and form an independent state? Do you think the Kurdish language, in addition to Turkish, should be recognized as an official language? Do you think that there should be a regional flag in the Kurdish-dominant places? Should there be a regional parliament in the Kurdish-dominant places? Do you think that Kurds should have autonomy in Turkey? The respondents answered this question, Yes or No. Source: The authors created this figure using statistics from two original public opinion surveys conducted in 2011 and 2015.

but remained at less than half of the population, rising from 24 percent in 2011 to 38 percent in 2015.

CONCLUSION

We discussed the changing policies and positions of political parties and Kurdish political actors over time and claimed that the lengthy civil war has created a convergence of demands between secular and religious Kurds, in particular linguistic and cultural rights. The findings on the public opinion survey conducted in 2015 suggest that more than 80 percent of the Kurdish public has demanded the right to study their language, receive an education in their mother language, get served in public institutions in Kurdish, and want to listen to Friday sermons in Kurdish. These figures imply, without the fulfillment of them that neither the Kurdish conflict nor the political instability fed by it will end.⁵⁸

Furthermore, the Kurdish public opinion wants “an official recognition” without a stick. Despite some reforms, the Turkish state under the

conservative AKP governments still refuses official recognition of Kurds and the Kurdish language. The “too little too late” policy of the Turkish state toward the Kurdish conflict created not only distrust between Kurds and the Turkish state, but also fostered cultural nationalism, a prerequisite for political demands.⁵⁹ Now, Kurds want their language to be an official state language and they aspire to have their regional government, parliament, and flag within the existing borders. While the majority agrees upon autonomy of these regional institutions, only a little more than one-third of the Kurds seek secession. However, the maltreatment of the Kurds and the continuation of the rejection of linguistic and cultural rights may help the upward trend in demanding an independent state, fostering inter-ethnic communal violence and social unrest.⁶⁰ In this sense, the findings confirm that the securitization of the Kurdish conflict has transformed Kurds with a private ethnic identity or non-politicized disposition into politicized ones; this is especially true of Kurdish youths who associate the Turkish state with the military and police, and their hostile attitudes and behaviors toward them.⁶¹

Turning to Kurdish actors, the higher support for legal politics through the Democratic Regions Party (DBP) and HDP, rather than support for the PKK, suggests that the Kurdish public opinion lends its support for these parties. Kurds have already endured decades of “Emergency Rule” (OHAL), curfew, extrajudicial killings, and human rights abuses amidst economic and social difficulties. High support for legal Kurdish parties suggests that seeking an “ordinary life” and “ordinary politics” is among their primary preferences. The urban warfare in the post-2015 era and the displacement of hundreds of thousands of people as a result may exert an effect on attitudes toward Kurdish parties and the PKK that should be examined in future studies. One can assume that while the PKK lost some support among Kurds, this does not mean that it was replaced by support for the AKP or the state actors, especially as long as Kurds do not see any improvement in their political rights and economic situation. Now, the AKP has been transformed from anti-establishment party to the statist party in the eyes of the Kurdish public as a result of increasing terror discourse toward the Kurdish conflict by the AKP government in alliance with the ultranationalist MHP. This perception has been consolidated by the replacement of elected mayors by the state-appointed ones (*kayyum/kayyım*) between 2016 and the 2019 March local elections and the ongoing imprisonment of Kurdish MPs, including the party cochair, Selahattin Demirtaş and Figen Yüksekdağ. There is increasing evidence that there is high support for the securitization of Kurdish rights among the Turkish state apparatus and the Turkish public. This trend, merged with the state’s concerns due to the Kurdish enclave in Syria and unforeseen events in the region, is likely to prolong the political status quo and civil war at the cost of significant loss of life, as well as civil and

political liberties.⁶² Nevertheless, it remains to be seen how long this unofficial recognition with a stick policy toward Kurds will continue without a reformed political system that is responsive to the cultural and political demands of Kurds.

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Chapter 3

The Political Economy of Turkey's Kurdish Question

Veli Yadirgi

The question of development¹ in Eastern South-eastern 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, 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 jeopardize 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."³ 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."⁴ 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.

Contrary to the scholarly wisdom apparent in the development literature reviewed previously, this research hypothesizes that continuous inadequate development has not been a characteristic feature of ESA's economy. 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 that 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 programs—that is, the construction and preservation of a Turkish national economy and state as well as the pursuit of population homogeneity based on Turkish 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 reorganization of the Ottoman lands.⁵ In other words, during and immediately after the war, the CUP's nationalist demographic policies aimed at homogenizing the multiethnic landscape of the Empire, which mainly targeted the Armenians and the Kurds in the ethnically heterogeneous eastern provinces, 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 modeled on *laissez-faire* liberalism and began to embrace the economic model of "national economy" centered 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 toward 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 industrialized economy and imperialist policies, but the model of development these economists advocated could not be universalized. According to List, if *laissez-faire* liberal ideas are adopted by countries that do not have the large-scale industries akin to those of England, they would end up reliant on England.⁶

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."⁷ 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."⁸

Relatedly, the CUP undertook fundamental economic measures with the purpose of nurturing the indigenous industry.⁹ 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 Turkish 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: AN 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 had commenced in February 1915. The “fifth and final stage of the deportations” is said to have begun on June 21, 1915, after the leader of the CUP, Talat Pasha, 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.¹⁰ Within a year or so after the initiation of forced deportation of the Armenians from their ancestral homelands, according to a report of a UN human rights subcommission, “at least one million” Armenians perished.¹¹

The removal and the subsequent destruction of the Ottoman Armenians had severe social and economic consequences.¹² 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, on November 2, 1915, confessed to the occurrence of “an economic vacuum arising from the transportation of Armenian craftsmen.”¹³

After the forced expulsion and massacre of the Armenians, the CUP designed and implemented a range of forced deportation policies targeting the Kurds. The settlement policies of the CUP entailed, on one hand, the deportation of Kurds from their homelands for resettlement in central and western Anatolia in accordance with the “5 percent rule”: ensuring that the Kurds constituted no more than 5 percent 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 percent of the local population.¹⁴

The statistical data prepared by the Ministry of the Economy indicates that there were “well over a million” Kurdish refugees and deportees during this period.¹⁵ Figures pertaining to the actual number of Kurdish deportations are nonexistent, 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.¹⁶

Overall, by the end of the war, the Ottoman economy shrank by around 50 percent and its gross domestic product (GDP) fell by 40 percent. The destruction the war caused in the different sectors of the Ottoman economy are succinctly summarized by the following figures pertaining to the declines experienced during the war. Mineral production fell by 80 percent, coal

production by 75 percent, cotton textiles by 50 percent, wheat production by 40 percent, and sheep- and goat-raising by 40 percent.¹⁷ For the population in Ottoman Kurdistan who had survived the war, life 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 during the course of World War I, the famine that began at the end of 1917 struck the eastern and south-eastern provinces more acutely than elsewhere in the Empire.¹⁸

**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 (October 29, 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 neglect and further peripheralization of these primarily Kurdish regions in the new Turkish nation-state, a theme explored later. This perhaps explains why the alteration in the Kemalist attitude toward the Kurds had overlapped with the Lausanne Conference, which was held in two sessions, from November 20, 1922 to February 4, 1923 and then from April 23, until July 24, 1923.

The major change of policy vis-à-vis the Kurds took place at the Izmir Economic Congress (February 17–March 4, 1923). This Congress convened during the interval in the deliberations of the Lausanne Conference, with the attendance of 1,135 delegates¹⁹ mostly from the dominant classes, that is, big landowners and the merchant bourgeoisie, as well as from the laboring classes.²⁰ When Mustafa Kemal's speech²¹ to this Congress was published, all references to the Kurds had been excised,²² which implied a fundamental shift in the policies of Ankara toward 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 World War I 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.²³

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 1939–1940, to “dismantle the territorial unity of Kurds” and to “Turkify the Eastern population.”²⁴ 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 southeast of Turkey in the early years of the Turkish Republic. During the first two decades of the Republic, there were twenty-seven Kurdish revolts, and only one out of the eighteen Turkish military expeditions during the years 1924–1938 transpired outside of Kurdistan. Three of these revolts, namely the Şeyh Said Revolt (1925), the Ararat Revolt (1930), and the Dersim Revolt (1936–1938), had a distinctive influence on the evolution of the Republican People's Party (*Cumhuriyet Halk Partisi*, CHP) regime and its Kurdish policy.

Subsequent to the Şeyh Said Revolt, Atatürk, on September 8, 1925, authorized 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 September 24, 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 a 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 seven million Turkish Lira (TL) in order to finance the settlement and the livelihoods of the Turkish refugees and transportation of the Kurds.²⁵

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 1915–1916. 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.”²⁶ 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, some 200,000 of whom were estimated to have perished.²⁷

The 1925 revolt was a catalyst for more than the suppression of the Kurdish national movement, as it led to the implementation on March 4, 1925 of an extraordinary law titled “The Law on the Maintenance of Order” (*Takrir-i Sükkün 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 civilization 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 modernization and capitalist development in Turkey.²⁸

Between 1923 and 1929, the Turkish economy recovered, and by 1929 it appeared to have regained its pre-war level. For instance, per capita GDP in 1923 was 40 percent below its 1914 level, but by the end of the 1920s, it had attained the levels prevailing prior to World War I.²⁹ When compared to the prewar Ottoman levels, considerable developments had taken place in the sphere of education and in transport.

However, the predominantly Kurdish provinces³⁰ in ESA (i.e., Beyazıt, Bitlis, Diyarbakır, Elaziz [Elazığ], Erzincan, Hakkari, Kars, Malatya, Mardin, Siirt, Urfa, and Van), which in 1927 were home to around a quarter (14.6%) of the general population of Turkey (13,660,275³¹), did not develop in parallel with the rest of the country. These regions had been the least affected by the post-war 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.³² In 1927, only 900 of the 14,000 schools in Turkey were located in these domains.³³ Furthermore, by 1930 there was only one bank, the *Elaziz İktisat Bankası*, established in 1929, which had a nominal capital of 50,000 TL in the whole of ESA.³⁴ 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.³⁵

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 World War I: “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.”³⁶

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.”³⁷

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 percent higher at the end of the Republican era in 1950 than on the eve of World War I.³⁸ Per capita income in Turkey in 1950 was at US\$ 1,620 constant or inflation adjusted, which was equal to 24 percent of the per capita income of the high-income countries and 188 percent of developing countries of Asia, Africa, and Latin America.³⁹ In addition, Turkey’s GDP growth rate between 1929 and 1950 was 83 percent—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 percent, respectively.⁴⁰

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),⁴¹ 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. Turkey had a lower HDI score than such countries as Bulgaria, Mexico, Thailand, and Greece.⁴²

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.⁴³

The available data⁴⁴ on living standards demonstrate that from the promulgation of the Republic up to the end of CHP rule, the improvements in living conditions in the ESA provinces had been considerably inferior to that of the other parts of Turkey, as exhibited by the figures tabulated in table 3.1.

The policies implemented during these twenty-seven years did not narrow but instead 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 percent in 1927 to 15 percent in by 1950.⁴⁵ 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 programs conducted under the Republicans. Industrialization, throughout the Republican era, was not only considered the dominant 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 percent of the industrial enterprises in Turkey were located in ESA. In 1939, this figure dropped sharply to 8 percent. By 1955, only 7.7 percent 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 percent in 1939 to 19.8 percent in 1955. Likewise, the proportion of industrial firms sited in the north-western Marmara region increased from 29.6 percent in 1939 to 47.8 percent in 1955.⁴⁶ The low level of industrialization witnessed in ESA provinces made agriculture virtually the sole source of income.

Table 3.1 Indicators of Regional Differences in Living Standards, 1923–1950

Regions/ Provinces	Population		7+ Literacy Rate		Changes in 1927–1950 as %		The Number of Doctors per 100,000 Population 1950 ¹	The Number of Land Vehicles per 10,000 Population 1950 ²	The Number of Radios per 10,000 Population 1950
	1950 (1,000)	1927 %	1950 %	1927 %	1927 %	1950 %			
Istanbul	1,180	45	73			+28	316	64	981
Ankara									
Izmir	2,637	12	47			+35	56	26	272
Adana									
Bursa	7,322	10	38			+28	24	9	115
Western Provinces ³									
Eastern Provinces ⁴	9,341	6	23			+17	15	6	53

¹ The number of doctors is inclusive of dentists, and the figures are attained from the statistics for the year 1953.

² Land vehicles comprise automobiles, lorries, buses, and jeeps.

³ Zonguldak, Bolu, Eskişehir, Konya, Hatay, and the provinces to the west of these, excluding Istanbul, Ankara, Adana, Izmir, and Bursa.

⁴ Provinces to the east of Hatay, Zonguldak, Bolu, Eskişehir, and Konya.

Source: The table was created by the author using data from Tezel (1982: 461).

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 percent 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.⁴⁷

TRANSITION TO A TURBULENT DEMOCRACY AND "INCORPORATION" OF ESA (1950–1980)

On May 14, 1950, the first democratic elections in the history of the Turkish Republic took place. The electorate inflicted a humiliating defeat to the CHP, giving it only 39.5 percent of the overall votes while its rival, the Democrat Party (*Demokrat Parti*, DP)—which was officially established on January 7, 1946—received 52.7 percent 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 May 19, 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 (1950–1960) 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 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.⁴⁸

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 Economic Recovery Plan (ERP), from its inception, the DP government, headed by 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 percent of the GDP, and its share

of total employment was 80 percent.⁴⁹ The DP also brought an end to the dichotomy of state versus the traditional institutions, which had been a major source of the frustration among those who opposed the top-down Western-centric modernization 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 center 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 the time when pre-war levels of production were already attained in 1947 through 1953.⁵⁰ 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 growth⁵¹—and the rapid commercialization of agriculture.⁵² These developments in agriculture were engendered by 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; 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.”⁵³ A significant number of peasants who acquired land were forced to sell off their lands to the tractor-owning ağas or large landowners due to 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 to 30.7 percent between 1950 and 1960, and the annual rate of urban population growth during 1950–1955 stood at 55.6 percent in Turkey.⁵⁴ As a result, the gradual mechanization of agriculture that commenced in the 1950s further intensified social differentiation in the countryside and accelerated rural migration into towns.⁵⁵

The rise in the number of landless peasant families between 1950 and 1960 in the predominantly Kurdish provinces far exceeded the national average (see table 3.2). 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.⁵⁶

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

Table 3.2 Landless Peasant Families in ESA, 1950–1968

	1950 (%)	1962–1968 (%)
Turkey	5.9	30.7
Urfa	36.7	55.0
Diyarbakir	37.1	47.0
Bingöl	20.0	40.0
Mardin	11.8	40.9
Siirt	12.0	42.0
Van	20.0	37.5
Tunceli	22.7	37.0
Elazığ	12.0	32.0
Ağrı	10.7	36.1
Erzincan	10.7	38.0
Erzurum	6.0	32.0
Kars	8.0	23.0
Adıyaman	**	34.0

Source: The table was created by the author using data from Sönmez, [1990] 1992: 144.

Kurdish *ağas*, 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 smallholdings, which had been the predominant unit of agrarian production in Turkey during the Democrat period. As Hershlag 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.⁵⁷

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 percent per annum in the “golden years” (1950–1953) of the Democrat decade to 9.5 percent in 1954, and as a result the trade deficit in 1955 was eight times that of 1950.⁵⁸ These years were followed by years of spiraling inflation (1956–1959). During these years, prices rose around 18 percent a year⁵⁹ because, regardless of slackening international demand and decline in prices of export commodities, the DP government continued with investment programs and initiated a large price support program for wheat, financed by increases in the money supply.⁶⁰

The deteriorating economic situation compounded with Menderes’ increasingly authoritarian style of government, to the extent that in his September 21, 1958 Izmir speech, he openly threatened “an end to democracy” and

brought the country to the brink of chaos. The trend toward totalitarianism by the government representatives was based on the fear of being toppled, which was instilled by the January 1958 rumors of a military conspiracy and aggravated because of the July 1958 revolution in neighboring Iraq, as well as the rising popular unrest at home. The robust anti-government demonstrations toward the end of the 1950s—some of which the CHP encouraged—severely undermined government authority. The most resilient popular movements were the student rallies and large street demonstrations on April 28, 1960—first in Istanbul and then in Ankara—which continued virtually uninterrupted until the military takeover by the thirty-eight officers of the self-proclaimed National Unity Committee (*Milli Birlik Komitesi*, MBK), on May 27, 1960.⁶¹

Long Period of Import Substituted Industrialization (1963–1979)

The economic policies of the military rule and the civilian rule that followed in the 1960s and 1970s were primarily aimed at the protection of the domestic market and industrialization 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 subsidized 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 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."⁶²

On the other hand, the Forced Settlement Law No. 105 appended to the Settlement Law No. 2510 on October 19, 1960⁶³ by the interim government in order to deport 55 of the 485 most prominent Kurds detained immediately

after the coup was annulled on October 18, 1962⁶⁴ 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 prioritized 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.⁶⁵ 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,⁶⁶ the "feudal land ownership devoid of modernization 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 1961–1969 succeeding it, failed to materialize.⁶⁷ 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.⁶⁸ Thus, the landed property of the large landowning families remained virtually untouched. In 1980, 8 percent of the families in ESA owned more than 50 percent of the cultivable land, while 80 percent of the families were evenly matched between those holding up to five hectares and those who were landless.⁶⁹

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 authorized 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.⁷⁰ Consequently, from the 1960s on, 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 programs 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.”⁷¹ Yet, as outlined in the program of the 1969 administration, the aim of the “special measures” was not to “initiate the formation of privileged regions, but to *forge integration*.”⁷² 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 prioritize the exigent needs of these lagging and long-neglected provinces. Hence, in the 1960s and the 1970s, despite the main economic development strategy centered 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 1961–1963 to 1977–1979 is compared to that of the Democrat decade of 1951–1953 to 1961–1963, the GDP growth rate increased from 4.9 to 6.4 percent, with an equally robust increase in the gross national income (GNI) growth rate from 4.4 to 6.3 percent. In addition, GDP growth per capita increased from 2.1 to 3.9 percent, with GNI growth per capita income increasing from 1.6 to 3.8 percent. Thus, the growth of per capita income more than doubled, which compared well with that of the industrialized and developing countries. The average growth of GNP per capita for the period 1960–1977, as set by the World Bank, for middle-income countries was 3.6 percent, for industrialized countries 3.4 percent, and for low-income countries 1.4 percent.⁷³

Even with this impressive economic performance, the socioeconomic disparities between different geographic zones inherited from previous decades intensified during 1960–1980, 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.⁷⁴

Throughout the long period of planned import substitution, the national income share of the seventeen eastern and south-eastern provinces continually decreased: in 1965, it was 10.39 percent; in 1975, it reduced to 9.56 percent; and by 1979, it further dropped to 8.17 percent.⁷⁵ 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 and 1970s.⁷⁶

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 1973–1974,⁷⁷ 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 1960–1980 is estimated to have constituted more than 50 percent of the overall investment in Turkey.⁷⁸ 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 percent. In total, forty provinces were classified as PDRs, that is, provinces in need of extra investment and incentives: all eighteen of the provinces in ESA, plus twenty-two 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 respectively as follows: 11.85, 11.90, 7.11, and 7.20 percent.⁷⁹ The share of public investment in the western Marmara region, on the other hand, increased from 11.70 percent in the First Five-Year Plan to 15.70 percent in the Fourth Five-Year Plan.⁸⁰

From 1962–1963 to 1974–1978, private investment in Turkey increased from 8.8 to 11.2 percent,⁸¹ but private sector investment in ESA provinces remained nominal, owed in part to the little effort the state put in to encourage private investment in this area. From 1968 onward, 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 percent of the total 5,918 incentives the state approved during 1968–1980 were for these provinces.⁸²

UNBALANCED SECTORAL DISTRIBUTION OF PUBLIC INVESTMENT

The other factors fueling 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) prioritization of the needs of the industrialized western economic centers over that of the primary and immediate requirements of ESA. The heavy investments in the energy and mining sectors, which with the exclusion of the Third Five-Year Plan constituted the main part of the public investment in the four quinquennial plans in east and south-east Turkey, exemplify both of these aspects (see table 3.3).

The petroleum sector had been the other main beneficiary of public investment during the period of planned import substitution.⁸³ Petroleum in Turkey was discovered in 1950 in ESA, and all successive discoveries have been in these domains.⁸⁴ 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 1973.⁸⁵ Between 1955 and 1972, production of petroleum is estimated to be worth \$27 million.⁸⁶ Up until 1980, it maintained the same level of production as 1973.⁸⁷ The great majority of the petroleum production was exported, since

Table 3.3 Sectoral Distribution of the Public Investment in ESA, 1963–1983

<i>Sectors</i>	<i>I. F. Y. P. (%)</i>	<i>II. F. Y. P. (%)</i>	<i>III. F. Y. P. (%)</i>	<i>IV. F. Y. P. (%)</i>
Energy	24.1	40.0	16.0	19.8
Mining	6	6.0	4.0	11.8
Agriculture	13.2	14.6	9.4	8.4
Manufacturing	8.0	11.0	27.4	23.2
Industry				
Transport	11.2	7.3	13.6	8.0
Education	17.0	11.8	15.0	11.3
Health	5.0	3.0	2.9	2.5
Other	11.9	6.3	11.7	15.0

Five-Year Plan (F.Y.P.).

Source: The table was created by the author using data from Sönmez, [1990] 1992: 158.

only 6 percent 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.”⁸⁸

In juxtaposition to the sizable state investment in the energy and mining sectors in ESA, there was 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 industrialization 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 1977,⁸⁹ eastern and south-eastern provinces’ share of the value added in manufacturing decreased from 7.8 percent in 1968 to 4.0 percent in 1974.⁹⁰ 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.⁹¹ In 1968, 34.3 percent and in 1974, 42.3 percent of the total share of valued added in manufacturing in ESA was generated by the Batman Refinery.⁹² The Batman Refinery accounting for the bulk of the valued 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 percent, while agriculture accounted for nearly half of the regions’ GDP.⁹³ In the western Marmara region, the manufacturing industry accounted for 33.7 percent of this region’s GDP, and agriculture’s contribution to the region’s GDP was a mere 7.9 percent.⁹⁴ 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 1960–1962, the ESA provinces accounted for 17.01 percent of the total cultivated area and 17.10 percent of the total crops produced in Turkey. In 1978–1980, despite the share of these provinces in the total cultivated land rising to 19.89 percent, the share of these provinces in the total crops produced decreased to 14.61 percent.⁹⁵ The decrease in output is believed to be inextricably linked to two region-wide issues: (i) the inefficient irrigation system deprived of modernization; and (ii) the limited availability and use of chemical fertilizers.⁹⁶

During 1965–1979, 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 sixty-seven provinces, the seventeen eastern and south-eastern provinces, with a few exemptions, were the lowest-ranked provinces in the national GDP rankings.

In summary, the preconditions for socioeconomic development in ESA—such as adequate public investment oriented toward 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 1960–1961 and 1971–1973, 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 programs—the construction and preservation of a Turkish national economy and state as well as the pursuit of population homogeneity based on Turkish 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. Sara Roy, *The Gaza Strip: The Political Economy of De-development* (Washington, DC: Institute for Palestinian Studies, 1995): 4.

4. Ibid, 6.

5. 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), and Jongerden (2007).

6. Friedrich List, 1856, *National System of Political Economy* (Philadelphia, PA: J. B. Lippencott [republished by Michigan: University of Michigan Library (n.d.)]).

7. Ziya Gökalp, *Turkish Nationalism and Western Civilization: Selected Essays*. Translated by Niyazi Berkes (London: George Allen and Unwin Ltd, 1959): 307.

8. Gökalp, Ziya, *Principles of Turkism*. Translated by Robert Devereux (Leiden: Brill, 1968): 123.

9. Zafer Toprak, *Türkiye’de ‘Milli İktisat’ (1908–1918)* (Ankara, Yurt Yayınları, 1982): 25–33.

10. Fuat Dündar, “Pouring a People into the Desert: The ‘Definitive Solution’ of the Unionist to the Armenian Question,” in Ronal Grigor Suny, Fatma Müge Göçek and Norman M. Naimark (eds.) *A Question of Genocide: Armenians and Turks at the End of the Ottoman Empire* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012): 281–283.

11. G. Richard Hovannisian, “Introduction: The Armenian Genocide, Remembrance and Denial,” in Richard G. Hovannisian (ed.) *Remembrance and Denial: The Case of the Armenian Genocide* (Detroit, MI: Wayne State Press, 1999): 15.

12. For a detailed examination of the social and economic repercussions of the Armenian Genocide of 1915, see Üngör and Polatel (2011).

13. Başbakanlık Odası Arşivi (BOA), Dahiliye Nezareti Şifre Kalemî (DH.ŞFR) 57/261, Interior Ministry to all provinces, November 2, 1915 in Üngör and Polatel (2011: 93).

14. Joost Jongerden, *The Settlement Issue in Turkey and the Kurds: An Analysis of Spatial Policies, Modernity and War* (Brill: Leiden, 2007): 178–179; Taner Akçam, *The Young Turks’ Crime against Humanity: The Armenian Genocide and Ethnic Cleansing in the Ottoman Empire* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2012): 43–50.

15. Uğur Umit Üngör, *The Making of Modern Turkey: Nation and State in Eastern Anatolia, 1913–1950* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011): 117.

16. Arshak Safrastian, *Kurds and Kurdistan* (London: Harvill Press, 1948): 76; Wadie Jwaideh, *The Kurdish Nationalist Movement* (New York: Syracuse University Press, 1961): 369.

17. Uğur Umit Üngör and Mehmet Polatel, *Confiscation and Destruction: The Young Turk Seizure of Armenian Property* (London; New York: Continuum, 2011): 94.

18. David McDowall, *A Modern History of the Kurds* (London: I.B. Tauris, 2000): 108–109.

19. Afet Inan, *Devletçilik İlkesi ve Türkiye Cumhuriyetinin Birinci Sanayi Planı* (Ankara: Türk Tarih Kurumu Basımevi, 1972): 12.
20. Korkut Boratav, *Türkiye'de Devletçilik* (Ankara: Savaş Yayınları, 1982): 14–18.
21. For the speech by Mustafa Kemal Atatürk to the İzmir Economic Congress, see Inan (1972: 57–69).
22. David McDowall, *A Modern History of the Kurds* (London: I.B. Tauris, 2000): 191.
23. Korkut Boratav, *Türkiye'de Devletçilik* (Ankara: Savaş Yayınları, 1982); Zafer Toprak, *Türkiye'de 'Milli İktisat' (1908–1918)* (Ankara, Yurt Yayınları, 1982); Galip Yalman, *Transition to Neoliberalism: The Case of Turkey in the 1980s* (Istanbul: Istanbul Bilgi University, 2009).
24. Faik Bulut, *Kürt Sorununda Çözüm Arayışları* (Istanbul: Ozan Yayınlar, 1998), *Cumhuriyet*, June 23, 1955: 185–189.
25. Mehmet Bayrak (ed.), *Kürtler ve Ulusal-Demokratik Mücadeleleri: Gizli Belgeler-Araştırmalar-Notlar* (Ankara: Öz-Ge Yayınları, 1993): 481–489; Mehmet Bayrak (ed.), *Açık-Gizli/Resmi-Gayriresmi Kürdoloji Belgeleri* (Istanbul: Öz-Ge Yayınları, 1994).
26. FO 371/12255, Clerk to Chamberlain, Istanbul, June 22, 1927.
27. Kamuran Bedirkhan, Ali *La question Kurde* (Paris: np, 1958): 52–53.
28. Zvi Yehuda Herschlag, *Turkey: The Challenge of Growth* (Leiden: Brill, 1968); Charles Issawi, *The Economic History of Turkey 1800–1914* (Chicago: London: University of Chicago Press, 1980); Zülküf Aydın, *Underdevelopment and Rural Structures in Southeastern Anatolia: The Household Economy in Gısgıs and Kalhana* (London: Ithaca Press & University of Durham, 1986); Feroz Ahmad, *The Making of Modern Turkey* (London and New York: Routledge, 1993).
29. Şevket Pamuk, “Economic Change in Twentieth-Century Turkey: Is the Glass More Than Half Full?,” in Reşat Kasaba (ed.) *The Cambridge History of Turkey, Volume 4: Turkey in the Modern World* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2008): 276–277.
30. Mustafa Abdülhalik Renda, one of the coauthors 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: 452–467).
31. TCBIUM, *Annuaire Statistique*, 1928: 24–25.
32. Ibid., 1932: 359.
33. Ibid., 1928: 28–29.
34. Ibid., 1934: 305.
35. Ibid., 1933: 188–189.
36. FO 371/11528, Knight to Lindsay, Trebizond, June 16, 1926.

37. FO 371/13828, Clerk (Istanbul) to Henderson (London), July 15, 1929.
38. Pamuk, "Economic Change in Twentieth-Century Turkey," 280.
39. Ibid., 270.
40. Yahya S. Tezel, *Cumhuriyet Dönemi İktisadi Tarihi (1923–1950)* (Ankara: Yurt Yayınları, 1982): 450.
41. 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.
42. For a detailed account see Pamuk 2008: 272.
43. Pamuk, "Economic Change in Twentieth-Century Turkey," 272–273.
44. It is apposite to state here that prior to 1968, statistical information on the geographical distribution of income and wealth in Turkey had been nonexistent. The maiden statistical study on the spatial distribution of income and wealth based on direct observation in the form of income surveys was undertaken in 1968. For a comprehensive analysis of the nature and historicity of studies on the spatial distribution of income and wealth in Turkey, see Karaman (1986) and Hansen (1991: 275–287).
45. Yahya S Tezel, *Cumhuriyet Dönemi İktisadi Tarihi (1923–1950)* (Ankara: Yurt Yayınları, 1982): 460–461.
46. Necdet Serin, *Türkiye'nin Sanayileşmesi* (Ankara: Sevinç Matbaa, 1963): 147.
47. Şefik Bilkur, *National Income of Turkey and Family Expenses in Country and Towns, Estimates 1927–1945, Forecasts 1948–1952* (Ankara: Türkiye Cumhuriyeti İstatistik Genel Müdürlüğü, 1949): 11.
48. The four seasoned ex-Republican politicians who founded the DP were Celal Bayar (1883–1986), the banker and confidant 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.
49. Pamuk, "Economic Change in Twentieth-Century Turkey," 268–269.
50. Ibid, 281
51. Erik-Jan Zürcher, *Turkey: A Modern History* (London: I.B. Tauris, 1994): 235.
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76. For more on population increase in the 1960s and 1970s, see Sönmez, [1990] 1992: 259.
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87. Europa, *Regional Surveys of the World*, 1130.
88. Jafar, *Under-Underdevelopment*, 68.
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Section II

**CONTINUITY AND
CHANGE IN SYRIA**

THE KURDISH PERSPECTIVE

Chapter 4

The Evolution of Rojava

Tensions between Democratic Confederalism and State-Building in Northern Syria

Sean Lee

In the midst of the complicated, brutal conflicts ravaging Syria since 2011, there has been a flourishing of mediatized interest in the three predominantly Kurdish regions of the country's north, where the Democratic Union Party (PYD) declared autonomy in 2012 after the Syrian military mostly withdrew. Together, these three cantons, and increasingly the areas separating and surrounding them, make up the geographic unit that to many has come to be called Rojava.¹ It is the evolution and change in what is meant by this term within the framework of a state building project that I address in this chapter. I am interested in showing that the Rojava project is, in fact, a state-building project; I do so by tracing the evolution of this project through the changing meanings of the term "Rojava" and the PYD's use of classic tools of state building.

Since the expulsion of Abdullah Öcalan from Syria and his consequent capture and imprisonment by the Turkish state, there has been a marked change in the Kurdistan Workers' Party (*Partiya Karkerên Kurdistanê*, PKK's) attitude toward the idea of a Kurdish state in particular and the concept of the nation-state more generally. As Öcalan (2011) puts it, originally, and in the context of decolonization movements in the 1970s, "the creation of a nation-state, which was the paradigm of the capitalist modernity at that time," seemed like the only way to realize the "legitimate rights of the Kurdish people."² Proposing in place of the nation-state model one based on Murray Bookchin's (2015) "commune of communes," the PKK and its affiliate parties and organizations have at least rhetorically eschewed the model of the nation-state in very strong terms.³ In his pamphlet entitled *Democratic Confederalism*, Öcalan is suspicious that the state can ever

shed what he sees as its religious and nationalist essence. Writing of state bureaucracy, he says:

During the European modernity the state had all means at its disposal to expand its bureaucracy into all strata of the society. There it grew like cancer infecting all lifelines of the society. Bureaucracy and nation-state cannot exist without each other. If the nation-state is the backbone of the capitalist modernity it certainly is the cage of the natural society.⁴

As Michiel Leezenberg (2016) has pointed out, in both the Turkish and Syrian contexts there is a certain tension between the bottom-up theory of democratic confederalism on the one hand and the praxis of a top-down revolutionary vanguard party on the other.⁵ I would argue that a parallel version of this tension is that between confederalism and (nation) state-building. In some ways this can be seen in the evolution of the term “Rojava” from a generic marker that distinguished predominantly Kurdish areas of Syria from those in Turkey, Iraq, and Iran to the definition of a political and territorial project and a nationalist reference similar to those like Kawa,⁶ Mahabad, the September Revolution, Halabja, and Anfal.⁷

VARIATIONS OF ROJAVA

The terms *bakur*, *başur*, *rojhelat*, and *rojawa*—north, south, east, and west, respectively—have been in use for a long time as cardinal geographical markers of Kurdistan. We see the term used in nationalist poetry, such as that of Cigerxwîn, where the trope of *Ji rojava hetanî rojhelatê* (from the west to the east) shows up, illustrating a spanning of the length of Kurdistan.⁸ Other examples of similar usage show up in the 1930s in Syria’s first Kurdish language journal *Hawar* (1932–1943),⁹ published by Celadet Bedirxan. The usage of these terms, then, poses the larger question of the genealogy of “Greater Kurdistan” as a term and a concept, the use of which as Ofra Bengio (2017) has remarked, has increased online as well as in literary and scholarly writing.¹⁰ From being a generic marker of cardinal direction, there seems to have been a shift in using these terms to speak of Kurdish areas delineated by the state borders of Turkey, Iraq, Iran, and Syria.

In my interviews with Syrian Kurds residing in Lebanon, Turkey, and Europe,¹¹ there was little consensus on where exactly Rojava ends except when it came to state borders. For instance, all of my interviewees agree that Qamishli is part of Rojava, but Nusaybin, on the Turkish side of the border with Syria, is definitely not. So, while some interviewees disagreed on whether or not Raqqa, Tal Abyad,¹² or Nubl¹³ were part of Rojava, and where

its borders with the rest of Syria fell, there is no disagreement when it comes to Rojava's emerging borders with Turkey and Iraq. One female interviewee told me, "any place where Kurds live is Rojava, not just the north." When pressed about places outside of Syria's borders, she walked the affirmation back to specify that Rojava stopped where Syria's borders ended. On several occasions, interviewees used the Kurdistan Region of Iraq's relationship to the Iraqi state to describe the relationship between Rojava and Syria.

This insistence on the salience of Syria's national borders is interesting if we recall the story Benjamin White recounts of the visit by the French High Commissioner to Jazira in 1939. Nationalists in Qamishli wanted to "show their sound nationalist feeling" by waving Syrian flags during the visit. However, anti-nationalists wanted to intercept the flags sent from Damascus, so there was a showdown at the local railway station where the stationmaster only wanted to release the flags to their intended recipient. Finally, when the local French officer dispatched a detachment of Circassian troops, the stationmaster relinquished the nationalist flags, which were promptly burned and urinated upon. As White (2011) tells it:

There are many interesting things about this incident, but one thing is interesting by its absence: the Syrian–Turkish border. Qamishli was a border town, and the recently drawn border ran just south of the railway line. So the local station was in Nusaybin, less than a mile away on the Turkish side, and the reluctant stationmaster was a Turkish state employee. But the documents relating these events nowhere mention the border, even though they describe two mutually antagonistic groups of Syrians, at least some of them armed, strolling onto Turkish territory for a stand-off that involved one of them—backed by French military force—pressuring a Turkish official. If any of those involved faced any hindrance at the border, or indeed surveillance, it is not mentioned. The border might as well not have existed.¹⁴

At the time of this incident, which occurred sixteen years after the declaration of the Republic of Turkey and the beginning of the French Mandate in Syria, the Turkish and Syrian states were still being formed, and their borders were still in flux. After all, the Sanjak of Alexandretta had only the year before become Hatay State and was about to turn into the Turkish province of Hatay.

Once in place, though, most of these borders became more or less cemented.¹⁵ For instance, and likely as a condition for basing his party in Syria during the 1980s and 1990s, Öcalan, whose PKK is in many ways as much a Syrian party as it is a Turkish one,¹⁶ publicly questioned the indigeneity of Kurds in Syria, suggesting that they really belonged on the other side of the border. While there has been much work—and rightfully so—illustrating how Kurdish politics are transnational, and how Kurdish political movements have traditionally and continuously been cross-border in nature,¹⁷ the regional

environment within which Kurdish politics operates is very much one where borders are important. The national regimes of the states in question have taken advantage of this fact to “play the Kurdish card” against each other.¹⁸ We can see the effects of this cementing even in transnational movements like the PKK organizational constellation. For example, while an earlier version of the Social Contract for Rojava rejects “the understanding of national, religious or militarist statehood,”¹⁹ later versions explicitly state in the preamble, “the Charter recognizes Syria’s territorial integrity.” And according to article 3, “Syria is a free, sovereign and democratic state.”²⁰ In part, this tension between a philosophical rejection of the state in theory and the pressure to accept the state system in practice has resulted in pragmatic but thorny efforts by the Democratic Union Party (Partiya Yekîtiya Demokrat, PYD) to separate itself from the PKK,²¹ leading Aldar Khalil (2017) of the PYD²² The Movement for a Democratic Society (Tevgera Civaka Demokratîk, TEV-DEM) to write in a piece entitled “Syria’s Kurds are not the PKK”:

We don’t deny our relationships with all Kurdish parties in the four parts of Kurdistan (spread across present-day Syria, Turkey, Iran, and Iraq), as we don’t deny our connection to Ocalan. In fact, as I write this, I am proud to say I have a photo of Ocalan on my desk next to me.²³

Aldar’s remarks illustrate, on the one hand, a straightforward reaction to the fact that the PKK is listed as a “Foreign Terrorist Organization” by the United States government as well as the European Union. As such, it would be difficult²⁴ for the U.S. government to openly support the PKK without falling afoul of its own laws on material support for such organizations. Leaving aside such pragmatic concerns, however, the official distinction between the PYD and PKK predates the current conflict in Syria.²⁵ As such, the organizational structure of the PKK’s sister organizations mirrors the state borders of Turkey, Syria, Iran, and Iraq and can be seen as an example of organizational isomorphism in the international system. Taking up Weber’s metaphor of the iron cage, Dimaggio and Powell (1983) have illustrated several processes that push organizations (including states) to homogenize.²⁶

The case of PKK-linked organizations is probably best described by what Dimaggio and Powell (1983) call “coercive isomorphism,” which “results from both formal and informal pressures exerted on organizations by other organizations upon which they are dependent.”²⁷ Or as Bozarslan (2017) puts it, “The division of the Kurds between the states produced distinct political cultures and patterns, specific histories which have been determined by distinct ‘national powers,’ and in some cases also antagonistic strategies.”²⁸ The need for a rear base and relations with regional states are only some of the structural reasons behind the PKK’s need to resemble the state system organizationally

even though its stated goal has been anti-state for over a decade. For instance, in the peace talks with the PKK that began in 2013, the Turkish state's top-down negotiation approach that favored talks with an imprisoned Öcalan to discussions with elected Kurdish leaders also "acknowledged, reproduced and possibly reinforced the movement's hierarchical structure."²⁹ Likewise, the arrangement between Hafiz al-Asad and Abdullah Öcalan during the 1980s and most of the 1990s allowed the latter to mobilize and train Syrian Kurds in Syria and Syria-occupied Lebanon, but on the condition that these forces be mobilized against Ankara and not against Damascus. Likewise, Marcus (2007) describes the PKK's conscription law, passed during its third Congress as "an attempt to mimic the power of the Turkish state, which had its own compulsory conscription."³⁰ As William Reno (2011) points out in the African context, rebel groups and their leaders are in many ways "products of the systems of political authority that they fought."³¹

TOOLS OF STATE-BUILDING: WAR, EDUCATION, AND MAPS

Charles Tilly (1975) famously noted, "war made the state, and the state made war."³² In the case of Rojava, this is at least partially true. In Tilly's bellicist account of European state formation, war and the preparation for war had as unintentional consequences the trappings of proto-state institutions, in particular, taxes conscription and requisitions. In Rojava, however, most of the institutions of statehood were imported from a preexisting Apoist³³ system developed elsewhere. That being said, it is impossible to imagine Rojava coming into existence without the Syrian civil war. Whether or not there was a formal agreement between the PYD and the Ba'ath regime, the withdrawal of the Ba'athist state in its majority along with its coercive apparatuses and the uncontested return of PYD cadres from Iraq made the "Rojava revolution" possible. There was also the existential conflict with Islamic State of Iraq and Syria (ISIS), which led to the party's policy of mandatory conscription.

This military conflict has led to two aspects of state building in Rojava: first, the implantation of military conscription, and second, the canonization of Kobane as a nationalist symbol. There is a well-developed literature on military conscription and nation/state-building, dating as far back as Aristotle (Book VI, chapter 7), who saw a connection between geography, types of military power, social stratification, and type of rule.³⁴ Picking up this line of thinking, Samuel Finer (1975) shows how different patterns of military recruitment can lead to different patterns of state formation.³⁵ Likewise, Eugen Weber (1976) has noted that military conscription is an agent of acculturation that helped turn, in his words "peasants into Frenchmen."³⁶

Military conscription includes ideological training in what we can assume is an attempt to collapse the difference between what James Scott has called “peasants and commissars,”³⁷ in hopes of activating what Finer (1975) calls a “beliefs cycle”: “Beliefs could inspire populations to sacrifices hitherto undreamt of. Hence, it could, and indeed it did become, an object of policy on the part of rulers to substitute beliefs for coercion, and benefits in return for sacrifices, in order to extract the vast resources needed.”³⁸ The PYD has incorporated this strategy into its military conscription, with all recruits (including foreign volunteers³⁹ and non-Kurdish conscripts) attending ideological sessions as part of their military training.

This policy of conscription is taken extremely seriously, even if it is applied unevenly, especially in areas like Tabqa and Manbij where the population is predominantly Arab and where tribal sheikhs still hold considerable influence. In the Jazira Commune, the Legislative Council passed Decree number 11, which not only sets out mandatory conscription for all men aged 18–40 years (women’s service is voluntary), but also sets up a permission system needed for leaving the commune, which is clearly geared toward combating those fleeing conscription.^{40,41} In addition to mandatory conscription, the People’s Defense Forces (Yekîneyên Parastina Gel, YPG) and Women’s Defense Forces (Yekîneyên Parastina Jin, YPJ) have also been accused by the United Nations of recruiting child soldiers, including girls and non-Kurdish children.^{42,43}

Such conscription policies are a classic example of state-building. So too are the new education policies, which have focused on Kurdish language instruction as a bedrock for education. While the Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF) stresses its multilingual nature, with Kurmanci, Arabic, and Assyrian⁴⁴ being prominently displayed in maps and logos, state power has been focused on Kurmanci-language education in an attempt to counteract the Ba’ath regime’s decades of Arabizing education policies, during which Kurdish-language education was banned. Partisans of the new self-governing organization see new Kurdish-language curricula as the result of the Kurdish language being “liberated from the prison of Arabic once and for all.” But as early as 2015, there was pushback against school curricula along both political and ethnic fault lines, with non-PYD aligned parties protesting the emphasis in the curricula of PKK ideology and non-Kurdish groups (Assyrian, Arab, and to a lesser extent Armenian) worrying about the emphasis of Kurdish language instruction at the expense of other languages.⁴⁵ According to Hediya Yûsif, the PYD curriculum has been translated into “Kurdish, Arabic, and Syro-Aramaic,” but “we also have too few qualified academics for instruction in the various local languages.”⁴⁶ The regime in Damascus also reacted negatively, closing down several schools in the al-Hasaka province and forcing local teachers to either leave the school for others not under PYD-control or lose their salaries. According to one source quoted by

a local news outlet, Damascus objected to both the change from Arabic- to Kurdish-language instruction as well as to the inclusion of ideological material supporting the doctrines of Öcalan.⁴⁷ In the summer of 2018, the debate of educational policies came to a head with the Ba'ath regime closing down more schools in areas of Qamishli that it controlled, while the PYD retaliated by closing down Arabic- and Assyrian-language private schools teaching the capital's curriculum.⁴⁸ This was followed by the PYD's security forces taking over the remaining government run health clinics in Hasakah city.⁴⁹

This clash over school curricula underlines the political and ethnic fault lines in areas under the PYD's control while highlighting the struggle between two competing governance projects: Rojava and the Syrian Arab Republic. In many ways, the latter has the upper hand in that, with the exception of the newly formed University of Rojava, it controls all of Syria's institutions of higher education, which all require the officially recognized diplomas, recognition withheld from institutions teaching the PYD curriculum. In any case, the way that conscription and education policies deal with non-Kurdish populations, including Arab settlers and those who fled during battles between ISIS and the SDF, will serve as a bellwether for the nature of the state in formation, and whether this process is an example of a transformation of the Syrian Arab Republic into a federal, civic polity or rather an example of nation-building with the Kurdish ethnos at its center.

Benedict Anderson (2006) lays out three "institutions of power" with which the colonial state—which he sees as the precursor to nationalism in the postcolonial world—"imagined its dominion": census, map, and museum.⁵⁰ I will focus on the map here, but the other two institutions and especially the census, remain helpful for understanding the history and trajectory of Rojava.⁵¹ As the geographer Mark Monmonier (1996) has put it, and I think Anderson would agree, "the haste of new nations to assert their independence cartographically reflects the colonial powers' use of the map as an intellectual tool for legitimizing territorial conquest."⁵²

For this reason, the flag of the SDF is very interesting. In addition to including a trilingual (Arabic, Kurmanci, and Assyrian) labeling of the organization's name in the yellow, green, and red associated with Kurdish politics, a map of Syria figures prominently. The most obvious feature of this map is the Euphrates, which serves as a sort of natural border for the self-declared autonomous region of Rojava, otherwise known as the Democratic Federation of Northern Syria.⁵³ On the one hand, perhaps in an attempt to stave off attempts to paint the PYD's project in Syria as a secessionist one, the entire map of Syria is displayed. In fact, it also includes Alexandretta/Hatay.⁵⁴ That said, it includes decidedly non-Kurdish areas of Syria, including Raqqa and the outskirts of Deir ez-Zor, but does not include Kurdish areas west of the Euphrates, such as Afrin, which has traditionally been considered to be part

of Rojava and was recently taken over by Turkish and allied Syrian opposition forces. In some ways though, the flag seems to mirror the stated policy of the organization's American patrons, who expected the organization to wrest control of territory from the so-called Islamic state but also to stay east of the Euphrates in order to appease Ankara, whose operation to take Jarablus, which is on the west bank of the river, was called Euphrates Shield.

While official maps in use in Rojava by the PYD are difficult to come by, we can see an interesting trend in the expansion of territory through Wikipedia. Since the site logs all changes, we are able to see territorial changes over time. Looking over the Kurdish language entry for *Rojavaya Kurdistanê*,⁵⁵ one sees a dramatic change from three cantons, to a connection of those cantons, to, finally, a much larger polity based on military territorial control.⁵⁶ One striking thing about these maps, besides the rapid territorial expansion, is the respect for national boundaries. So despite the rhetorical rejection of the state system set out under Sykes-Picot by Kurdish political movements of both the Apoist⁵⁷ and Barzani persuasion,⁵⁸ and contrary to the border demolishing state-building project of ISIS, Kurdish state projects have in many ways stopped themselves at the border.

CONCLUSION

The nature of Rojava has changed over time and especially during wartime, and these wartime dynamics illustrate classic strategies of state-building.⁵⁹ This brings us to the thorny question of the future of Rojava, which is uncertain in more ways than one. Most obviously, this political experiment is uncertain in the same way that experiments in rebel governance in places like East Ghouta or East Aleppo were: for if the Asad regime is able to force a return to something resembling the pre-war political situation, in which Damascus enforces centralized control over the periphery, then Rojava will cease to exist altogether. As of this writing, Damascus has called for the return of its sovereignty over every inch of Syria after retaking the suburbs of Damascus as well as the remaining rebel strongholds in the south. Idlib, where armed opposition factions and civilians fearing a return to regime-controlled territory have been relocated, is currently in the crosshairs of the Ba'ath regime and its backers in Moscow. While there have seen some recent moves toward negotiations between Damascus and the PYD, it is far from certain that Damascus could ever accept the PYD's core demands of federalism and limited autonomy, not least because it fears other regions, such as Suwayda, might make similar demands. The unilateral announcement by Donald Trump in December 2018 that the United States would withdraw all American forces from Syria has led to a Turkish announcement that it will invade areas under PYD control,

which has in turn led to a further weakening of the party's negotiating position vis-à-vis Damascus.⁶⁰ The question of military service is also a thorny one, as it is hard to imagine the PYD accepting to disband its military forces.⁶¹ Until recently, the PYD has been in a stronger negotiating position since Rojava is host to American military forces, but given the unpredictability of the Trump administration's foreign policy in general and in Syria, in particular, that advantage cannot be counted on indefinitely. In fact, Donald Trump announced on December 19, 2018, that the so-called Islamic State had been defeated in Syria and that consequently, the United States would bring its troops home "now."^{62,63}

Finally, even if Damascus does not take advantage of the announced American withdrawal and threatened Turkish incursion to reassert its control over Rojava, the rapid expansion of SDF-controlled territory and the demographics of the areas under its control mean that the tension between territorial and ethnic-based understandings of Rojava will become more important over time, especially if Arab tribal forces defect to the regime.⁶⁴ Disputes over school curricula and conscription could signal larger political and ethnic divisions in the future. Such questions over the borders and nature of the state-building project in Rojava bring to light the issue of indigenous second-order minorities, such as Assyrians, Turkman, etc., but also Arab communities that settled the border regions as part of Ba'athist Arabization policies in the 1960s and 1970s. So even in the context of a federal pseudo-state such as exists in the Kurdistan Region of Iraq, the rulers of Rojava will need to decide not only on its borders but also what kind of polity is enclosed within them.

NOTES

1. Officially, the term for the territory under the control of the PYD and its umbrella militia group, the Syrian Democratic forces (SDF) is the Democratic Federation of Northern Syria (*Federaliya Demokratîk a Bakûrê Sûriyê*). According to Hediya Yûsif, a PYD cadre who was the co-chair of the Jazira Canton and of the entire Democratic Federation of North Syria, the name Rojava was dropped from the official territory's name because it "encompassed more than Rojava and that many cultures lived there. Kurds not being the majority" (Ayboga 2017). That said, Rojava remains the term used in common parlance, and for this reason, I use it in this chapter.

2. Abdullah Öcalan, *Democratic Confederalism* (Cologne: International Initiative Edition, 2011): 7–8.

3. Murray Bookchin, *The Next Revolution: Popular Assemblies and the Promise of Direct Democracy* (London: Verso, 2015).

4. Öcalan, *Democratic Confederalism*.

5. Michiel Leezenberg, "The Ambiguities of Democratic Autonomy: The Kurdish Movement in Turkey and Rojava," *Southeast European and Black Sea Studies*, Vol. 16: No. 4 (2016).

6. It should be noted that upon capturing Afrin in March, 2018, Turkish and allied forces proceeded to pull down the statue of Kawa the Blacksmith.

7. Thanks to Hamit Bozarslan for stressing this point.

8. From his poem “Şehnama Şehîdan” in his first collection, *Prîsk û Pêtî*, published in 1945. I would like to thank Perî Othman for her generous help with Kurmanci language translation.

9. For more on Hawar and other Kurdish-language journals in Mandate Syria, see Tejel (2007).

10. Ofra Bengio, “Separated But Connected: The Synergic Effects in the Kurdish Sub-System,” in Gareth Stanfield and Mohammed Shareef, eds. *The Kurdish Question Revisited* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2017): 78–80.

11. These were conducted individually and in focus group settings throughout 2016 and 2017. All in all, I interviewed around fifty people from northern Syria from various walks of life and regions. Around two-thirds were male, and one-third female. The majority of the interviews were conducted in Lebanon, and most interviewees identified as partisans of the PKK or PYD, although some were politically unaffiliated, and others identified with the Future Movement, founded by Mashal Temmo or pro-Barzani parties.

12. Tal Abyad is a predominantly Arab town on the border with Turkey to the east of Kobane.

13. Nubl is a predominantly Shi’a village about halfway between Afrin and Aleppo. It was under siege, along with another neighboring Shi’a village al-Zahraa, by Arab opposition forces until 2016. At one point, the PYD was serving as a mediator between local committees allied with Damascus and Hezbollah and the opposition forces surrounding the villages.

14. Benjamin White, *The Emergence of Minorities in the Middle East: The Politics of Community in French Mandate Syria* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2011): 101–102.

15. The exceptions, of course, being the status of Alexandretta and the occupied Golan. See Jörum 2017 for a discussion of the politics of borders in Syria.

16. In addition to the fact that the party spent nearly two decades based in Syria (and Syria-controlled Lebanon) under Hafiz al-Asad’s patronage, Syrian citizens are said to be overrepresented in the party’s membership. One Syrian commander interviewed by İmset (1993: 179, fn 179) estimated that there were between 8,000 and 10,000 armed supporters inside Syria in the early 1990s.

17. This can be seen in cross-border relations and migrations, as well as trans-boundary party influence. In this vein, there is *Khoybun*, which was founded in Lebanon by Kurdish exiles from Turkey living in French mandate Syria. There is also the example of Radio Yerevan’s Kurdish language programs broadcast into Turkey from Armenia. See also work on *Kurdayetî*, or “Kurdishness,” which is transnational (e.g., Gourlay 2017). Finally, the lives of many Kurdish Syrians have been extremely transnational in practice, including those of Salim Barakat (1980), who describes crossing back and forth between Turkey and Syria as a child, and of Nouredine Zaza (1993), whose memoirs begin in Turkey but take him to Syria, Lebanon, Iraq, and Switzerland through the course of his life. Finally, there is the question of the important Kurdish diaspora which is by definition transnational.

18. Jordi Tejel, *La Question Kurde: Passé et Présent* (Paris: Editions L'Harmattan, 2014).

19. Michael Knapp and Joost Jongerden, "Communal Democracy: The Social Contract and Confederatism in Rojava." *Comparative Islamic Studies*, Vol. 1, No. 1 (2014): 96.

20. It is worth noting that Article 54 stipulates that only Syrian citizens are eligible to be a Canton Governor, which raises the question of the many stateless Syrian Kurds whose citizenship was stripped from them by the Syrian State. For more on the issue of the stateless, see Allsopp (2014).

21. This, of course, also has a lot to do with the United States and Europe listing the PKK as a terrorist organization. For more on the ambiguity of the PKK-PYD relationship, see Kaya and Lowe (2017).

22. Officially, Khalil's position is in TEV-DEM, the umbrella coalition created by the PYD that is ostensibly above the PYD in the organizational hierarchy. Its relationship to the PYD is much like that of the KCK to the PKK.

23. Aldar Khalil, "Syria's Kurds are not the PKK," *Foreign Policy* (2017) May 15. <http://foreignpolicy.com/2017/05/15/syrias-kurds-are-not-the-pkk-erdogan-pyd-ypg/>.

24. It should be noted, however, that such a designation is not always an impediment. See, for instance, the case of the Iranian *Mujahedin-e Khalq* (People's Mujahedin, MEK) which was able to openly hire high-profile American politicians, such as John McCain and Rudolph Giuliani to lobby on their behalf, eventually leading to the delisting of the MEK as a "Foreign Terrorist Organization" in 2012 (US State Department 2012).

25. The formation of satellite organizations of the PKK dates at least as far back as 2002 (Unlu 2002).

26. The pressure of the international system's recognition of de jure state sovereignty is also extremely powerful as Herbst (2000) and Motyl (2001) have pointed out in the cases of states in sub-Saharan Africa and the former Soviet Union, respectively. For critiques of the trope of the artificial nature of Middle Eastern borders, see Pursley (2015) and Neep (2015).

27. Paul DiMaggio and Walter Powell, "The Iron Cage Revisited: Institutional Isomorphism and Collective Rationality in Organizational Fields," *American Sociological Review*, Vol 48, No. 2 (1983): 150.

28. Hamit Bozarslan, "'Being in Time': The Kurdish Movement and Universal Quests," in Gareth Stanfield and Mohammed Shareef, eds. *The Kurdish Question Revisited* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2017): 61–62.

29. Michiel Leezenberg, "The Ambiguities of Democratic Autonomy: The Kurdish Movement in Turkey and Rojava," *Southeast European and Black Sea Studies*, Vol. 16: No. 4 (2016): 680.

30. Aliza Marcus, *Blood and Belief: The PKK and the Kurdish Fight for Independence* (New York: New York University Press, 2007): 117.

31. William Reno, *Warfare in Independent Africa* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2011): 164.

32. Charles Tilly, *The Formation of National States in Western Europe* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1975): 42.

33. This term refers to the system based on the writings of Abdullah Öcalan, who is also known as Apo, which means “uncle” in Kurdish.

34. Aristotle, *Politics*, Translated by Ernest Barker (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1995).

35. Samuel Finer, “State- and Nation-Building in Europe: The Role of the Military,” in Charles Tilly, ed. *The Formation of National States in Western Europe* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1975).

36. Eugen Weber, *Peasants into Frenchmen: The Modernization of Rural France (1870–1914)* (Palo Alto: Stanford University Press, 1976).

37. James Scott, “The Revolution in the Revolution: Peasants and Commissars,” *Theory and Society*, Vol. 7 (1979).

38. Finer, “State- and Nation-Building in Europe,” 96–97.

39. Some foreign fighters from Europe and North America have been drawn to the ideology of the PKK and PYD, while others left the YPG for Assyrian Christian militias in Iraq, such as Dwekh Nawsha, citing ideology as a main reason for leaving (Krohn 2015).

40. Encûmena Zagonsazî, “Marsum raqm 11 li ‘aam 2017: qanun waajib al-dafa’ al-dhati al-mu’adal” [Edict number 11, year 2017: Revised law on the obligation of self-defense]. <https://bit.ly/2miQgWy>.

41. Estimates vary, but there have been a significant number of Syrian Kurds who have left Rojava for the neighboring Kurdistan Region of Iraq.

42. UN, “Children and armed conflict—Report of the Secretary-General.” (A/72/865–S/2018/465), 2018. <https://undocs.org/s/2018/465>.

43. According to this United Nations (UN) (2018: 26) report, out of the 961 verified cases of child recruitment investigators were able to find, 284 were recruited by the so-called Islamic State, 244 by groups affiliated with the Free Syria Army (FSA), and 224 by the YPG and YPJ. Out of the eighty-nine girls verified by UN investigators, seventy-two were recruited by the YPG and YPJ, and out of the children recruited by these organizations, 16 percent were Arab. In July 2019, Mazloun Abdi, Force Commander of the Syrian Democratic Forces, signed a Plan of Action with the UN’s Special Representative of the Secretary-General for Children and Armed Conflict pledging to end and prevent the recruitment and use of child soldiers (UN 2019).

44. The term “Assyrian” is somewhat controversial and perhaps ahistorical, but it is the term most commonly used today in northern Syria and Iraq. For more on the “name debate” concerning the Syriac faith, ancient Assyrians and the neo-Aramaic language, see Butts (2017) and Hanoosh (2016).

45. Yaman Yosif, Mateo Nelson and Moutasem Jamal, “New PYD curricula in northern Syria reveal ideological, linguistic fault lines,” *Syria Direct*, 2015 October 21. <https://syriadirect.org/news/new-pyd-curriculum-in-northern-syria-reveals-ideological-linguistic-fault-lines/>.

46. Thomas Schmidinger, *Rojava: Revolution, War and the Future of Syria’s Kurds* (London: Pluto Press, 2018).

47. Jan Nasro, “Al-nizam al-suri yuqarar iyqaf al-ta’alim fi b’ad mudaras Qamishlo al-Ibtidayi, [The Syrian Regime decides to stop primary education in some cities of Qamishli],” *Ajansa Rojnamevaniya Azad*, 2015, September 23.

48. al-Akhbar, “Azmat ‘al-minahij al-ta’alimiya’ fi al-Hasakah [The ‘Education Curricula’ Crisis in al-Hasakah],” *Al-Akhbar*, 2018, August 29.

49. al-Watan, “Istowlat ‘ala al-marakiz al-sahiya fi al-Hasakah wa ishtarar mahasil al-qutn bi al-as’aar zahida” [“Health centers seized in al-Hasakah and cotton crops sold at low prices”], *al-Watan*, 2018, October 25. <http://alwatan.sy/archives/171504>.

50. Benedict Anderson, *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism* (London: Verso, 2006 [1983]): 163–164.

51. The census of 1962 in al-Hasakah province was especially important. The government that seceded from the union with Abdel Nasser’s Egypt in 1961 and preceded the Ba’athist coup of 1963 carried out this census, which effectively stripped many Syrian Kurds of citizenship, resulting in the crisis of statelessness that still exists to today. Although carried out by different governments, this census is often seen by Syrian Kurds as part of a long policy of Arabization carried out by Nasserites and Ba’athists alike and of which the 1963 report by the intelligence officer Muhammad Talab Hilal (1963) on the Jazira region was but the most virulently anti-Kurdish.

52. Mark Monmonier, *How to Lie with Maps* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1996): 90.

53. Ironically, this official name does not include the word Rojava, since the name is centered on the Syrian polity rather than on Greater Kurdistan. So in Kurmanci, it is *Federaliya Demokratîk a Bakûrê Sûriyê*.

54. This territory is always included in official Syrian government maps, but many logos produced by Arab and Turkmen opposition militias with patronage ties to Ankara do not include it as part of Syria.

55. This is the Kurmanci language page for the Democratic Federation of Northern Syria.

56. While not shown in these maps, before the loss of Afrin, senior officials reportedly planned on asking the United States to support a trade corridor all the way from Kurdish controlled territory to the Mediterranean Sea (Townsend 2017).

57. Salih Muslim, former head of the PYD said at the Flemish Parliament in Brussels in 2014, “Drawing and dying for borders is a European illness from the nineteenth and twentieth centuries” (Jongerden 2017: 246).

58. Öcalan, *Democratic Confederalism*; Ghassan Charbel, “Barzani li ‘al-Hayat’: Kharaa’t Sykes-Picot mustana’ a wa al-hudud al-jadida tursam bi’l-dam” [Barzani to al-Hayat: Sykes-Picot borders are artificial, and the new borders are being drawn in blood,” 2015, February, 6. <http://www.alhayat.com/article/635223/>.

59. In November 2018, the official news agency of Damascus announced that the Syrian Ministry of Foreign Affairs and Expatriates had opened what it called a “consular office” in Hasakah to serve the people of Hasakah, Raqqa, and Deir ez-Zor provinces (SANA 2018). It is notable that this office operates under the auspices of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs and Expatriates rather than the Ministry of the Interior.

60. In December 2018, the YPG General Command announced a withdrawal from Manbij while inviting Syrian government forces to “assert control over” the areas their forces had withdrawn from (YPG 2018).

61. According to Marcus (2007), however, there is some precedent in the 1990s for Damascus allowing Syrian Kurds to be excused from mandatory military service

in order to join the PKK's guerilla forces in Qandil, Iraq. But the relationship between Hafiz al-Asad and Öcalan was very different than that between Bashar al-Asad and the PYD.

62. Donald Trump, "We Have Defeated ISIS in Syria, My Only Reason for Being There During the Trump Presidency," *Twitter*, 2018a, December 18, <https://twitter.com/realDonaldTrump/status/1075397797929775105>; Donald Trump, "After Historic Victories Against ISIS, It's Time to Bring Our Great Young People Home!" *Twitter*, 2018b, December 18. <https://twitter.com/realDonaldTrump/status/1075528854402256896>.

63. After receiving negative reactions to the apparently spontaneous decision to withdraw American forces from Syria, especially given subsequent remarks by Ankara concerning Turkey's plans to "bury" Kurdish forces and take over the fight against ISIS (Cunningham 2018), the Trump administration may be attempting to walk back the decision (Talley 2018), or at least slow it down (Oprysko 2018).

64. Daniel Wilkofski and Khalid Fatah, "Northern Syria's Anti-Islamic State Coalition has an Arab Problem," *War on the Rocks*, 2017, September 18. <https://warontherocks.com/2017/09/northern-syrias-anti-islamic-state-coalition-has-an-arab-problem/>.

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Chapter 5

Non-State Actors and Governance

Kurdish Autonomy in Syria

Massoud Sharifi Dryaz

One year after the beginning and the spread of anti-government protests in Syria, about a thousand fighters with the Kurdistan Workers' Party (*Partiya Karkerên Kurdistanê*, PKK)-affiliated Democratic Union Party (PYD) left their shelters in the Qandil Mountains to settle in the northeastern part of the country. This group soon became the dominant force in the Kurdish areas of Syria. Following the PKK's new ideological and political orientation, the ambition of these fighters, more than a mere military presence, centered on creating a near utopian society in the middle of a region strongly shaken by crises and conflicts. Seven years later, the party's numbers have grown to some 50,000 armed men and women. Since its victory against the Islamic State (IS) in Kobane, it has continued to expand its territory in areas mainly populated by Kurds and in some mixed territories as well, largely to the detriment of Jihadist-Salafist groups.

The case of Syrian Kurdistan provides an interesting example of how a guerrilla organization engages in a variety of governance activities including security, education, health, justice, public service, and para-diplomacy in areas in which state presence and authority have been undermined. Several studies have shown that when states no longer exercise a monopoly on the use of force or become themselves a source for threats and violence, citizens, communities, and non-state actors attempt to ensure the maintenance of basic security and public order. Sometimes, non-state actors have effective control over a territory, engage in the state-building process, and establish a governance structure.¹ Currently, Kurdish organizations in Syria, with the PYD at the forefront, are some of the most organized non-state actors on the Syrian political scene. In the context of the territorial breakup of the central state, the PYD managed to establish its own institutions, military, and security forces in areas abandoned by the Syrian government. Since late 2013, the PYD has

run an interim government in the territories under its control by dividing them into three noncontiguous autonomous regions, with each having public administration services, a police force, and a judicial system.

This chapter aims to explain the nature and evolution of the Kurdish question in Syria and explores the development of Kurdish guerrilla organizations governing a *de facto state-like* entity known as the “Rojava” (West Kurdistan), as the Syrian Kurds call their territories. The chapter is divided into four parts. The first part gives a brief historical overview of the evolution of the Kurdish issue in Syria, from the dissolution of the Ottoman Empire up to the country’s civil war. The second part deals with the transformation of the PYD, the most powerful Kurdish party in Syria, from a rebel group to a central actor for the Kurdish movement in Syria. The theme of ideology and the PYD’s relationship with the PKK is addressed in this part. The third part of the chapter focuses on Rojava’s domestic structure and the security and political measures developed and implemented by the PYD to ensure political and military support for the various groups living in Rojava. The final part addresses the formal policies, alliances, and diplomatic and military relations of the Rojava administration at the international, regional, and national levels.

SYRIAN STATE AND THE KURDS: INVISIBLE PEOPLE

After the collapse of the Ottoman Empire, part of the Kurdish population found itself in Syria, a new country controlled by the French military administration. However, even after the delineation of the border between Turkey and Syria in 1921, the Kurdish question remained far from limited to the newly drawn boundary. Kurdish political life in Syria remained closely connected to the overall position of Kurdistan in other areas, especially Turkey. Indeed, under the French Mandate, the new Kurdish enclaves that were spread across several provinces constituted a geographical, social, and political extension of Iraqi and Turkish Kurdistan. Van Bruinessen notes that “the borders delineating Turkey, Syria and Iraq cut through tribal territories. Many nomadic tribes had summer and winter pastures on opposite sides of these borders.” However, “several Kurdish tribes continued to cross and recross the border with Turkey,”² and Syrian Kurds remained in contact with their relatives on the other side of the border, and they used their trans-border networks for commercial trade and smuggling, an important source of income in underdeveloped regions like Syrian Kurdistan.³ Moreover, many Kurds had been forced to leave their native lands and come to Syria due to Turkish persecution in the 1920s.⁴ The efforts of those Kurds who had fled Turkish Kurdistan and specially the Khoybun League were crucial for the development of cross-border activities in Syria, Lebanon, Turkey, Iraq, Iran,

and Europe.⁵ Borders remained a place of refuge for Kurds until the 1960s when the frontier policies of the Ba'ath Party included the relocation of Kurdish groups by creating an Arab cordon sanitaire along the border with Turkey and Iraq.

Apart from some protests in 1937, Syrian Kurdistan remained relatively calm during the mandatory period.⁶ Most Syrian Kurds' efforts were directed toward Kurdish nationalist mobilization in Turkey. Syria became a land of refuge for Kurdish opponents of the Kemalist regime.⁷ Among these were some dignitaries like Hadjo Agha, chief of the Heverkan and an active participant of the Kurdish network against Mustafa Kamal,⁸ and members of Kurdish intelligentsia such as the founders of Khoybun organization, a transnational Kurdish party founded in 1927 in Lebanon⁹ which was behind a major uprising named the Ararat rebellion.

From the early beginnings of the Syrian state, its French patrons accepted the fragmented nature of the country and created separate political units for political and practical reasons. Consequently, the Kurds living in the multiethnic and multi-confessional structure of the newly formed Syrian state, under the tolerance of the French mandate authorities (1920–1946), were able to create associations and carry out numerous cultural activities.¹⁰ Of the various organizations created to promote Kurdish culture, the most important was Khoybun, which expanded its role and began to engage in an extensive range of cultural activities and exercise decisive influence on Kurdish identity. It was during this period that the bilingual (Kurdish-French) magazines like *Hawar* (The Calling) and *Roja Nû* (The New Day) were published in Syria. Khoybun was dissolved in 1946, the year Syria became politically independent.

At the early stages of independence there were clear tendencies toward centralized military dictatorship rule. From 1948 until 1954, the country witnessed multiple military coups. The second half of the twentieth century was characterized by the consolidation of a nation-state system in Syria, like other countries formerly a part of the Ottoman Empire. Not surprisingly, the history of the state's formation in this country resembles the story of a traditional model of nation-building based on centralization and assimilation policies. In Syria's new national identity, especially after the proclamation of the United Arab Republic between Egypt and Syria, the Kurds, the largest ethnic minority, and a non-Arab one, were perceived as a major threat to the state and the manifestation of their identity was interpreted as a serious attack which would undermine the national unity, territorial integrity, and security of "the Syrian Arab Republic."

In the 1950s, Pan-Arab nationalism inspired by the Egyptian revolution of 1952 seemed to be increasingly attractive to Arab states. The call for national rebirth and Arab unity culminated with the proclamation of the United Arab Republic (UAR) in early 1958.¹¹ Ethnic and religious minorities in Syria

began to face systematic persecution, stigmatization, and marginalization in the economic, social, and political spheres. An outbreak of hostilities between the Iraqi government and the Kurds in September 1960 revitalized suspicions against Kurds and anti-Kurdish propaganda. Nasser's UAR launched a campaign of repression targeting leaders, members, and supporters of the Kurdistan Democratic Party of Syria (KDP-S), founded in 1957. The party then split into several rival groups.¹² In 1962, after an exceptional census conducted in al-Hassake province, 120,000 Kurds were stripped of Syrian citizenship and left stateless.¹³ Once the Ba'ath Party gained control of Syria in 1963, it continued to use Pan-Arab rhetoric and followed the policy of denial and repression of its Kurdish people. The same year, Syria sent troops to Iraqi Kurdistan to join Iraqi troops in suppressing a Kurdish uprising.

Once Hafiz al-Assad took control in November 1970, he continued to implement the Syrian Arab Ba'ath Party policies of forced assimilation and engineered demographic change. Coercive measures, beyond restrictions on the use of the Kurdish language and cultural displays, were deployed by his regime to remove the demographic dominance of the Kurdish population on the northern and northeastern borders. To this end, the Arab Belt policy was implemented in 1973 and a military cordon (fifteen kilometers wide and 375 kilometers long) was created along the Syrian borders with Turkey and Iraq and Syrian Arabs were settled in new villages.¹⁴ However, throughout the late 1970s, al-Assad began to show signs of tolerance toward Kurds when the government felt threatened by the intensification of the Muslim Brotherhood's anti-regime activities.¹⁵

In the 1980s, splinter groups from the KDP-S began to organize a range of cultural activities—folk dancing, concerts, poetic evenings, literary gatherings—and promoted cultural festivals and commemorative ceremonies such as Newroz. In addition, Kurdish materials were developed, published in neighboring countries such as Lebanon and distributed to the population.¹⁶ Nevertheless, the government placed limits on pro-Kurdish activities and the Kurds continued to face oppression and discrimination. The state of emergency imposed in 1963 was still in effect; the number of Kurds stripped of their citizenship increased and the prohibition on the use of the Kurdish language, Kurdish names, and Kurdish cultural centers was maintained.¹⁷ On several occasions, Syrian police severely repressed political and cultural protests. At least twenty Kurds were shot and killed during mass demonstrations in March 1986.¹⁸ Four years later, on March 28, 1990, a rally attended by 300 demonstrators who had been stripped of their citizenship rapidly degenerated and dozens of protesters were detained.¹⁹

One important point to highlight is the Syrian attitude toward the Kurdish movement in other countries. Syrian aspirations of regional hegemony led Damascus to harbor and support various organizations that targeted

neighboring states. Apart from Palestinian and Iraqi organizations which already had their offices in Damascus, some Kurdish parties such as the Patriotic Union of Kurdistan (PUK) officially came to light in Damascus in June 1975.²⁰ Since the 1960s, Iraqi Kurds saw Syrian Kurdistan as a rear base and a corridor ensuring access to the outside world. By supporting and encouraging Kurdish and communist organizations, al-Assad sought to undermine the Iraqi Ba'athist party which had become a potent rival since it took power in July 1968. Furthermore, Turkish-Syrian relations had been marked by several moments of tension for quite some time. Syria had still not accepted the Turkish annexation of Alexandretta in 1939. This dispute, which frequently resurfaced between the two countries,²¹ was accentuated by disagreements over Syria's rights concerning the distribution of water from the Euphrates River.²² Taking advantage of this tension between the two countries, leftist and Kurdish groups opposing Turkish authorities found precarious shelter in Syria following the Turkish military coup of September 1980. The Syrian regime, for its part, used the presence of these organizations in its territory as an instrument of political pressure to acquire regional influence.

Beyond the limitations imposed by the government, the mostly flat region occupied by Syrian Kurdish enclaves precluded the formation of a resistance movement. In addition, territorial and political fragmentation always caused difficulties to the Kurdish movement in Syria. Syrian Kurds were often involved in supplying their compatriots in Iraq and Turkey, though in practice the various and often fragmented Kurdish political parties in Syria have never managed to establish and build a generalized movement capable of expressing political demands by the people of Syrian Kurdistan. The political parties were generally involved in cultural and folk activities. When the situation was more amenable, they sometimes took on the role of informal mediators between the state and Kurdish society. However, the situation began to change at the start of this century.

Several factors combined to give a rebirth to the Kurdish question in Syria. The cross-border involvement of Syrian Kurds through their engagement in other Kurdish organizations, the end of the strategic alliance between the PKK and the Syrian regime in 1998, a new atmosphere emerging after the death of Hafiz al-Assad in 2000, the formation of state-controlled political opposition, and the experience of the Kurdish autonomous zone in Iraq stimulated the emergence of new conflict dynamics between the Kurdish community and Damascus. The great impact of these transformations on the Kurdish question in Syria became even clearer in the following years. Starting in 2001, Kurdish activists, most of them connected to the Yekîti Party, began to organize various peaceful activities and demonstrations to celebrate International Human Rights Day (December 2002), to commemorate the census of 1962 (June 2003), and so on. The culminating point of these activities was the

Kurdish uprising after a football match in March 2004 which led to violent clashes between Kurds and police forces.²³ According to Kurdish leaders, 40 people were killed and 2,000 were arrested.²⁴ The protest was also inspired by the recognition of Kurdish autonomy in Iraq and resulted in an outpouring of sympathy and solidarity from other Kurdish regions.²⁵

FROM REBELLION TO THE REAPPROPRIATION OF STATE POWER

Since the 2004 unrest in Kurdistan, political repression in the name of national security intensified and scores of Kurdish activists and members of political parties were harassed and given heavy prison sentences. Before the onset of the 2011 Syrian uprising, about fifteen Kurdish parties were trying—with varying success—to mobilize the Kurdish people. In general, these parties often became problematic groups that divided rather than united Syrian Kurds. There were disagreements between the most influential political parties about their aims, ideology, and political agenda. As a result of these divergent views, the Kurds had not formulated a coherent and common strategy. Furthermore, the Syrian constitution did not provide a legal framework for political participation capable of channeling Kurdish demands into legal organizations. Consequently, all these organizations were technically considered to be illegal. Apart from certain periods when limited and controlled political activities were permitted, state policy continued to center on coercion, repression, and manipulation. Members of political organizations such as the Yekîfî, the Kurdish Future Movement, the Azadî, the KDP-S, and the PYD were subject to systematic repression, including harassment, imprisonment, and heavy sentences on charges of “rioting,” “membership in an unlicensed organization,” “weakening national sentiment,” or “inciting sectarian conflict.”²⁶ The government often arrested, referred to military courts, and imprisoned activists identified with the PYD organization in particular, likely due to its power to mobilize.

The PYD, which has arguably become the most influential organization in Syrian Kurdish areas—especially after the uprising of 2011—was founded when the PKK was in the process of organizational and ideological restructuring. It is important to point out that the PYD’s ideology, structure, and political agenda remained closely related to the PKK’s. Thus, its dynamics and its overall strategy may be best understood through considering the efforts of the Kurdish movement in Turkey, and particularly the PKK, for over four decades.

Following a military *coup d’état* on September 12, 1980, the Turkish Armed Forces, for the third time, took control of the country under the

excuse of restoring law and order.²⁷ Facing the militarization of Turkey, and to escape arrest and the liquidation of their organization, PKK militants, like many Kurdish and leftist organizations, escaped to Syria and then to Lebanon, where they started to reorganize their activities to continue on the path of armed struggle against the Turkish state.²⁸ Damascus did not prevent these newcomers from settling in the Helwe camp in the Bekaa Valley, a Lebanese territory that was under Syrian military control at the time. The new situation that PKK militants faced played a decisive role in the organization's survival. Four years later, benefiting from military training by Palestinian organizations and logistical and financial aid from the Syrian government,²⁹ PKK militants entered a stage of sustained armed struggle that lasted for more than three decades. Over the 1980s, the PKK began to widen its field of action, created a new army, and expanded its area of influence. It was deployed continuously on the border region between Turkey, Syria, and Iraq, and even in areas close to Iran. During the two decades following the PKK's arrival in Syria and Lebanon, authorities in Damascus tolerated the PKK's training and political activity on one hand, and "restricted the group's freedom of movement"³⁰ and operations on the other hand.

For more than a decade, the PKK sought the decolonization of Kurdistan and the foundation of an independent country which would comprise Kurdish territories colonized by four states. Since the 1990s, PKK leaders repeatedly reformulated the Kurdish question and their ideology has considerably changed. In the context of negotiations with the Turkish government in the early 1990s, there was a radical shift from the idea of independence to the idea of autonomy. If a strong Kurdish state had been indispensable for building a socialist society beforehand, it was now the contention that the creation of a humanist society could be compromised by promoting the idea of the nation-state. In the Fifth Congress, the communist hammer and sickle were removed from the Party's flag.³¹ While Soviet ideology was strongly criticized, the reference to socialism remained the essential point.³² They claimed to put it in a more humanized, more scientific, and always universal framework.

Alerted by the development of a recognized Kurdish authority in northern Iraq in the 1990s, the Syrian and Turkish states began a process of rapprochement with the intent of signing agreements on security issues, including countering Kurdish measures. Following pressure by Turkey and its ultimatum in late 1998, Syria banned PKK political activity and threatened to extradite Abdullah Öcalan, the leader of PKK, to Turkey.³³ A significant shift in the organization's discourse, structure, and even its name took place in the aftermath of Öcalan's arrest. The word imperialism completely disappeared from group's discourse. Cease-fire took the place of armed struggle; defense replaced offense. The organization adopted a new political framework of "Democratic Confederalism" in which the emphasis was placed on reducing

the state's power instead of overthrowing the state.³⁴ Instead of trying to create a Kurdish state, the proposal consists of a new form of self-governance that is organized and controlled by the people. Under the proposal, associations, municipalities, and parallel institutional structures distinct from the State's should facilitate the work of running the alternative society. The end goal of the project is to overcome the disadvantages that are inherent in the nation-state and provide opportunities for various social, religious, and ethnic communities to participate in social life in the form of direct democracy. Öcalan's writings, explanations given by military chiefs, and proposals from political leaders serve as guidelines to lead militants and sympathizers to understanding that it is possible to transform power relations without necessarily reversing the State or redrawing existing borders.

The salient characteristics of the alternative system proposed by Öcalan are "self-organization," "self-governance," and "direct democracy,"³⁵ which appear to be inspired by the contributions of Murray Bookchin, for whom anarchism is the alternative to state and social hierarchy.³⁶ However, the PKK archetype of political power distinguishes itself from anarchism on a vital front. In practice, the PKK does not call for the dissolution of the state or the decline of state sovereignty. Instead, its efforts are directed toward establishing a form of self-governance within the existing state apparatus. Thus, in this formula, the state is simply reduced to its bureaucratic function by setting up a revolutionary project under which the anti-system forces mobilize to reorganize power at different levels—global, regional, national, and local—with the ultimate goal of establishing a new system that Öcalan calls "democratic modernity."³⁷

While this alternative has been interpreted by some as a sign of a PKK renunciation of its separatist demands, for others it has become the manifesto of a new political and social project. Faced with this new PKK strategy, the Turkish State, which felt threatened by the creation of parallel structures, resorted to judicial and police repression.

The PYD was founded on September 20, 2003, with the purpose of coordinating a movement for the Kurds in Syria. Although it was just one organization among others in Syrian Kurdistan at first, it had access to significant material and symbolic resources due to its links to the PKK. Other political parties were suspicious of this group due to the PKK's close relationship with Syrian authorities in the past. They were skeptical about its radical ideas and feared it would redirect Syrian Kurdish mobilization capabilities to other parts of Kurdistan. In the past, Iraqi and Turkish Kurdish parties had considered Syrian Kurdistan as a recruitment and supply reserve and a strategic rear base. In the absence of a strong Kurdish organization in Syria, the Syrian Kurds traditionally had shown sympathy for Barzani's Kurdistan Democratic Party (KDP). With just a few hundred activists in the 1980s, the PKK was

initially seen simply as a small group that evoked only curiosity, empathy, or some limited assistance from Syrian Kurds. However, in the years following the PKK's entry into the region, the Syrian Kurds became one of the group's main sources for recruitment. There are no exact figures for the number of Syrian PKK members, but there are estimates of between 5,000 and 10,000 Syrian Kurds³⁸ who joined the war against the Turkish army.

Shortly after its founding, the PYD opened its first head office in Qamishli. At the same time, it broadened its activities beyond the Middle East and opened offices in Austria, Germany, the Netherlands, and Sweden.³⁹ In Syrian Kurdistan, where more than fourteen Kurdish organizations were active, the PYD progressively increased its activities. Its propaganda activities appeared to upset Syrian authorities, who started to arrest, detain, torture, kidnap, and kill pro-PYD activists beginning in 2004. Systematic persecution of Kurds, killings, and harassment of civilians and PYD sympathizers by the government increased popular support for the organization. As stated above, animosity between local inhabitants and the Syrian government was at its peak in 2004. In an atmosphere of grassroots uprisings, the organization had the opportunity to strengthen its networks among more politicized and radical Kurds. The new recruits who joined the PKK after these events were clearly more anti-Syrian than older members of the guerilla movement.

Some estimates suggest that in 2007, 20 percent of the PKK's troops had Syrian origins.⁴⁰ The same year, Fehman Huseyn (Doctor Bahoz), a Syrian Kurd, was appointed leader of the People's Defense Forces (HPG, the PKK's military wing). Starting in 2007, the PYD began to gain more prominence after organizing an increased number of demonstrations and public protests. For example, they organized street protests in November and December 2007 against Turkish attacks on northern Iraq and in February 2008 to mark the anniversary of the PKK leader's capture. Dozens of leaders and members of the group were incarcerated at each gathering. Over the course of 2009, hundreds of its members were detained and some were sentenced to prison. In 2011, 640 PYD members were held in Syrian jails.⁴¹ According to some sources, they were "usually punished more severely than members of the other parties."⁴²

Like its sister organization, the PYD is characterized by a sophisticated and multilevel structure, ideological motivation, and heterogeneous membership. The party's leaders claim that the PYD is an independent organization which promotes, advocates, and defends Kurdish rights in Syria rather than secession and separatism. Of course, the nature of its connection with the PKK has been a multifaceted, complex, and evolving one, especially after the PYD established a political structure in 2012.⁴³ However, the PYD openly declares that it adopts the ideological framework and symbolic leadership of Öcalan, who is the honorable president of the Kurdistan Communities Union (*Koma*

Civakên Kurdistan, KCK), an umbrella organization for the pro-PKK Kurdish movement including parties (PYD, PÇDK,⁴⁴ PJAK,⁴⁵ and PKK) and civil society organizations in different countries.⁴⁶

CONSTRUCTING NON-STATE GOVERNANCE

Three weeks after the beginning of unrest in Dara'a, antigovernment protests in Syria spread to the Kurdish cities of the northeast. On April 1, 2011, nearly 2,000 demonstrators, coming from the main Kurdish cities of Amoude, Hassake, and Qamishli, took part in a demonstration supporting their Arab compatriots' revolt to reform the Syrian regime. The event, well-attended primarily by young people, was organized by a group of young Kurds who denied involvement by Kurdish political parties.⁴⁷ During the following days there were other protests and hundreds of Kurds demonstrated in Kurdish towns chanting "Not Kurds, not Arabs, the Syrian people are one."⁴⁸ A few days after these events, to placate the Kurds and to prevent them from adding fuel to the uprising, Bashar Al-Assad met with Kurdish tribes and local leaders, released forty-eight Kurdish political prisoners,⁴⁹ and promised to give citizenship to stateless Kurds.⁵⁰ Two weeks later, as a new gesture of goodwill and to create a fresh atmosphere of trust, the Damascus authorities turned a blind eye to the return to Syria of Saleh Muslim, the PYD leader who had fled to the Qandil Mountains after being detained on several occasions. Half of detained PYD were released and the government began to show tolerance toward the opening of a handful of cultural centers and Kurdish schools by the PYD.⁵¹

Kurdish protests reached a peak in October when one of the few Kurdish politicians who supported the Syrian National Council (SNC), Mechaal Tamo, was assassinated.⁵² The Kurdish political parties were unsure and divided over their relationship with the Syrian opposition and a future common strategy for Kurdistan. Due to their tendency to compete with each other and with non-Kurdish opposition groups, Kurdish organizations were unable or unwilling to transform this new wave of politics on Kurdish streets into a united movement. By contrast, two of the main rival political groups were actively involved in open internal conflict and competition, emphasizing their ideological and strategic differences.

On one hand there was the Kurdistan National Council (KNC) formed by a dozen parties under the patronage of Massoud Barzani, the aim of which was to unite a common Syrian Kurdish opposition as well as to enhance his influence over Syrian Kurds. The various factions of this group differed in mobilization capacity, repertoires, and ideology. Its paramilitary forces were trained by the Kurdistan Regional Government (KRG) and they benefited from KDP

political and financial support. The KNC developed close relationships with Ankara and in its early stages achieved wider international legitimacy than PYD. However, the KNC remained a fragmented coalition, restricted in geographic and social scale, and failed to establish a solid grassroots base. On the other hand the PYD boasted stronger popular support, domestic legitimacy, and presence in Kurdish-inhabited areas but lacked comparable levels of international legitimacy and recognition.

Under Barzani's supervision, the two main blocks of Kurdish opponents finally announced an agreement and decided to form a common front called the Supreme Kurdish Committee (SKC) in July 2012. The rapid rise of the IS and its invasion of Kurdish areas in Iraq and Syria enabled a rapprochement between Democratic Society Movement in Western Kurdistan (TEV-DEM) and Kurdish National Council of Syria (KNCS) and mutual understanding by both sides in October 2014.⁵³ The subsequent course of events nonetheless showed that this *modus vivendi* agreement could not be carried out in a context in which the two organizations were competing for the same base of support and local resources. The political domination and military supremacy of the PYD played a crucial role in this context, as it proved reluctant to share power with its rivals.

After the withdrawal of the Syrian regime's security forces in July 2012, the PYD stepped in to replace them. The PYD worked to build a viable Kurdish territory and set the political, financial, and administrative basis necessary for it to survive, protect Kurdish-majority areas, provide essential services, and ensure a new status for the Kurds in a post-war Syria. Syrian flags on public buildings were replaced by those of the PYD. The authority of the PYD replaced that of the regime. In the initial stages, patrol groups, border checkpoints, and committees responsible for managing basic products, fuel, and food supplies were introduced to manage these territories alongside an army of volunteers—men and women alike—trained by the PYD.

It is important to highlight that the PYD's political and military supremacy did not develop naturally, but was created. Its political capacities for mass mobilization and exerting territorial control are influenced by its preexisting coercive, political, and administrative resources. In order to explain the outcomes of PYD governance, it is essential to conceive of this party as an administrative and coercive organization which seeks the legitimization of its rule. In this sense, despite the PYD's rejection of nation-state ideologies, the party seems to aspire to the same kind of power that states enjoy. Currently, the PYD possesses distinctive capacities and is involved in three major functions: administration, security, and legitimization. The first ensures the efficient performance of its project by establishing a set of institutions and agencies, new rules, civil service bureaucracy, elected representatives, and even the founding a new social order. The second is concerned with

maintaining territorial control using coercive institutions such as the police and armed forces. The third involves the legitimization of its political and military domination based on legal, rational, and charismatic authority.⁵⁴

ADMINISTRATION

With the decline of state apparatus, the PYD's militias established themselves as the new administrators. As a part of the idea of democratic autonomy developed by the PKK's leader, the political model of the PYD in Syrian Kurdistan is formed around the idea of establishing a sort of self-administration. The purpose of this project is to transform society. Consequently, it requires a concrete action plan, coordination, and cooperation at different levels as well as a strong mobilization of actors on the ground.

Administering a vast Kurdish area through a guerilla organization would have been much more difficult without community participation. Therefore, the PYD aimed to use the potential of community-based solidarity associations to organize a bottom-up movement within Kurdish society and to contribute to the processes of building autonomy in various areas. Traditional relationships and structures like family, neighborhood, tribe, clan, and village continue to occupy an important and established place in the reorganization of collective life. As such, community is the key element of sociopolitical reorganization initiated by the PYD. It is within communities where the supply of food and energy is managed. In theory, the commissions in each community supervise the administration of justice, the provision of public health, security services, economic activities, production workshops, and agricultural projects. The communities elect their delegates to form the district council. Then, each town council is made up of representatives from the districts, political parties, women, and youth groups.

Currently, PYD administration is governing areas controlled by Kurdish forces. In practice, the self-administered territories of Rojava (Afrîn,⁵⁵ Kobane, and Cizîrê), represent a political entity that acts as a substitute for the central government and is engaged in a variety of governance activities including revenue collection, overall organization and management of education systems, economic activities, security control, and restoring public services. In November 2013, the creation of three autonomous cantons in Rojava was officially declared. Since then, each canton has had its own administrative structure and assembly, various committees for social, economic, cultural, and security affairs, and representatives with the regional executive body. The governance structure in the Autonomous Regions, according to Article 4 of the social contract adopted in January 2014, is composed of a Legislative Assembly, Executive Councils, High Electoral Commission,

Supreme Constitutional Court, and Municipal/Provincial Councils. Article 12 of the contract stipulates that “Autonomous Regions are an integral part of Syria. It is a model for a future decentralized system of federal governance in Syria.”⁵⁶ By announcing “federalism is going to save the unity of a whole Syria”⁵⁷ in March 2016, Kurdish officials declared a federal system,⁵⁸ called “the Democratic Federation of Northern Syria” (DFNS)⁵⁹ in the three Kurdish-controlled autonomous areas. This declaration faced fierce opposition from the Syrian government, Arab-led opposition, Turkey, and the Arab league, which considered the new federal system illegal and saw it as a step toward dismantling Syria.

While the PYD attempts to portray the feasibility of stateless democracy in Rojava, it is often accused of monopolizing power. It is clear that most civil and administrative entities are part of the PYD’s ideological apparatus, which exercises a significant influence—directly or indirectly—on the actions and decisions of civil and public organizations by providing regulations and economic resources. Such involvement will surely play an important role in developing the party’s domination and legitimacy.

SECURITY: JUSTICE, MILITARY, AND POLICE

After exercising control over Kurdish territory in Syria, the PYD has developed effective governance and established its own rules, laws, policies, and institutions. The central tasks of these institutions are to manage the life of the civilian population and to maintain security and protect people. Generally, in the view of PYD activists and leadership, security symbolizes protection from Islamic radicalism, ethnic conflict, state forces, crime, and male violence against women.

Security problems remain primary challenges for the PYD within the areas they control. By seeking to become the region’s core defensive force charged with protecting all constituent communities in northern Syria, the party needs to show that it can guarantee basic security to residents in areas under its control. There are a range of state-like institutions that provide security and justice. First, there are judicial councils that function at various levels (village, town, district, cantonal, and regional levels) which have general responsibility for constructing a new justice system and ensuring that the social contract in Rojava is applied. At the lowest level of this judicial system are people’s courts that provide informal and traditional justice mechanisms such as mediation and reconciliation for resolving civil and minor disputes. People’s courts are made up of professionals as well as individuals without professional legal training.⁶⁰ In addition, women’s commissions are responsible for cases involving violence against women. This judicial system suffers

from several recurrent problems, in particular the lack of independence and effectiveness, and the lack of institutional structures, qualified judicial actors (judges, prosecutors, and lawyers) and resources, which have a serious impact on its impartiality, transparency, and effectiveness.⁶¹

The People's Protection Units (YPG) are the second key institution established by the PYD to provide security in Rojava. According to Article 15 in the Rojava social contract Charter, "the People's Protection Units (YPG) are the sole military force of the three cantons, with the mandate to protect and defend the security of the Autonomous Regions and its peoples, against both internal and external threats. The YPG act in accordance with the recognized inherent right to self-defense." With a troop strength estimated at sixty thousand, the YPG is arguably one of the most organized non-state military forces in Syria. Women comprise forty percent of military members, forming the Women's Protection Units (YPJ).⁶² There is also another armed group, the International Freedom Battalion, estimated at 800 individuals, made up mostly of leftist foreign fighters who fought with or are fighting alongside Kurdish forces. The YPG has also used its resources to establish a network of local militias, enabling civilians to flee to safety and preparing local people to organize counterattacks. It encouraged the development of a self-defense force and established military training camps and centers.

Another important institution for "maintaining law and order" in the civil space is the Kurdish police, *Assayisha Rojava*⁶³ (security of Rojava), which is the official security organization of the autonomous administration in Syrian Kurdistan, formed in December 2012 within the context of the Syrian civil war. As mentioned in Article 15 of the social contract, "the Assayish forces are charged with civil policing functions in the Autonomous Regions."⁶⁴ This security and police force, affiliated with the PYD, has established a special branch dedicated to women called "The Women's Security Forces Center." The purpose of this force is to act on women's issues including gender-based violence, domestic violence, and women's rights in society. The Assayish act in coordination with military forces (YGP and YPJ), but their core activity is ensuring security at checkpoints, preventing and detecting crime, regulating traffic, examining and trying to resolve cases, or sending offenders to people's courts or judicial councils.

Though the PYD claims to be committed to a bottom-up form of social organization, the army and police have maintained a high degree of power in controlled areas. In the context of political instability and violence, the Kurdish military forces occupy a strategic role in the regulation of political, social, and economic life. The militarization of society, coercing civilian involvement, forced taxation and contributions from civilians, the intimidation of political opponents, and an overlap between police and armed forces are inevitable consequences of the PYD's security discourse.⁶⁵

LEGITIMIZATION

From the beginning, in addition to the fact that it uses military force to underpin its system of domination, the PYD has made further attempts to legitimize and legalize the authority of its administration. In other words, it explicitly combines coercion and legitimacy. It should be recalled that, long before the establishment of its military units, the PYD held elections for the future “Council of Western Kurdistan” in October 2011. Composed of 300 representatives, this new institution’s mandate was to politically and economically manage the areas controlled by Kurds. At the same time, it started to organize local elections to set up “citizens committees” in municipalities with a large Kurdish population.⁶⁶ Rojava has since held several local and federal elections. The PYD claims that its political power is recognized by the people and that, as a neutral representative of divergent societal interests, it has the legal right to define the new order and legitimately use force. The PYD alleges that it rules on behalf of “people” who are contributing to the realization of a new revolutionary transformation. However, they continue to face the dilemma of how to reconcile the idea of direct democracy with revolutionary leadership.

The PYD also draws its legitimacy from being an actor that protects the population from internal and external enemies. The core elements of this legitimization process are simple: considering that Syrian Kurds are threatened by the state, Syrian opposition, Turkey, and Jihadists; the PYD recalls it has proved its effectiveness in combating a multitude of enemies. Since it serves its people effectively and is recognized by them; therefore, the only legitimate force that can protect Kurds is the PYD. During a war on various fronts, the party reaffirmed its determination to extend its control beyond Kurdish areas and to legitimize its use of violence. It was not a coincidence that, shortly after the arrival of the PYD, its military and paramilitary forces were suddenly strengthened by the entry of thousands of new recruits who received not only military but also political and ideological training. It is, of course, true that civilian participation was not always voluntary. By implementing compulsory military service, the YPG has resorted to coercive means, and occasionally violence, to recruit soldiers, maintain civilian support, and build its army.⁶⁷ Nonetheless, a sizable part of the Kurdish population still believes in the legitimacy of YPG forces.

Involvement in the processes of symbolic production and identity construction is an essential component of the legitimization strategy used extensively by the PYD. This creative manipulation of symbols and meaning clearly shows the influence of the PKK.⁶⁸ A simple glance at the images and words produced by this organization in media and the public sphere provides examples of the use of various historical, cultural, and political elements such as Newroz, Kawe, Öcalan, martyrs, flags, images of Kurdish repression,

slogans, and the like aimed at raising pro-PYD sympathy and identification. Considerable resources and much work have been invested in developing new codes. Given the ease with which symbols are shared and reproduced, a close relationship has developed between Kurdish culture and this universe of new references over time. Symbols, events, and heroes are introduced and preserved in daily life. News about successful YPG/YPJ operations is circulated on the streets, television, the internet, social media, and so on. In the private and public sphere, Rojava fighters and martyrs are honored and commemorated, becoming the bearers of the nation's truth and seeming to represent a powerful unifying force for many Kurds. Those who speak on behalf of these emblems gain the credibility and legitimacy to shape, preserve, and dominate the movement. Bourdieu has noted that the "symbolic systems" are "tools for imposing or legitimizing domination."⁶⁹ In the case of Syrian Kurdistan, one might hypothesize that it is largely through symbolic development that the PYD has succeeded in being recognized as the main actor for the Kurdish cause in Syria, thus building the legitimacy of its domination.

Experience shows that the democratic claims of armed organizations very often and very easily fail. Legitimized authority strengthens the PYD's domination, which is accompanied by the realization of its particularistic interests. Once established, the new rulers tend to accumulate power and use available material and nonmartial resources to pursue their own interests. Therefore, this monopolistic tendency increasingly displaces the pluralistic tendency of the initial project. Consequently, the established notion of radical democracy is challenged by increasing pressure from the people excluded from the system and a deep rift has grown between pro-PYD and other forces which increasingly creates a legitimization deficit for parts of the population. There have been numerous episodes in which tensions have escalated into violence against rival parties.⁷⁰ Among the most severe were the mass protests in Amoude in June 2013 which questioned the legitimacy of the PYD's authority and resulted in one dead and four injured.⁷¹ Similar events also occurred in March 2017 when tensions increased between KNC and PYD supporters in Qamishli and Amoude.

DIPLOMACY AND WAR IN ROJAVA

The Kurdish question definitely has a robust regional and, more recently, transnational dimension. Pro-Kurdish activities that transcend national borders question the legitimacy of political borders and are considered a threat to the territorial integrity and sovereignty of states in the region; consequently, they are regarded as illegitimate by the current international system. This does not, however, prevent Kurdish organizations from adding a new

dimension to regional politics by being involved in interstate conflicts and acquiring crucial resources and opportunities to ensure their development and survival. This situation becomes more complicated when both “state and non-state actors are fragmented.”⁷² With the involvement of several states and Kurdish organizations with opposing or diverging interests, the Kurdish question has become an increasingly important instrument of foreign policy through which different actors seek to pressure their rivals. As explained earlier, Syria, for a long time, attempted to construct a non-official alliance with the PKK in an attempt to contain Turkey’s ambitions. The alliance offered the PKK a useful opportunity to ensure its continuity and become a key player in the Middle East.

The Syrian crisis has triggered a new alliance system in the region. The alliance of Syria, Russia, Iraq, Hezbollah, and Iran was pitted against the anti-Assad forces—Syrian opposition groups, Turkey, Qatar, Saudi Arabia, and Western countries. The strengthening of anti-Western jihadi groups in Iraq and Syria has added another major element to the mix. In the initial stages, Kurdish groups remained divided on what action to take. The PYD favored a policy of neutrality, or a “third way,” and continued to be suspicious of the SNC, a coalition of predominantly Arab opposition groups, founded in Istanbul, which remained unresponsive to Kurdish demands. Other Kurdish parties rallied under the KNC which, in contrast, wished to use the Syrian crisis as an opportunity to negotiate the future Kurdish status in post-conflict Syria and chose to associate themselves with the Syrian opposition bloc. In September 2011, during a conference at the Swedish parliament building, about 50 Kurdish activists declared that “the removal of Assad and his ruling Ba’ath Party could allow for a new political system that devolves power to the provinces, free of racist and extremist ideology.”⁷³ Some delegates speaking for Syria’s Kurds attended the “National Salvation Congress,” a Syrian opposition meeting held in July 2016 in Istanbul. Due to a lack of a common ground with the fragmented Syrian opposition about the Kurdish place in a post-Assad order, the Kurdish factions withdrew from the meeting.

The PYD’s territorial control of Rojava added a significant new dimension to Kurdish strategies and alliances. It should be noted that in the absence of a well-defined territory in Syrian Kurdistan, the strategy of Kurdish forces “was not the simple fall of the Ba’athist regime but the implementation of its political project that goes through the territorial control of Kurdistan.”⁷⁴ Most criticize the PYD by accusing it of collaborating with the government of Bashar al-Assad. However, it is important to avoid the idea of a PYD-Syrian relationship as either entirely conflictful or entirely cooperative. Rather, it is an arena of both conflict and cooperation in a context marked by constant tensions, conflict, and war. The PYD sought to consolidate its gains by adopting a policy of moderate opposition to the Damascus authorities,

which sometimes translated to compromise and concessions. Some examples include the withdrawal of Syrian troops from Kurdish areas in mid-2012, the YPG decision to let the Syrian regime take over towns south of al-Bab in March 2017,⁷⁵ and the participation of Syrian forces loyal to Bashar al-Assad in resisting Turkey's invasion of Afrin canton in February 2018.⁷⁶ At the same time, there is obviously a certain amount of tension which can quickly lead to violence and open warfare. According to pro-PYD sources, "376 Syrian regime forces soldiers . . . were killed in clashes with YPG" in 2013.⁷⁷ In the following years, several violent clashes were reported between the Syrian regime's army and PYD forces in April 2016,⁷⁸ August 2016,⁷⁹ and September 2018.⁸⁰

As soon as PYD governance began, the new leadership relied substantially on traditional actors such as tribes, clergy, and religious and ethnic minorities to govern civilian populations. Many traditional leaders and actors, out of fear or opportunism, had joined local Kurdish party organizations because they realized that the only way to protect themselves in their areas of influence against the violence perpetrated by opposition groups in Iraq and Syria was to form a strategic alliance with the PYD. Three years later, to build a Kurdish-Arab alliance capable of reversing the advances made by IS, the creation of the "Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF)" was announced by the YPG in October 2015. This new military organization comprises several Syrian rebel groups including the Syrian Military Council, tribal-based Arab groups, and Kurds. In its early stages, the YPG largely dominated the coalition by constituting more than 90 percent of the approximately 25,000 SDF fighters. Two years later, in March 2017, General Stephen J. Townsend, the coalition's military leader, asserted that the YPG represented 40 percent of SDF troops, compared to 60 percent for Arab groups.⁸¹ This coalition has quickly become a first line, indispensable force in the fight against the IS, with Washington's assistance.

The PYD has proven itself an indispensable ally for Western countries since 2014. Two significant events have had an impact on a closer Kurdish relationship with the West. The first was the crucial role played by the YPG and YPJ in rescuing tens of thousands of Yazidis trapped on Mount Sinjar as they tried to escape from the IS onslaught. The second key event was the defense of Kobane which helped give Kurds legitimacy as a reliable partner in the ongoing battle against religious extremism. Kobane, which had become the main point of confrontation between the IS and the international coalition, was liberated after more than four months of fierce fighting at the end of January 2015 by Kurdish forces. During the siege of Kobane, the YPG was aided by 150 Iraqi Kurdish Peshmergas and hundreds of airstrikes by the international coalition. This represented a severe defeat⁸² for the IS and an important symbolic victory for the PYD. Kurdish readiness to deploy their armed forces

in pursuit of Salafist groups led to the formation of military partnerships with the United States and its allies in Syria. To some, the values held by Kobane fighters—such as “secularism,” “democracy,” and “equality between men and women”—embody Western ideals and values,⁸³ while others simply consider the YPG and YPJ as efficient and professional ground forces in the military campaign against the IS.

Subsequently, American ties with the PYD have strengthened—to Turkey’s displeasure. At the same time, Kurdish forces were collaborating with Russians on the ground. PYD delegations have begun meeting with Western officials in Washington and European capitals as well. The copresident of the party, Asya Abdellah, and the commander of the YPJ, Nassrin Abdalla, were received in February 2015 at the *Élysée* Palace by the French President. U.S. State Department spokesman John Kirby publicly declared in February 2016 that the United States did not “recognize the PYD as a terrorist organization.”⁸⁴ The U.S.-led coalition against the IS already counts two thousand soldiers in Syria,⁸⁵ where they are the principal suppliers of training, weapons, and ammunition for the SDF.⁸⁶ This American–Kurdish alignment of interests has not, however, prevented Kurds from seeking support from the Kremlin, who saw a low point in their relationship with Ankara after a Turkish fighter jet downed a Russian bomber in November 2015. A few months later, Russian foreign minister Sergey Lavrov insisted on the important role of the PYD in a political settlement in Syria and called for the inclusion of Kurdish representatives in Syrian Talks.⁸⁷ All these political and military achievements did not appear sufficient to allow Syrian Kurds to be deemed a legitimate partner in peace talks, however. In the end, following pressure by Turkey and similar to previous instances, the PYD has been left out of Geneva III and ensuing negotiations.

In fact, Turkey remains the greatest obstacle to PYD gains and acceptance in the international community. Continued Kurdish dominance in northern Syria and their ongoing influence in the region were a source of concern to the Turkish state, which tried to counter the PYD through political, diplomatic, and military means. Contrary to Turkish expectations, Assad’s regime has remained determined to ensure its survival and Turkey-backed Syrian rebels are becoming increasingly fragmented. In turn, the PYD’s status, due to its military achievements, rose dramatically during these years both internationally and in Kurdistan. The first attempt by Ankara to undermine the PYD’s authority by supporting pro-Barzani parties was unsuccessful. For their part, Syrian Kurds have been aware of the importance of Turkey for their survival and the difficulties it could cause them. In the process of reassuring the Turkish government, following the so-called Turkish-Kurdish peace process, the PYD began to negotiate with Turkey. Salih Muslim met with Turkish officials⁸⁸ and assisted Turkish troops in Syria to relocate the remains of

Suleyman Shah, the grandfather of the Ottoman Empire's founder, Osman I.⁸⁹ But these measures were not enough to reassure Ankara, which was alarmed by the Kurdish advance in Syria, the new self-declared autonomous Rojava, and their positive international image.

In the face of these developments, Turkey's first response was to destabilize Rojava by aiding Jihadist groups⁹⁰ like Jabhat al-Nusra and the IS,⁹¹ and denouncing the legitimacy of the PYD by portraying it as a terrorist organization and equating it with the IS.⁹² Rather than turning against the Rojava authority, Washington continued its partnership with the Kurds, enabling them to regroup for a counteroffensive against the IS. Soon after the YPG and their allies retook Manbij, Turkey initiated the Euphrates Shield Operation⁹³ in August 2016, fearing the Kurds would consolidate their control over the area west of the Euphrates River. Nearly two years later, in March 2018, Turkish armed forces supported by Arab and Turkman militias entered the city of Afrin and have occupied it since.

CONCLUSION: FEASIBILITY AND CHALLENGES

Today, Rojava is a political entity whose leadership has established public institutions and sees its social and political project as an alternative to the current conflict in Syria. As the dominant party, the PYD has managed to maintain effective military capability, provide a certain level of security and basic services to the population living in the territories under its rule, attract the loyalty and participation of the Kurdish population, and construct its domestic legitimacy. Rojava authorities are trying to build their new in a region rocked by a series of internal crises and external intervention. The political situation remains dynamic and unstable; alliances and agreements between various players are made and broken regularly. During this period of extreme political instability, and following their military victories, Kurdish forces are trying to consolidate their conquests. In this process, their anti-system project has guided political and social organization in conquered territories. Attacks by the IS were a shock to the newly established Kurdish administration, and they certainly damaged it, but they failed to destroy it.

Apart from this climate of widespread violence, Syrian Kurds currently face two daunting challenges which must be overcome to achieve their anti-system project. The first comes from their own ruling party. Obviously, though not the only group, the party with the greatest popular support in Rojava is the PYD. Although other Kurdish organizations have never seriously threatened PYD political dominance, they often criticize its authoritarian tendencies and oppressive policies. By taking advantage of the PKK's

symbolic and ideological capability the PYD is staking its claim to be the true standard bearer of Rojava's sociopolitical project. This quasi-utopian intention to radically transform the current order risks being confined to the PYD's desire to preserve its authority and dominance—to the detriment of political pluralism.

The second challenge is the lack of legal recognition and international legitimacy. In most cases, Kurdish national liberation movements have relied on *moral* claims of legitimacy, based on their right to self-determination or state violence. However, Rojava has moved to using the discourse of *practical* legitimacy,⁹⁴ which is based on its ability to survive as well as its success in carrying out combat against jihadist groups. Despite its efforts to prove its readiness to fully cooperate with the international community to restore stability, security, and a democratic system, the PYD has been unable to fully establish Rojava's political legitimacy in the international arena. In fact, as non-state actors, Syrian Kurds continue to be considered a threat to state territorial integrity and a source of regional instability. It would be difficult to imagine Rojava's continuity in the long term without real political pluralism and international legal recognition and acceptance.

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Chapter 6

Continuity and Change in Syrian Kurdistan

The Rojava Revolution and Beyond

Ozum Yesiltas

Until the Qamishli revolt of 2004, the Kurdish question in Syria was overlooked both by the academic and policy communities while attention has been lavished mainly on the Kurds of Turkey and Iraq, and more modestly on the Kurds of Iran. This is often explained by the fact that the Kurds of Syria are less in number than those of Turkey, Iran, and Iraq, and more geographically dispersed, which accounts for their weaker mobilization in challenging the government in demand of their rights.¹ While the Kurdish cause gained greater visibility in Syria following the events of Qamishli, the Kurds saw their first real opportunity for change when Syria joined the wave of uprisings sweeping across the Middle East and North Africa in 2011. For the first time, the Kurdish parties took up arms, albeit not exclusively against the regime, to achieve their political aims. More importantly, in November 2013, the Kurdish parties proclaimed the Transitional Administration of Rojava which created a de facto autonomous region composed of three self-governing cantons in northern Syria.² The Rojava revolution represents a new chapter in the Kurdish struggle for self-determination in that it is built upon institutions of self-government established within a territorially demarcated area protected by organized military forces and foreign alliances.

From the horrors of the Syrian civil war, Rojava and the Islamic State of Iraq and Syria (ISIS) Caliphate emerged as two visions of state-building that are antagonistic to each other. While ISIS is patriarchal, Rojava is feminist; ISIS is based on a fundamentalist interpretation of Islamic law, Rojava is secular; ISIS is sectarian, Rojava aspires to embrace and promote diversity. Although the expansionist aims of ISIS posed a direct challenge to Syrian Kurds' political aspirations, over the course of the war against ISIS, the previously forgotten

Kurds of Syria emerged as attractive local allies for global powers including the United States and partially Russia. These new proxy relationships played a significant role in providing Syrian Kurds with necessary military and financial resources to advance their domestic political agendas.

Geographically, Rojava exists in a hostile neighborhood. In Syria, in stark contrast to Iraq, the U.S. coordination with the Kurds in the fight against ISIS has been greatly complicated by Turkish objections.³ The relations between Ankara and the Democratic Union Party (PYD), which is the dominant Kurdish actor in Syria, has been fraught with tensions since the early days of the uprising. Animosity between the two is rooted in the PYD's ties with the Turkey-based Kurdistan Workers' Party (PKK), a Kurdish militant group that has fought Turkey since the early 1980s and is designated as a terrorist organization by both Turkey and the United States. Tensions between Ankara and the PYD escalated to a military confrontation in the Kurdish enclave of Afrin in January 2018. Proving the fragility of Kurdish gains in Syria, and to the detriment of the Rojava project, the Turkish incursion into Afrin did not meet any tangible resistance from either the United States or Russia, the two super powers that control Syria's airspace.

On the domestic front, mutual distrust between the Kurds and the Arab opposition proved an enduring phenomenon. Although the aftermath of the Qamishli revolt led to a limited Kurd-Arab rapprochement, the fragile *détente* soon fell victim to mutual suspicions due to striking differences between the opinions of Kurds and Arabs regarding issues of political transformation in Syria and the solution to the Kurdish problem. In the wake of the Syrian uprising, despite the common discontent with the regime, Kurds and Arabs remained wary about joining forces as the secular democratic vision of the Kurdish movement continued to clash with the opposition's predominantly Arab nationalist and Islamist ideology.

The purpose of this chapter is to shed light on the dynamics of continuity and change in Syrian Kurdistan in the context of the still-unfolding Syrian crisis. The chapter first provides a brief historical overview of the trajectory of Kurdish nationalism in Syria, then focuses on a number of themes to address continuity and change in Syrian Kurdistan: the social and political transformation transpiring in Rojava, the foreign relations of Syrian Kurdish parties, and the complex trilateral relationship between the Kurds, the Assad regime, and the Arab opposition.

BACKGROUND

The Kurds constitute the largest ethnic minority in Syria, making up almost 10 percent of the population.⁴ Syrian-Arab official discrimination against

the Kurds, which became prominent after Syria gained independence from France in 1946, was the major impetus behind the rise of Kurdish nationalist activity in Syria. The struggle for Syrian independence was primarily fought not in terms of a Syrian nationalist discourse, but as one of Arab nationalism, which established pan-Arabism as the official ideology of the new state.⁵ Anti-Kurdish sentiment increased after the union between Syria and Egypt in 1958. The newly created United Arab Republic (UAR) adopted a fiercely Arab nationalist rhetoric, which intensified anti-Kurdish propaganda and a campaign of arrest and detention against Kurdish political activists. In the provisional constitution drafted after the collapse of the UAR in 1961, Syria was formally described as the “Syrian Arab Republic.” This was followed by an extraordinary census in 1962 in al-Hasaka province, which arbitrarily stripped 120,000–150,000 Kurds of Syrian citizenship, leaving them without basic civil rights.⁶ The census allowed Syrian Kurds to pitch deeply into the discourse of victimhood, which continued to define Kurdish nationalism in Syria over the subsequent decades under the Ba’ath rule.

The Syrian Ba’athists, which came to power in 1963, started a relentless Arabization campaign in Kurdish-inhabited areas of Syria and increased coercion on the cultural, economic, and political life of the Kurds. After Hafiz Al-Assad came to power in 1970, the regime adopted a more pragmatic approach by pursuing a policy of cooptation toward Kurdish groups both within and outside of Syria. In Syria, Kurds were encouraged to participate in the Ba’ath system and offered positions in the military and the parliament on the condition they would not embrace any consciousness regarding Kurdish identity. Outside the borders of Syria, the regime provided Kurdish groups, fighting against the Turkish and Iraqi governments, with relative freedom of action in Syria from the 1970s to the late 1990s, as part of its strategy to displace its Kurdish problem to neighboring countries.

Two conflicting consequences came out of the regime’s cooptation policy. On the one hand, Damascus’ support for the Kurds of Turkey and Iraq was available only on the condition that they would avoid any attempt to mobilize Syrian Kurds against Hafiz Al-Assad’s regime. Thus, the freedom of action that the Turkish and Iraqi Kurds enjoyed in Syria came at the expense of the development of a coherent Syrian Kurdish movement, a position that fit nicely with Assad’s desire to channel Syrian Kurdish nationalist discontent toward Turkey and Iraq. On the other hand, Assad’s policy led to the unintended consequence of strengthened Kurdish identity in Syria. Syrian Kurds pragmatically kept quiet and avoided challenging the regime during the 1980s and the 1990s. Yet, they served heavily in the armed struggles of Turkish and Iraqi Kurds, mainly in Mulla Mustafa Barzani’s insurgency in Iraq in 1961–1975 and in the PKK’s struggle in Turkey from the early 1980s to the present. Joining the better-organized and stronger Kurdish groups of Iraq

and Turkey helped Syrian Kurds remain politically mobilized and maintain a certain level of organizational capacity. This situation laid the foundations for the Kurdish movement in Syria to eventually break away from the game of conformity in the early 2000s and challenge the Arabist ideology of the regime through greater visibility.

Following Hafiz Al-Assad's death and Bashar Al-Assad's takeover in 2000, a period of intense political and intellectual debate, known as "Damascus Spring," started to take place in Syria and raised hopes for a democratic change. This brief political opening contributed to the consolidation of the status of the Kurdish element in the opposition movement as Kurdish parties and activists actively participated in the Damascus Spring and made contacts with the Syrian opposition. Although the democratization drive came to a rapid halt in February 2001, Kurdish political action in Syria in the form of demonstrations and protests increased dramatically in both frequency and scale between 2002 and 2004. The fact that the return of suppression after the Damascus Spring was followed by a constant cycle of Kurdish protests clearly indicated greater visibility and a new level of confidence among the Kurds in Syria.

If the period between 2002 and 2004 demonstrated the Kurdish movement's potential to become a crucial part of Syrian opposition, the Qamishli revolt represented the transformation of this potential into a substantial political force. On March 12, 2004, the protest movement of the previous two years took a different turn after unrest at a soccer match in al-Qamishli resulted in six dead, all Kurds.⁷ The outrage over the death of six Kurds quickly culminated in a series of Kurdish nationalist rallies and demonstrations which represented a genuinely popular expression of discontent and increased confidence in the public expression of Kurdish identity.

On the international front, the Qamishli revolt gave rise to a previously unknown degree of solidarity not only among the Kurds of Syria, but also with the Kurds of Iraq and Turkey. Traditionally, it had been Syrian Kurds who were engaged in the national movements of Kurds in neighboring countries. During March 2004, countless Iraqi and Turkish Kurds in the European diaspora, including Diyarbakir (Turkey), Erbil, Dohuk, and Sulaymaniyah (Iraq), demonstrated to show solidarity with Syrian Kurds.⁸ The events of Qamishli not only reaffirmed Kurdish identity as a transnational phenomenon, but also legitimized the autonomous character of the Kurdish movement in Syria and reinforced the sense of "Syrian Kurdishness."

On the domestic front, the size of the Qamishli revolt forced Arab activists to recognize that the Kurds constitute a political force in Syria that could no longer be ignored. Opposition groups issued a statement of unity and democratic change known as the Damascus Declaration in October 2005, which marked the first official recognition of Kurdish grievances in Syria.

Ironically, however, the growing Arab-Kurdish cooperation crystallized the striking differences between Kurdish and Arab opposition groups' vision of a democratic Syria. Having identified themselves as secularist parties characterized mainly by a tendency toward Marxist and socialist discourse, Kurdish parties in Syria never embraced the Islamic doctrine, which always put them at odds with the Arabist-Islamist movement. Despite their strong distrust of the Ba'ath regime, for the majority of Syrian Kurds, Bashar Al-Assad's secular dictatorship was a more preferable enemy than a regime dominated by the Muslim Brotherhood, the most powerful Sunni-based Islamic opposition group in Syria.

After the events of Qamishli, as Kurdish nationalism proved a potent force in the Syrian political scene; managing the Kurdish question became largely contingent on the capacity of both the regime and the opposition to meet the economic, political, and cultural demands of the Kurds. The complex relationships among the Kurds, the Assad regime, and the Syrian opposition transitioned into a new chapter following the spread of the Arab uprisings to Syria in 2011. The Kurdish movement, once again, emerged as a crucial player whose political leverage became critically important in tipping the scales of the emerging political instability.

THE REVOLUTION IN ROJAVA

As the Syrian civil war entered its ninth year in March 2019, Syrian Kurds have made advances toward achieving their political goals in a manner unimaginable before the uprising: this includes control over large swathes of land in northern and eastern Syria, called Rojava by most of the Kurds; an ongoing military partnership with the United States in the fight against ISIS; and a de facto autonomous status that is subscribed not only by the Kurds, but also by other ethnic and religious minorities in the country.

What is revolutionary about Rojava is that it gave rise to significant changes in the traditional social, political, and institutional order in Syrian Kurdistan with important implications for the entirety of Syria. Politically, since 2012, Kurdish parties have not only controlled parts of northern Syria, but also gradually established a functioning self-governing structure in a territorially demarcated area, which is unprecedented in the history of Syrian Kurdish political organizations. For Syria, the emergence of Rojava as an autonomous entity points to a shift in the location of sovereignty which is no longer concentrated exclusively in Damascus. Institutionally, Rojava is composed of three self-governing cantons: Afrin in the west,⁹ and Jazirah and Kobane in the east. The governance of the cantons is based on a system of direct democracy in which the decision-making is vested in a series

communes, councils, and commissions. The institutional structure in Rojava not only represents a major change in Kurdish political organization beyond conventional parties, but also constitutes an alternative to both the regime's secular authoritarianism and the opposition's sectarian Islamism. Socially, Rojava's aim is a fundamental transformation of social relations and democratization of society, with equality for women and minorities, and a separation of religion and state. The broader implication of this goal is a demand for a reconfiguration of state and state-society relations in Syria, based on a pluralist democracy and recognition of the rights of all ethnic and religious minorities.

Until the 1990s, there was no specific articulation of Kurdish political demands in Syria around the discourse of political decentralization. In the 1950s, the Kurdish Democratic Party of Syria (KDPS), the first popular Syrian Kurdish national party, asked for democracy in Syria and for the Kurds to be recognized as a distinct ethnic group.¹⁰ During the 1970s and the 1980s, Syrian Kurdish ethnic consciousness and militancy was expressed mostly through membership in the Iraqi Kurdish parties and the PKK which diminished the space available for the expression of Kurdish grievances in the Syrian context. Only in the 1990s did Kurdish activism and outspokenness begin to increase and generate a more diverse party landscape that prioritized attaining certain goals within Syria. The Yekiti Party, which was established in 1992, incorporated territorial demands, referencing a "Syrian Kurdistan," into its party program in 1999.¹¹ Likewise, the PYD, which was founded by the sympathizers of the PKK in Syria in 2003, emphasized in its party program the importance of decentralization of power as the guarantee of democracy and peaceful coexistence in Syria. Other influential parties, such as the Azadi and the Future Movement also mentioned "self-administration" in the Kurdish majority areas of Syria as a goal that would allow the Kurds to manage their own legislative, administrative, and judicial matters.¹²

The demise of state authority in Syria in 2011 created an unprecedented opportunity for Syrian Kurds to advance their aspirations for self-rule.¹³ Out of the power vacuum, the PYD, and its military wing, People's Protection Units (YPG), emerged as the most influential Kurdish force in Syrian Kurdistan. In July 2012, following Bashar Al-Assad's decision to loosen his grip on the Kurdish regions to tighten it on Sunni Arab rebels, the PYD effectively took control of several Kurdish cities in northern Syria. This process culminated in the proclamation of the Transitional Administration of Rojava as a self-governing entity in January 2014. The three cantons, Afrin, Jazirah, and Kobane, declared their autonomy and the Charter of the Social Contract was approved as the Constitution of the Rojava. This formalized the relations between the cantons and the people of the autonomous regions based on principles of decentralization and pluralism.¹⁴

In 2015, the YPG victory against the Islamic State in the Kurdish city of Kobane not only consolidated the autonomous status of Rojava, but also marked the beginning of United States-Kurdish military alliance. Driven by the expansion of territories captured from the Islamic State, the Kurds embarked on building a wider and more comprehensive system of governance. On March 17, 2016, the Democratic Federation of Northern Syria-Rojava was declared at a conference in the Syrian city of Rmelan. According to the revised Social Contract of the Federation of Northern Syria, the Federation's system of governance was structured around the doctrine of democratic confederalism. The conceptual framework for democratic confederalism was originally developed by Abdullah Ocalan, the jailed leader of the PKK, in the early 2000s. When ISIS was flushed out of Rojava, concurrent with the collapse of central state authority, relative peace emerged in the area for the first time and provided the Kurds with the opportunity to put Ocalan's ideas into practice.

Democratic confederalism is a system of bottom-up government which seeks to achieve a society that administers itself through small, self-governing, decentralized units.¹⁵ Operating at a municipal level, people manage their own affairs by actively participating in local councils and propose and act upon legislation themselves rather than delegating power to political representatives.¹⁶ Aimed primarily at the empowerment of local communities, this model of direct democracy reorganizes the political and institutional landscape in Syrian Kurdistan based upon a confederation of people's assemblies.

Socially, ethnic and religious plurality and gender equality constitute the two major pillars of the Rojava model. The self-management of society renders the centralized regime and the nation-state superfluous in Rojava, where care is taken to ensure equal representation of all ethnic and religious communities—Christians, Yezidis, Arabs, Turkmens, Chechens, Armenians—in local councils and assemblies. According to the Social Contract, all councils have a 40 percent quota for women, and separate women-only committees deal with matters of particular concern to women such as forced marriages, honor killings, domestic violence, and discrimination.¹⁷ Besides their presence in all parts of decision-making, women also assume a key role in security and military matters. An estimated 35 percent of YPG's forces are women who have been playing an active role in the fight against jihadist groups in Syria including the Islamic State and Jabhat al-Nusra, the Syrian branch of Al-Qaeda.¹⁸ In addition, in 2012, women from the YPG established an all-female brigade, the Women's Protection Units (YPJ), which conducts independent operations.

The Social Contract assigns no leadership role to the Kurds in the administration of Rojava, but instead emphasizes the ethnically and religiously diverse character of society. Kurdish, Arabic, and Syriac are designated as

the three official languages of the cantons. In December 2016, in accordance with the supranational claim of the autonomous areas, the name “Rojava” was dropped from the name of the administration. Despite the political and military dominance of the PYD/YPG, the updated December 2016 Constitution designated the Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF) as its official defense force. The SDF, which was founded in October 2015, is an alliance of predominantly Kurdish, but also Arab, Turkmen, and Assyrian/Syriac militias that allows different ethnic and religious groups living under the Federation’s jurisdiction to form their own defense units. As Kurdish forces expand into Arab provinces, the SDF not only seeks to fulfill Rojava’s promise of diversity, but also reflects pragmatic considerations such as ensuring support from non-Kurdish groups. The SDF is also vital to securing continued military assistance from the United States who needs to ease Turkish objections to direct U.S. military support to the YPG.

Sinam Mohamad who is the representative of the Syrian Democratic Council, the political wing of the SDF, in Washington, DC, explains the evolution of the political and military structure of Rojava as follows:

Northern Syria is diverse, Kurds, Arabs, Muslims, Christians, Sunni, Yezidi. In the beginning, we built Rojava as a Kurdish administration. It was in 2011. We started to organize the youth, women, the protection units. After that, we contacted other groups such as Syriacs, Arabs, and others who were living with us. They realized that we did not want what was happening in other parts of Syria happening in our region. We shared our vision with them and they agreed to that. We established the self-democratic administration in the three cantons, Afrin, Jazirah and Kobane, and then it became a joint administration of the Kurds, Arabs, Syriacs and so on.¹⁹

Bassam Ishak, the president of the Syriac National Council, seconds this vision:

We felt that we needed a different model than what the opposition and the regime presented. I am one of the founders of Syrian National Council and I was living in Istanbul. The problem was with time we discovered that the opposition’s vision of democracy is different than ours. They say democracy but what they mean is closer to a religious state. When we say democracy, we mean a pluralistic, citizenship-based country where Syrians are equal regardless of gender, ethnic, religious, or sectarian background. It is hard to work and cooperate with people who hold different visions. This is where we parted ways. We needed to have a voice for our future.²⁰

Rojava aspires to create an administrative structure that gives women and diverse ethnic and religious elements a participatory role unprecedented in

the Middle East—a role as equals in the management of the society. This does not mean that Rojava has been without criticism. A report released by Amnesty International accused the YPG of using child soldiers and forcibly removing Arab families from towns liberated from ISIS.²¹ However, given the long-standing cultural norms in the region and the fact that it is a conflict zone, it is fair to claim that the Kurds managed to establish a system of governance that is democratic, gender balanced, and ethnically and religiously representative; hence, a strong alternative to the centralized, authoritarian, nation-state model that has long prevailed in Damascus.

FOREIGN RELATIONS OF ROJAVA: CURSE OR OPPORTUNITY?

The Kurds of Syria, as a non-state local force, were not visible to the international community until the Syrian uprising of 2011. The eruption of the civil war provided Syrian Kurds with an opportunity to establish an unprecedented network of novel relations with outside actors. The PYD, as the dominant political organization in Syrian Kurdistan, has enjoyed cross-border ties at the regional level, particularly with the Kurds in Turkey, since its establishment in 2003. Yet foreign ties reaching up to a global level, in which the United States, Russia, and the European Union are involved, are a novelty.²² The PYD's ever evolving foreign relations created an exceptional experience for the Kurds of Syria who, for the first time, managed to secure external support to advance their domestic interests. A combination of several factors, including the PYD's military prowess and organizational capacity as well as the structural changes in Syria's political landscape, account for the Kurds' success in securing assistance from global actors.

State weakness can create political vacuums that attract outsiders.²³ In the case of Syria, the emergent multilateral conflict environment since 2011 gradually eroded the legitimacy of the state and generated structural conditions conducive to the involvement of external actors with conflicting agendas. The war pitted supporters of anti-regime forces—Turkey, the United States, and the Gulf—against pro-Assad forces, Russia and Iran, while non-state actors such as ISIS, Hezbollah, and Jahab Al-Nusra sought to take advantage of the power vacuum to expand their own ideological and sectarian agendas. Although the PYD had had the same military and organizational capacity to project influence in Syrian politics before the civil war, it was only after the rise of ISIS that the international community's view of the PYD changed. Contrary to Russia and Iran, which directly intervened in the conflict on Assad's behalf, the United States opted for getting involved only after the emergence of ISIS threat and only through military partnerships with local

proxies. The U.S. strategy to employ surrogate warfare against ISIS as well as Russia's determination to protect the Assad regime from Sunni Islamist challengers enabled the PYD to position itself as an attractive local proxy ally to these global powers.

Although the changing political circumstances in Syria were in PYD's favor, its ability to establish foreign ties ranging to the global level cannot be explained with structural factors alone. What made the PYD an attractive local force in the eyes of outside players is undeniably linked to the PYD's military and organizational capacity. The PYD had been present and recognized in the region since its establishment in 2003, but the victory against ISIS during the battle over Kobane made the PYD the main focus of global actors in their Syria policy.²⁴ From the perspective of the United States, the YPG's military effectiveness on the ground, coupled with the PYD's secular ideology as a political party, quickly consolidated the Kurds' image as the "secular enemies of the jihadists" in the Middle East. From the Russian point of view, although Russia and the PYD do not share similar political agendas, the PYD effectively fights ISIS as well as other regional Islamist groups such as Ahrar al-Sham and al-Nusra who challenge the regime.

The protracted conflict environment in Syria provided Syrian Kurds with an unexpected appearance on the international scene. However, in the context of the Kurds' long-term political objectives, the new proxy relationships established with the United States and Russia appear both an opportunity and a curse. Syrian Kurds do not have the political or military power to determine the outcome of the conflict or their own future trajectory alone.²⁵ As the PYD avoided any direct confrontation with the regime, the PYD-Russia relationship proved a lucrative cooperation since the beginning of uprising. Moscow's collaboration with the Kurds, however, is driven more by short-term interests such as gaining leverage over Turkey, driving a wedge between North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) allies, Turkey and the United States, and keeping Bashar al-Assad in power than supporting the Kurdish cause in Syria.²⁶ Likewise, the U.S. support for the Kurds in the fight against ISIS increased the international legitimacy of the PYD and empowered the self-governing structures in Kurdish-controlled areas in northern Syria. Nonetheless, the United States-Kurdish partnership remained largely limited to a narrowly defined goal of counter-terrorism that was divorced from any political commitment regarding the status of Rojava as a self-administration project.

As the dust is settling regarding the ISIS threat, it appears that the American and Kurdish visions of a Syria and a Middle East increasingly diverge. Sinam Mohammad summarizes these differences in the following way:

We told our American allies many times that behind each fighter, there is a political demand to change Syria into a pluralistic, gender-equal, democratic

system. One should ask what's the reason for these fighters to make all these sacrifices to defeat terrorism. This is not only about getting money and guns from the U.S. We have a vision for Syria. A democratic Syria with a new constitution to guarantee the rights of all Syrians. Our organized forces are fighting for this vision. This is what the U.S. must recognize.²⁷

Geographically, Rojava is surrounded by hostile states—a regional dynamic that remained unchanged throughout the Syrian civil war. The threat that the regional status quo poses for the survival of Rojava project became evident in January 2018, when the Turkish military launched a ground incursion into the Afrin canton. Given the affiliation between the PKK and the PYD, Ankara justified its cross-border incursion as combat against “Kurdish terror.”²⁸ Since the beginning of the Syrian uprising, Turkey's biggest concern was the expansion of Kurdish forces in northern Syria under the leadership of the PYD. The YPG's military alliance with the United States further exacerbated these concerns.

To the disappointment of the Kurds, the Afrin operation did not create much opposition from the international community, especially from big powers; this is an alarming indicator of the fragility of Kurdish territorial gains in Syria. Tensions between Ankara and the PYD and their potential to derail efforts to combat ISIS have been the concern for Washington. Yet, the United States practiced caution and confined itself to urge Turkey to “limit its military action” in Afrin, while Moscow turned a blind eye to the military offensive and Turkish jets were allowed to use the Afrin airspace controlled jointly by the Assad government and Russia.²⁹ Given the risk of a military standoff with Turkish forces, Washington opted not to alienate its NATO ally over “Afrin,” which was neither in the American-controlled zone nor a U.S. strategic priority in Syria. Russia, on the other hand, has been working closely with the YPG in Afrin to prevent conflicts between different armed groups. However, Moscow was not happy about the United States–YPG alliance and was already accusing the PYD for contributing to growing U.S. presence in Syria. Furthermore, the Turkish operation came at a time when Turkey and Russia, together with Iran, were collaborating closely as the guarantors of Syria peace talks in Astana, Kazakhstan, where Russia was seeking concessions from Turkey on Assad's behalf.

SYRIAN OPPOSITION, THE KURDS, AND THE ASSAD REGIME

The status quo between the Kurds, the regime, and the opposition was first transformed by the events of Qamishli in 2014. The Assad regime recognized

that the Kurdish question in Syria could no longer be managed through the traditional cooptation policy. The Arab opposition, on the other hand, publicly acknowledged the legitimacy of Kurdish grievances, yet continued to maintain its strong opposition to certain “identity” demands of the Kurds. Thus, witnessing many in the opposition reacted to Kurdish demands much like the Assad government, the Kurdish parties opted for establishing themselves as a “third force” which was based on challenging both the regime and the Arab opposition on their exclusionary policies and insistence upon a particularist identity in Syria.

Distrust for both the regime and the opposition continued to define the position of the Kurdish movement throughout the Syrian uprising. The efforts to incorporate the Kurds into a unified opposition quickly failed as the Kurdish parties and Arab opposition groups once again remained at odds over Kurdish demands for recognition as a distinct nation under some form of power-sharing system in post-conflict Syria.³⁰ As Syria’s conflict expanded, skepticism grew among Kurdish parties that the predominantly Arab nationalist and Islamist opposition lacked the inclusive vision necessary to satisfy the various minority groups in Syria. Hence, rather than voicing open support for the opposition’s “anti-regime” rhetoric, the Kurdish response to the uprising was marked more by a determination to spare Kurdish areas violent confrontation by minimizing the risk of clashes with the government forces. This situation was interpreted by the radically anti-regime Sunni Arab opposition as Kurdish reluctance to confront the regime and prompted increasing charges of collusion.

The fact that the party-based Kurdish opposition maintained a low profile throughout the uprising did not derive from a reluctance to support regime change. Rather, it needs to be viewed as a continuation of the Kurdish position to act as a “third force” in the Syrian political scene. Anti-regime sentiment is deeply rooted among Syrian Kurds given the discriminatory policies of Syrian Arab Ba’athism throughout the twentieth century. For the Kurds, however, being at the forefront of the protest movement not only carried the risk of harsh regime repression, but also might have allowed the regime to play up the ethnic divide and rally Arab support against “Kurdish secessionism” just as it had in 2004.

Much like the cooptation strategy of the 1980s and the 1990s, the regime’s response to the Kurds’ “third way” policy was pragmatic. When the uprising broke out in March 2011 the regime, fearful of the Kurds’ ability to gear up the unrest, promptly made political overtures to the Kurds. After half a century of regime indifference, the citizenship issue was suddenly resolved by a presidential decree in April 2011.³¹ Concerned primarily with diverting precious resources to the anti-regime demonstrations taking place in majority-Arab cities, the regime pursued the strategy of maintaining the loyalty

of minority groups and depicting the uprising as an essentially Sunni Arab sectarian revolt.³² Although the growing influence of the PYD weakened the regime's hold in the Kurdish regions of Syria, enhanced PYD control in the north served the regime's purpose of preventing Arab opposition from taking control of border areas and allowed Assad to wage important battles elsewhere in the country. As for the PYD, tacitly agreeing to an entente with Assad allowed the group to focus on ISIS and spared Kurdish areas from direct regime assault as they have built autonomous political and military institutions.

The Assad-PYD arrangement to avoid direct clashes allowed both actors to fight groups that threatened their existence. However, as the war against ISIS has slowed down and the threat from anti-government Arab forces is gradually receding, the Baath-Kurd strife will likely resurface. The SDF wants to preserve its hard-fought autonomy in northeastern Syria, while the regime seeks to reassert centralized control over the entire country.³³ Given the precarious circumstances still dominating Syria, for the time being, neither party is interested in escalating tensions. In July 2018, representatives of the Syrian Democratic Council met with regime officials in Damascus to start negotiations over the status of Rojava. While it is unlikely that Assad will readily agree to a decentralized political system, direct negotiations between Damascus and representatives of Rojava points to Assad's de facto recognition of the Kurds' authority over the autonomous region in the north and the SDF's ability to impose high costs on regimes forces in case of a military confrontation.

CONCLUSION: PROSPECTS FOR ROJAVA

Syria has become an arena where a global power game of chess takes place between the NATO states and their Sunni allies on the one hand, and Russia, Iran and their Shia allies on the other. Since the Qamishli uprising, and specifically throughout the civil war, Syrian Kurds skillfully navigated these sectarian blocs without allowing themselves to be co-opted by any of the warring internal or external actors. Kurdish parties steered clear of aligning themselves either with Arab opposition groups or the regime and focused instead on bolstering the position of the Kurds within the uprising and protecting Kurdish areas from possible Arab–Ba'ath or Kurd–Ba'ath clashes. The U.S.-led coalition's support for the YPG, which began during the siege of Kobane, was a positive development for Rojava—yet once Russia got involved in the Syrian war in late 2015, Kurds, again, followed their third path instead of choosing between the United States or Russia.

While the nonaligned status of Rojava enhanced the Kurdish cause in Syria, the Kurds' "third way" has the potential to complicate the situation in

the autonomous cantons in the near future. Both the United States and Russia worked with the SDF against ISIS, yet they remained silent on the Turkish military incursion into Afrin and did not voice open support to Rojava as a political project. So far, neither the regime nor the opposition has recognized the autonomy of Rojava and the Syrian Democratic Council was not allowed to participate in the peace negotiations either Geneva or Astana because of Turkish opposition. In addition, the political split between the PYD and the less Turkey-hostile, Erbil-based Kurdish National Council (KNC), a coalition of Syrian Kurdish parties founded under the sponsorship of Iraq's Kurdistan Regional Government, has proven difficult to overcome. The proclamation of the three cantons was the work of the PYD alone and was not coordinated with the KNC, and none of the parties in the coalition has so far participated in the Rojava administration.³⁴ The lack of unity among Kurdish parties not only played into the hands of the regime and the Arab opposition, which seek to benefit from Kurdish infighting, but also crippled the political legitimacy of Rojava in the eyes of international actors.

Following the near territorial defeat of ISIS, the SDF must now consider a number of challenges including how to prepare for the eventual withdrawal of U.S. forces, the likely victory of Bashar al-Assad in Syria's civil war and continuing tensions with Turkey.³⁵ As a non-state actor that relies on continuing U.S. security guarantees, and in the face of ISIS' ongoing rural insurgency in northeastern Syria, the SDF is not likely to risk a direct military confrontation with the regime or its allies, Russia and Iran. Likewise, the regime is still busy with recapturing the remaining strongholds of the opposition, and currently cannot risk a direct clash with the SDF due to the continuing U.S. presence in Kurdish-controlled areas. Therefore, at present, both parties have strong incentives to reach a negotiated settlement over the future of Syria. There is also room for the two big powers, the United States and Russia, to play a productive mediating role. Despite their divergent interests in Syria, both Moscow and Washington are invested in preventing the return of ISIS and bringing stability back to Syria. An Assad-Kurd settlement is vital to the achievement of both goals.

Although Assad and Syrian Kurds hold radically different ideas about how post-war Syria should be structured, neither the President Bashar al-Assad nor the regional and international powers can expect to relegate the Kurds to their prewar status. Following seven years of de facto self-rule, Rojava has established itself in ways that are difficult to undo and given the fact that SDF is a competent militia, the regime is aware of the potential costs of coercing the Kurds into accepting the return of centralized rule from Damascus. In addition, the Rojava administration receives support not only from the Kurds, but also from local Arab populations and minorities, which would certainly factor into Assad's decision making throughout negotiations. As Assad

will likely continue his struggle to contain the largely Islamist-led political opposition in post-war Syria, it is possible that the regime could make some concessions in return for gaining support from the Kurds and other minority groups. Kurds are likely to make compromises as well to salvage what they have achieved over the past seven years. Although risks to Kurdish gains remain, a return to the deeply discriminatory regime of the past is unlikely.³⁶ If the regime sees the value of accommodating the democratic demands of the Kurds, including some form of decentralized government, Syria will have a higher chance of progressing towards reestablishing stability and achieving democratization.

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Chapter 7

Evolution of Kurdish-Led Administrations in Northern Syria

Wladimir van Wilgenburg

The Syrian Kurds for the first time in history managed to gain widespread autonomy amidst chaos and the civil war in Syria. They did so following a “third way” policy independent from the Syrian opposition and Damascus. The autonomous administrations were led and formed by the Democratic Union Party (PYD) following the withdrawal of the Syrian army in July 2012. Moreover, the territory that the Kurdish-led forces controlled significantly expanded after they became the main ally for the United States-led anti-Islamic State of Iraq and Syria (ISIS) coalition during the battle for Kobani in 2014–2015 under the Obama administration. The discipline and effectiveness of the Kurdish People’s Protection Units (YPG) made it a major partner for the U.S. military, despite Turkish allegations that the group was linked to the Kurdistan Worker’s Party (PKK). Unlike many Syrian Arab and Turkmen rebel groups, the YPG did not cooperate with ISIS or Al Qaida in Syria.

As a result, Syrian Kurds that were marginalized and ignored for years became one of the major players in the Syrian civil war and now control more than a quarter of Syria’s territory.¹ This includes the majority of Syria’s oil, water, and gas resources. But it should be noted that the system and institutions formed by the PYD evolved gradually due to political developments and territorial expansion. In 2012, the YPG controlled mostly Kurdish-majority areas. However, by 2019, the Kurdish-led Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF) also controlled Arab-majority areas such as the Raqqqa Governorate and large parts of Deir Ezzor. Furthermore, the YPG lost the Afrin region in March 2018 to Turkey after a battle that lasted over two months.² The first draft of this chapter was written before Trump announced on December 19, 2018, his intention to pull U.S. troops out of Syria.³ This decision brings a lot of uncertainty, and it remains to be seen if the withdrawal will really occur or if this autonomous area will survive the Syrian civil war. Notwithstanding

the fluidity of the situation, this chapter aims at explaining and analyzing the steady evolution of the administrations and institutions in northeastern Syria.

An understanding of the evolution of the administrations and institutions of northeastern Syria may help us dispel certain myths about the area. Such myths include the idea that the administration is just a Kurdish administration, similar to the Kurdistan Regional Government (KRG) in Iraq. In addition, the cantons of northern Syria may also offer a model for Syria's future, should the Assad regime come under sufficient pressure to accept something short of total victory. The concluding section of this chapter goes over this possibility in more detail.

THE ROJAVA REVOLUTION AND WEST KURDISTAN

Following the outbreak of the Syrian civil war in 2011, the Syrian army was forced out of most of the Kurdish-majority towns in the north and northeast of Syria. The government's abandonment of majority Kurdish areas occurred around July 2012, which is often called the "Rojava revolution."⁴ In the face of limited clashes, the YPG took over 5 cities, 5 towns, and 100 villages within a year.⁵

The PYD was part of a new umbrella organization, TEV-DEM ("the movement for a democratic society"), formed in 2011. To manage these areas, TEV-DEM reached an agreement with the Kurdish National Council (KNC) in Erbil on June 11, 2012, which was backed and formed with support of the Kurdistan Democratic Party (KDP) leader, Masoud Barzani. According to this Erbil agreement, the KNC- and TEV-DEM-linked People's Council of West Kurdistan (PCWK) would rule over the Kurdish-held territories through the Kurdish Supreme Committee (DKB) and would form an interim administration within four to six months.^{6,7,8}

However, rivalry between the KNC, backed by Barzani, and the PYD, backed by the PKK, continued due to differences over ideology, government models, and power. Since the PYD and YPG dominated the territories on the ground through its security police, the KNC was not able to challenge this without a military force or militia of its own on the ground. There was an attempt to renew this agreement, leading to a new Erbil agreement on December 24, 2013, but this agreement was never implemented.⁹

The tensions were also part of the larger intra-Kurdish rivalry between the PKK and the KDP over leadership of the Kurdish cause. Moreover, the decision of the KNC to join the Turkish-backed Syrian National Council (SNC) in September 2013 increased tension between the PYD and the KNC.¹⁰

In November 2013, the PYD and its allies announced the creation of an interim administration.¹¹ The plan was to divide the Kurdish-held areas into

three cantons (Al Jazeera, Afrin, and Kobani).¹² This led to the end of the joint administration plan between the KNC and the PYD. Moreover, the YPG in 2013 publicly stated that their goal was to take over large parts of northern Syria along the border with Turkey, with an intent to create a contiguous territory and unite all the administrations from Derik to Afrin.¹³

On January 21, 2014, the “Democratic Autonomous Administration” (*al-Idarat al-Dhatiya al-Dimuqratiya*) was formally declared with three autonomous cantons in Afrin, Kobani, and Jazeera.¹⁴ However, after ISIS attacked both the Kurds in Syria and Iraq, there was a new Duhok agreement between the KCN and PYD on October 22, 2014. According to this agreement, a new thirty-member, power-sharing council was to be formed by the KNC and PYD.¹⁵ As with previous two Erbil agreements, it did not materialize due to political and ideological disagreements between the two blocks.¹⁶

While the KNC favored the creation of a Kurdistan region of Syria, similar to the Kurdistan region of Iraq headed by the Kurdistan Region’s president Masoud Barzani, the PYD favored a non-ethnic federal or autonomous entity based on PKK leader Abdullah Ocalan’s ideas of democratic autonomy, anti-capitalism, and commune systems.¹⁷ In addition, with the territory of the YPG slowly expanding, it was becoming more unrealistic to create a strictly Kurdish entity.

FROM THE ROJAVA SYSTEM TO FEDERALISM

A new dynamic was introduced when the United States started to support the YPG after ISIS assaulted the Kurdish canton of Kobani in September 2014, which enabled the YPG to significantly expand areas under PYD and YPG control.¹⁸ Before the Kobani battle, the United States was more supportive of the Arab-led Syrian opposition, which included the KNC. “We have not engaged directly with the PYD for reasons that are well known,” a U.S. State Department official insisted even in October 2014.¹⁹

As a result, the Kobani and Jazeera cantons were linked after the YPG captured Tal Abyad in June 2015.²⁰ In October 2015, the multiethnic SDF force was established with U.S. support and advice as a broader framework to bring together the YPG and allied forces in order to fight ISIS.²¹ This U.S. support helped the SDF to liberate many Arab-majority territories, which led to the need to transform the main fighting force, the Kurdish YPG, into a multi-ethnic force. A few days before this, a U.S. general told the YPG to change its brand.²² “They got to work on their own branding. If they continue to keep linkage to their past product—the PKK linkage, specifically—the relationship is fraught with challenges,” U.S. Army General Raymond Thomas, the head of Special Operations Command, said in July 2017.²³ Moreover, the role of

Kurdish structures, TEV-DEM and PCWK, also diminished with the creation of the multi-ethnic Syrian Democratic Council (SDC) in December 2015 that replaced these structures.²⁴ Although TEV-DEM is still active (unlike the PCWK), the priority now is for the SDC, as shown by the SDC office in Washington. The SDC later played a central role in creating councils for newly liberated areas such as in Manbij, Raqqa, and parts of Deir Ezzor. As a result of this alliance, the SDF and YPG managed to control 30 percent of Syrian territory, making them a very important player in the Syrian political landscape.

In March 2016, the three Kurdish-controlled regions agreed at a conference in Rmeilan in northeast Syria to establish the self-administered “federal democratic system of Rojava—Northern Syria.”²⁵ The plan was to elect a joint leadership and a thirty-one-member organizing committee, which would prepare a “legal and political vision” for the system within six months.²⁶ They appointed Mansour Saloum, an Arab from Tal Abyad, and Hediya Yousef, a Kurd, as co-leaders for this new federal region for northern Syria.²⁷ Moreover, a council was created for the Shahba region in northern Aleppo. In December 2016, they agreed on a new draft constitution and dropped the word “Rojava” from the newly proposed system of federal government, since the plan was to potentially include Raqqa and Deir Ezzor also into the Democratic Federation of Northern Syria (DFNS).²⁸ This new administration was not just planned as a Kurdish entity only but as a multi-ethnic region.

Before the creation of this new administration, the SDF liberated the town of Manbij on August 13, 2016.²⁹ However, this led to a response from Turkey: the Euphrates Shield operation on August 24, with the goal to prevent the Kurds from creating a corridor to the west and east of the Euphrates.³⁰ This was a big setback for the YPG and the SDF since they wanted to create a Shahba administration in northern Aleppo to link the cantons and create a contiguous territory along Turkey’s border.

Despite Turkish objections, the United States continued to cooperate with the SDF. Raqqa was liberated from ISIS with continued U.S. support under the new Trump administration in October 2017 after a battle which lasted several months.³¹ Even before its liberation, the SDC created the Raqqa Civil Council that still runs Raqqa today.³²

In July 2017, the decision was made for elections to take place to determine the leadership of the new system of government in SDF-controlled areas. Accordingly, commune elections were supposed to be held on September 22, 2017, and municipal and Northern Syria Democratic Federation Cantons elections on November 3, 2017. On the other hand, regional and Northern Syria Democratic People’s Congress (i.e., parliament) elections were held on January 19, 2018.³³

Moreover, the administration system was changed. The system was divided into three regions with six cantons³⁴: Afrin in the west, Euphrates in the center, and Jazira in the east. The Afrin region included Afrin canton and Shahba canton (northern Aleppo). The Euphrates region consisted of the Kobane canton, Ain al Issa, and Tal Abyad. The last region, Jazira, included Qamishli and Hasakah. Manbij and Raqqa, although SDF-held areas in Deir Ezzor, were not included in the system. These areas were given the option to join later via popular vote or a decision by their councils (that were created before the SDF liberated these regions from ISIS).³⁵

NEW NORTH AND EAST SYRIA ADMINISTRATION

However, in January 2018, the DFNS decided to indefinitely postpone the third round of elections for technical and administrative reasons.³⁶ This coincided with the launch of a Turkish invasion of Afrin in January 2018. With a green light from Russia, Turkey took over Afrin on March 17 after a battle that lasted more than two months and led to the displacement of over 137,000 civilians to mostly northern Aleppo.³⁷ After numerous Turkish threats to expand the Afrin operation to Manbij, Turkey and the United States reached a deal over Manbij which would include a YPG withdrawal from the city. In a statement by the U.S. president, Donald Trump, in April 2018, he suggested that U.S. forces should pull out of Syria as soon as possible.³⁸ These developments and a threat by Syrian president Bashar al-Assad in June 2018, in which he said Damascus was “opening doors for negotiations” with the SDF but if talks were to fail, he would resort to force to recapture areas where some 2,000 U.S. forces are stationed, pushed the SDC to have talks with Damascus.³⁹ Assad’s threats came after he recaptured most opposition-held areas apart from Idlib.⁴⁰ As a result, there were two attempts at talks in Damascus by the SDC and the Syrian Future Party, a newly created party on March 27.⁴¹ However, talks did not progress much due to the fact that Damascus did not accept any form of autonomy and demanded that the SDF simply surrender to its authority. The SDC expressed a strong willingness to reach a solution within Syria, provided that Damascus recognizes the local autonomous administration in the northeast of Syria.

However, with a new anti-Iran policy, it became clearer that the Trump administration was walking back the notion of an imminent pullout of U.S. forces from Syria, promising to remain until there is an “enduring defeat” of ISIS.⁴² James Jeffrey, a former U.S. ambassador to Turkey, said the United States was “shifting its position” to remain active in the country and push for a complete withdrawal of all Iranian forces from Syrian territory.⁴³ The U.S. Defense Secretary, James Mattis, said they will continue to support

local forces and councils in northern Syria to prevent the return of ISIS.⁴⁴ Moreover, the United States imposed sanctions on Assad's oil traders who have allegedly acted as middlemen between Damascus and the Kurds for oil sales.⁴⁵ Mattis earlier played down odds of a Syria pull out before a peace agreement is reached through United Nations (UN) peace talks in Geneva.⁴⁶ A clash between the regime and Kurdish security forces in Qamishli on September 8, that killed several fighters on both sides, led to further tensions and an eventual halt to the talks.⁴⁷

Furthermore, on September 6, the creation of a new administration system was announced, to be led by Siham Qeyro, a Syrian politician, and Farid Ati, a lawyer from Kobani, based on a decision of the SDC on July 16, 2018.⁴⁸ This administration will replace the federal system and will unite all the administration in the north and east of Syria.⁴⁹ Officials of the administration say the decision was made during a conference of the SDC on June 17. "The SDF created this self-administration because there was the need to unify the several local administrations under one umbrella," said Berivan Khalid, the Kurdish cohead of the new administration.⁵⁰

This new administration will unite all the local councils and the administrations of the Afrin, Jazeera, and Euphrates region including Deir Ezzor and Raqqa.⁵¹ A newly formed, seventy-member General Council for Autonomous Administration of North and East Syria will consist of forty-nine members of the legislative councils in the areas of Autonomous Administration and civil councils, and twenty-one technocrats. "The Autonomous Administration in North and East Syria is a memorandum of understanding between the autonomous and local administrations to develop the service reality and unify all their decisions through a unified council," officials from Manbij said.⁵² Furthermore, the Afrin administration that is displaced to northern Aleppo has been reformed in light of the latest developments.⁵³

The new administration includes the Interior Body, Education Body, Local Administration Body, Economy and Agriculture Body, Finance Body, the Culture and Art Body, Health and Environment Body, Social Affairs and Labor Body, and the Women's Body.⁵⁴ However, on the October 3, there was an announcement that ten commissions and seven offices were being created, which include Foreign Relations, Defense, Advisory Office, Oil and Natural Resources, Media Offices, Religion and Faith Office, and Planning and Development Office.⁵⁵ According to one official, the decision to call them offices was to show that the Kurds are not separatists, but are rather working for the unity of Syria.⁵⁶ He also denied rumors that the administration was formed due to the fact that U.S. officials were unhappy with the earlier federal system. "The idea to forming this hasn't come from another country, but from us. The idea was formed, when tensions and differences started to exist between the different regions. The laws should be unified," he added.⁵⁷ Also,

Abd Hamid al Mabas, the cohead of the administration said the idea came from the SDC and not the United States.⁵⁸

CONCLUDING REMARKS

The future of the autonomous self-administrations in northeastern Syria is still unclear due to the fact the administration there remains unrecognized. Damascus and Turkey still reject the administration and oppose its status. Initially, it seemed there would be a long-term U.S. presence even after ISIS. But this became more uncertain after U.S. president Donald Trump announced a complete troop withdrawal in December 2018, declaring a victory against ISIS. Although under pressure from the U.S. Congress and the Pentagon, president Trump agreed to leave a residual peace force of 200 troops,⁵⁹ the situation remains uncertain.

As of the timing of this writing in September 2019, there are still around 1,000 troops in Syria months after yet another withdrawal announcement (in October of 2019) and it seems U.S. troops will stay.⁶⁰ Moreover, in August, Turkey and the United States reached a deal to establish a joint operations center in Turkey to create a safe zone or security mechanism, after weeks of Turkish threats to invade.⁶¹ The United States and Turkey engaged in joint patrols, air patrols, and the SDF removed fortifications in an area between Tal Abyad and Ras al-Ayn.⁶² Nevertheless, Turkey appeared unwilling to accept this security mechanism. Turkey's president Recep Tayyip Erdogan continued to threaten to invade the northeast of Syria in order to create a Turkish-controlled safe zone and to place between two to three million Syrian refugees in the northeast Syria, changing the ethnic demography.⁶³ This happened earlier when Turkey invaded Afrin and settled thousands of non-Kurds in Afrin from other areas in Syria. Erdogan made good on his threats in early October, forcibly taking control of a stretch of territory between Tal Abyad and Ras al-Ain.

The transformation of the Kurdish "Rojava" administration focused on Kurdish areas to establish a multiethnic self-administration for the north and east of Syria. This reflected local demographic and political realities and could be a model for the future of Syria. Compared to areas under regime, Jihadist, or Turkish control, the SDF-held areas are slowly improving services, governance, and democracy. The Syrian Kurds, who were a repressed minority before 2011, have emerged as a major player in Syrian politics. They control nearly 30 percent of Syrian territories and constitute a key role in the anti-ISIS operations in Syria. Even after the latest Turkish incursion of October 2019, the SDF still holds thousands of foreign ISIS fighters and families, and controls most of Syria's oil, gas, water resources, and dams.

Furthermore, their areas border Iranian-backed militias that the United States and other Western states want out of Syria. As a result, the SDF and its administration have major political cards to play to preserve their future.

Nevertheless, serious risks and uncertainties remain. The SDF-controlled areas lack any official recognition. The United States seems to be primarily focused on a counter-ISIS mission. The SDC has been excluded from peace talks in Geneva and Astana due to Turkish pressure. Despite these uncertainties, the United States is unlikely to leave Syria since they do not want the Syrian regime and Iranian-backed militias to gain more territory. If the United States leaves Syria the West will lose all its cards to pressure the Syrian regime in Damascus into concessions.⁶⁴ In this case, it seems the self-administration project can muddle along for the next several years, similar to what Iraqi Kurdistan did between 1991 and 2003 when the Ba’ath regime withdrew. All in all, the future of the administration remains unclear in the long run with serious challenges ahead.

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Section III

**CONTINUITY AND CHANGE IN
IRAQ-KURDISH RELATIONS**

Chapter 8

The Kurdish Question

An Overview

Peshawa A. Muhammed

The Kurdish struggle for autonomy and independence constitutes the Kurdish question.¹ Despite having a strong sense of “Kurdishness,” the Kurds have not been able to develop a unified nationalist movement or pursue full sovereignty. The Kurds’ failure to achieve independence and their delay in developing a strong nationalist movement was mainly the result of the geopolitics of their particular region, which has been strongly shaped by other powers without consultation with the Kurds themselves. This is in large part due to their lack of organization and internal divisions.² Indeed, different arguments on this issue have been made among Kurdish scholars. The traditional view of the “classic” writers is that the Kurds failed to establish a state of their own because of “intra-Kurdish conflict” and “disunity among the Kurds.”³ Analyzing this issue from different angles, “modern” scholars have provided different explanations. For Muhammad Amin Zaki Bag, “Kurdish immaturity and lack of science and wealth” are the major reasons why the Kurds have been unable to have an independent state.⁴ Aladdin Sujadi and Jamal Nabaz, however, link the issue of Kurdish independence to “Kurdish Muslimness”⁵ and the fact that the Kurds have “no special religion or sect.”⁶ Providing a rather different explanation, Masud Muhammad says that it is the geopolitics of “Kurdistan” that has effectively precluded the formation of an independent Kurdish state, especially the “economic bleeding” caused by the neighboring countries.⁷

As the Kurds inhabit a region that spans not only Iraq but also Turkey, Iran, and Syria, a historical background outlining the evolution of the Kurdish question in these countries and the region’s geopolitical context is necessary to understand the Kurdish issue in Iraq, which is the focus of this chapter.

Given the current status of Iraqi Kurdistan, both politically and economically, the prospect of “Kurdish independence” is more relevant to Iraqi

Kurdistan than the Kurdish parts of other countries.⁸ In addition, efforts of successive Iraqi governments to repress the Kurds and betray promises of Kurdish autonomy have revived Iraqi Kurdish aspirations to achieve a special status, or even some form of independence, within the Iraqi state. While keeping the Kurdish question unsettled, this has exacerbated the existing regional tensions and instability.⁹

PRE-WWI HISTORY: KURDS IN THE OTTOMAN EMPIRE

The Kurdish question can only be understood in its historical context. Recognizing that Kurdish nationalism is “one of the most explosive and critical predicaments in the Middle East,” Hakan Ozoglu defines Kurdish nationalism as “an intellectual and political movement that is based mainly upon two premises: ‘the belief in a consistent Kurdish identity, which is rooted in ancient history; and the conviction of an unalienable right for self-determination in a historic Kurdish homeland or territory.’”¹⁰

Although the history of the Kurds begins with the Arab conquest in the seventh century,¹¹ it is not clear when precisely a distinct Kurdish identity emerged. David McDowall argues that the equilibrium between the battling Ottoman and Safavid empires in the sixteenth century created the conditions for a more stable political structure for Kurdistan.¹² Since that time, Kurds have attempted to preserve their culture, language, and territory despite the efforts of various central governments to prohibit or deny their identity. As the Safavid state was organized around a Shiite identity, the political struggle with the Ottomans took on a sectarian character. When the Kurds consequently fell under Ottoman rule, their primary form of identification was religious in that Sunni Islam occupied the top tier in the hierarchy. As most Kurds are Sunni, they were identified more easily with the Ottoman than Safavid authorities and were more successfully integrated by the former than the latter. This created a situation where religious belief played no role in Kurdish distinctiveness.¹³

Some scholars trace Kurdish nationalism back to the early nineteenth century. According to this view, the Ottoman state’s policies paved the way for the emergence of Kurdish nationalism because the Ottoman intervention in the affairs of the Kurdish principalities affected the Kurdish sense of nationalism, which initially manifested itself in attempts to establish principalities independent of central government.¹⁴ However, apart from the extension of direct Ottoman control, other factors played a significant role in reviving Kurdish nationalism. Kendal contends that using the Kurdish territory as the theatre for the destructive Russo-Turkish and Turko-Persian wars eventually

awakened feelings of exasperation and hostility toward the Ottoman authorities among the Kurdish population.¹⁵

David McDowall believes that the demise of the Kurdish principalities and the emergence of *sheikhs* as new actors in Kurdish politics marked the point when the Kurds began to conceive of belonging to one single nation.¹⁶ In light of this argument, many scholars regard Sheikh Ubeydullah's rebellion in the 1870s, which aimed to establish a state for the Kurds on the territories occupied by the Ottoman and Persian empires, as the first stage of emerging Kurdish nationalism.¹⁷ However, Hakan Ozoglu argues that Sheikh Ubeydullah's rebellion was "more like a trans-tribal revolt" and "it seems very unlikely that the participants in his revolt were motivated by nationalist designs."¹⁸ Moreover, Amir Hassanpour contends that Sheikh Ubeydullah's revolt was not nationalist because, apart from treating the majority population as subjects rather than citizens, it aimed at the formation of a feudal mini-state that did not have any semblance to a modern state with an elected representative government, citizenship, the rule of law, and separation of powers.¹⁹

Another view suggests that Kurdish national identity emerged following the Young Turk Revolution in 1908, in which pan-Turkism replaced pan-Islamism as a unifying concept that gathered all Turkic-speaking peoples into a single political unity.²⁰ This view advocates that the nationalisms of the Muslim minorities inside the Ottoman Empire, including Kurdish nationalism, emerged largely as a response to an increasing prominence of Turkish nationalism and pan-Turkish aspirations in the region.²¹ The Young Turk Revolution heralded numerous important changes for the peoples of the Ottoman Empire, mainly the revival of the Ottoman Constitution, which led to campaigns, elections, and new kinds of politics. Influenced and encouraged by this, leading Kurdish intellectuals and notables established a small number of political clubs and committees in the Empire's capital and provincial centers, which consequently led to the advancement of the new political activity of Kurdish nationalism.²²

Providing a detailed analysis of the emergence of Kurdish nationalism, Janet Klein illustrates that "the Kurdish nationalist movement" has been the product of several different movements, each with a different vision of the political entity that its participants hoped to create or protect through their activities.²³ As far as one line of argument in the relevant literature on the emergence of Kurdish national identity is concerned, leaders of Kurdish nationalist movements obtained their influence and exhibited a sense of national identity at different stages, which led to cycles of regional instability. This suggestion is in opposition to the other line of argument in the literature, which suggests that the Kurds, like Iraq, had no pre-World War I identity. Abbas Vali, for example, maintains that "Kurdish nationalist historical

discourse is a product of modernity, following the emergence of centralised territorial states in Turkey, Iran, and Iraq.”²⁴

Given that different periods in history have contributed to the development of nationalism, Denise Natali’s study on the development of Kurdish national identity is particularly important, as she acknowledges that the factors discussed previously, as well as party politics, have directed developments in Kurdish nationalism since the late 1800s.²⁵ However, some prominent scholars advance a more tenable analysis, placing the emergence of a full-fledged, significant Kurdish nationalist movement soon after World War I.²⁶

THE KURDISH QUESTION IN IRAQ

The Kurds did not become an issue on the international agenda until the Kurdish question emerged following the fall of the Ottoman Empire.²⁷ The geographical rearrangement of the Middle East, which produced the new nations-states of Turkey, Iraq, Syria, and Iran, resulted in the divisions of the Kurdish lands and people among these newly forged states. Although the Kurds have historically enjoyed a considerable degree of semi-autonomy under the various regional powers seeking to exercise territorial control over the lands inhabited by them, the first opportunity for the Kurds to establish their own independent state came with the collapse of the Ottoman Empire at the end of WWI. Woodrow Wilson, in his “Programme for World Peace” (Point 12), recognized the right of the Kurds—among all other non-Turkish minorities of the Ottoman Empire—to self-determination.²⁸ That was followed by the 1920 Sèvres Treaty giving Kurds the right to independence. However, neither Wilson’s pledge nor the treaty was ever implemented because the subsequent War of Independence changed the situation and enabled Mustafa Kemal to impose different terms in the Treaty of Lausanne in 1923, which destroyed Kurdish hopes of achieving independence.²⁹

Subsequently, the Kurdish people—because of their demands for independence or autonomy—suffered from various forms of national oppression that led to the emergence of the Kurdish question in Iraq and in other countries that have a Kurdish population.³⁰ Nawshirwan M. Amin believes that the Kurdish question is an internal problem, not a Western invention, produced as a result of depriving the Kurds of their basic rights to nationhood. Moreover, he thinks that the Kurdish question, as well as their conflicts and uprisings, will continue unless the oppression of the Kurds comes to an end.³¹ The new Turkish, Syrian, Iranian, and Iraqi states all pursued strong centralization policies based on their respective majority national identities to the exclusion and detriment of Kurdish minorities in each state. In this context, David Romano explains that such differential policies eventually led to assimilation

or politicization of Kurdish ethnic identity in these states.³² Romano agrees that this is related to the view that contends “where a state is captured by a particular ethnic community and operates as an agent of that community, the state becomes a party to ethnic conflicts.”³³

Although the Kurds of Iraq have traditionally had a more recognized political status than the Kurds of other neighboring states and have enjoyed a comparatively large amount of cultural freedom, they have been in a constant state of revolt since the inception of Iraq in 1921.³⁴ There are different explanations for this rebellious situation. In terms of population, the Kurds in Iraq have greater weight compared to Kurds in other countries: they represent more than 20 percent of the population. This, according to Omar Sheikhmous, has made the Kurds of Iraq have stronger nationalist sentiments.³⁵ Moreover, as Michael Gunter explains, Iraq, as an artificial state, has less legitimacy as a political entity than Turkey and Iran; these are two states that have existed in one form or another for many centuries. Thus, discontent and rebellion came more easily to the Iraqi Kurds. Gunter also believes that the strong Sunni-Shiite Muslim division, which is less visible in Turkey or Iran, has further divided Iraq.³⁶ In addition, as Benjamin Smith notes, Iraqi governments’ policy was more effective in breaking up Kurdish rural social structures. According to Smith, this policy “unwittingly created the foundation for waves of Kurdish nationalist rebellion in Iraq” by creating large urban Kurdish populations that could be mobilized.³⁷ Apart from this, the presence of certain national rights in Iraq and the discrepancy between rights held in theory and those experienced in reality have also been factors stimulating Kurdish political activism in Iraq.³⁸

The Kurdish issue has constituted a central problem confronting Iraqi governments ever since the state of Iraq was established under the Sykes-Picot Agreement of World War I out of the amalgamation of three former Ottoman provinces: Mosul, Baghdad, and Basra.³⁹ Consequently, the conflicting claims on the territory and resources of Kurdish and other actors have become a major source of conflict and instability in Iraq.⁴⁰ As Saad Jawad argues, the Kurdish problem comprises both internal and external aspects. In the domestic political context, the Kurds have fought for a special status within the Iraqi state on the basis of their ethnic and linguistic differences from the Arab majority. Yet on many occasions that desire has been exploited by external powers for their own interests.⁴¹

When Iraq was detached from the Ottoman Empire, it became a League of Nations mandate under British control. It was the British who initially overlooked the clear territorial and ethnic distinctions that existed in the region by combining the diverse provinces of Mosul, Baghdad, and Basra. Courtney Hunt believes that the British had no understanding of the cultural impact of combining the distinct segments of the “territory” into one country.⁴² When

Iraq was created, an emerging Kurdish nationalism, which was hindered by the British, existed in Kurdistan.⁴³ In fact, Kurdish nationalism in Iraq has developed mainly in response to the building of an Arab-dominated state that would permit only a minimal amount of Kurdish autonomy.⁴⁴

When the promises for Kurdish self-determination and autonomy outlined in the Treaty of Sèvres were abrogated in the Treaty of Lausanne (1923), which was renegotiated with Mustafa Kemal of Turkey, Kurdish hopes of achieving independence were destroyed.⁴⁵ In addition, the British had already decided to attach the largely Kurdish-populated province of Mosul to Iraq. Gareth Stansfield explains the reasons behind this decision, claiming that the scale of the oil reserves situated around the province of Mosul was becoming increasingly apparent and thus it became of significant geopolitical value. In addition to its vast oil resources, Mosul was to be part of Iraq for financial considerations. The British military at that time “remained seriously damaged by the exertions of World War I, and the depleted British treasury was also incapable of funding expensive overseas defensive arrangements.”⁴⁶ The annexation of Mosul to Iraq, Stansfield argues, “effectively removed the possibility of a Kurdish state emerging for nearly the next century.”⁴⁷

Nevertheless, Kurdish aspirations for autonomy remained strong and became a major factor influencing British policy making on the ground. Likewise, the consolidation of Britain’s strategic, economic, and political position to reconstruct a new regional order was bound to affect Kurdistan’s political future.⁴⁸ In particular, as Middle East oil became its major concern, Britain opposed Kurdish independence or autonomy to obtain oil concessions.⁴⁹

A long series of tribal uprisings had taken place in Iraqi Kurdistan from 1919 to the mid-1940s with the aim of achieving greater autonomy. Although the Kurdish leaders’ tendencies were nationalist, their revolts were tribal. Driven by tribal interests, some Kurdish leaders were more interested in gaining the sort of “autonomy” that tribal leaders of the remote areas had enjoyed during the disintegrating period of the Ottoman Empire.⁵⁰ Therefore, some scholars contend that the consolidation of a Kurdish nationalist movement in Iraq occurred from the 1940s onward.⁵¹ In 1946, Mullah Mustafa Barzani formed the Kurdistan Democratic Party (KDP) as “an alliance between the tribal, rural-based Kurds and their urban-dwelling, generally leftist-orientated figures,”⁵² to revive Iraqi Kurdish aspirations for independence. Barzani focused his demands on achieving independence or autonomy for the Kurds. However, following his involvement with the short-lived Kurdish Republic of Mahabad in Iran—to which he had offered his military support—Barzani was forced to flee to the Soviet Union where he spent a decade in exile (1947–1958).⁵³ In Barzani’s absence, the urban leftist “wing” in the KDP dominated the direction of the party. The increasing dominance of the leftists was also helped by socioeconomic developments principally caused by the expansion

of the oil industry in Iraq, which provided the KDP with ample opportunities to recruit among the rising number of urban Kurds.⁵⁴

After Abd al-Karim Qasim seized power and overthrew the Iraqi monarchy in a coup in 1958, Barzani was allowed to return. The key point to note here is that Qasim brought Barzani back to provide him with support against his rivals in Baghdad: mainly the Communist Party and Nasserites. However, as Qasim consolidated his rule and gained control of the political scene in Baghdad, his biggest challenge shifted from these groups to the next strongest rival: Barzani. Consequently, as Qasim attempted to weaken Kurdish influence in Iraq, Barzani refused to heed the government's orders. Moreover, Qasim accused the Kurdish movement of "harboring secessionist designs backed by imperialism."⁵⁵ Kurdish dissatisfaction with Qasim's regime finally came to a head in the September 1961 armed revolt against him. Between 1961 and 1970, the Kurdish situation in Iraq closely followed political developments in Baghdad. During this period, a number of negotiations between the Kurds and successive Iraqi governments failed, and therefore the Kurdish rebellion continued to revive the Kurdish nationalist movement.⁵⁶ This is why some scholars tend to argue that the emergence of Kurdish nationalism as a genuine social movement can be seen from the 1960s onward.⁵⁷

At the height of his power in the early 1970s, Barzani negotiated the March Agreement of 1970, which theoretically provided for Kurdish autonomy under his rule.⁵⁸ The recognition of the existence of the Kurdish nation within Iraq was the most important aspect of the agreement.⁵⁹ However, as Kerim Yildiz contends, the March Agreement of 1970 was little more than a ploy.⁶⁰ Granting the Kurdish region a limited autonomy was a "ruse" to let the Ba'ath regime gain enough strength to impose direct control. Following the Ba'ath takeover in 1968, the Kurds had made a number of attacks on the Iraq Petroleum Company's installations in northern Iraq. By targeting the oilfields, these attacks highlighted the military capability of the Kurds and Iraq's economic vulnerability. Playing for time, the Ba'ath regime wanted to avoid the possibility of further attacks from the Kurds.⁶¹ The peace agreement did not last long due to a failure to reach agreement on the boundaries of the autonomous Kurdish region and the issue of nationalization of the Kirkuk oil fields.⁶²

External factors also contributed to the failure of the agreement and Barzani's defeat in 1975. The Soviet-Iraqi Treaty of Friendship and Cooperation in 1972, signed as a counter-balance to the close Iran-United States relationship that was developing,⁶³ indicated a lessening of previous Soviet support for Barzani.⁶⁴ Barzani's goals were also set back by the abrupt termination of Iranian and U.S. support for the Kurdish rebellion in Iraq in return for Iraqi concessions to settle disputes between Iraq and Iran over certain lands (such as the Shatt al-Arab waterway and the Iranian Arab province of Khuzestan),

an action that Henry Kissinger, former U.S. secretary of state and national security advisor, described as a “covert action” that should not be confused with “missionary work.”⁶⁵

Calling Barzani’s rebellion a nationalist one is debated among scholars.⁶⁶ Emmanuel Sivan argues that Barzani’s revolt, unlike previous revolts, which were primordially tribal, was essentially nationalistic.⁶⁷ Conversely, David McDowall points out that there is little solid evidence that Barzani espoused the Kurdish cause during the course of his revolt. Instead, McDowall believes that Barzani, like any tribal leader, was constantly seeking to widen his regional authority.⁶⁸ Indeed, the Kurdish tribal leaders believed that the Kurdish nation would be best served by their leadership, and therefore they combined their own interests with some form of nationalism. Nevertheless, although Barzani’s ideology was more tribal, he succeeded in planting nationalist sentiment in the hearts of the Kurds, not only in Iraq but also in neighboring countries.⁶⁹

Aiming at “filling the political vacuum of 1975 in Iraqi Kurdistan,” Jalal Talabani formed the Patriotic Union of Kurdistan (PUK) in June 1975.⁷⁰ The formation of this new political party in Iraqi Kurdistan owes its origins to a number of conditions and factors that existed at the time. According to Omar Sheikmous, a founding member of the PUK, the major factor leading to its formation was an emotional reaction to the collapse of the Kurdish national movement in Iraqi Kurdistan and the defeat of the then leadership of the KDP, headed by Mustafa Barzani.⁷¹ There are, of course, other factors that contributed to the formation of the PUK. As the heir of the old KDP politburo that had been engaged in a struggle with Barzani’s tribal and traditional thinking in the earlier years,⁷² the PUK was influenced by the left, modernist stream to take the leadership of the Kurdish movement. Moreover, the PUK received support from the states that were in conflict with Iraq and Iran, such as Syria, Libya, and the Soviet Union, who considered the rapprochement between Iran and Iraq a threat to their interests and influence in the region.⁷³

As a new political party in Iraqi Kurdistan, the PUK provided a sustainable base of recruits, which led to the survival of the Kurdish liberation movement despite numerous attempts by the Iraqi government to destroy it during the 1980s.⁷⁴ In fact, it was the popular feelings of anger, outrage, and animosity toward the United States, Iran, Iraq, and Israel for letting the Kurdish movement collapse that the founders of the PUK capitalized on and utilized for recruitment and mobilization purposes.⁷⁵ Although the formation of the PUK revived Kurdish nationalist aspirations among the Iraqi Kurds, it also deepened existing intra-Kurdish divisions. Talabani’s PUK is considered to be urban-based and leftist as opposed to Barzani-led KDP.⁷⁶ The split is also in line with clan-related and religious divisions, given that Barzani and Talabani belong to different Islamic Sufi orders (*tariqas*): Barzani to the *Qadiri* and Talabani to the *Naqshbandi*.⁷⁷

Intra-ethnic conflicts and lack of unity have always hampered secessionist movements (e.g., in Cyprus, India, and Pakistan). In the Kurdish case in Iraq, however, the impact has been more challenging, and it has had divisive effects and hindered the development of strong national loyalties instead of helping to nurture regional and tribal loyalties.⁷⁸ As noted by Michael Gunter, the Iraqi Kurds suffered from tribal, geographical, political, linguistic, and ideological divisions that led to a stunted sense of nationalism compared to their more powerful surrounding enemies.⁷⁹ Given the scope of this study, however, the term “intra-Kurdish conflict” refers mainly to the political cleavages within the Kurdish political community in Iraq that have led to a number of conflicts over the years.

One of the most important factors that has given rise to intra-Kurdish conflict is the lack of both democratic and pluralist political culture within the parties and movements that exist in Iraqi Kurdistan. The character of the Kurdish political groups that were modeled on non-democratic nationalist, socialist, and communist parties in the Middle East resulted in the use of violence to gain and maintain power. It is this tendency that has consequently led to extreme drives toward the monopolization of power and to immense hindrances of tolerance of and acceptance of the other parties.⁸⁰ Turkey, Iran, Iraq, and Syria have also played a very important role in provoking and giving cause to intensified intra-Kurdish conflict in Iraqi Kurdistan by supporting one of the parties in the competition for power and resources, by inciting incidents of disagreement and war, and by luring one of the parties with false promises and temptations.⁸¹

Explaining the impact of the intra-Kurdish conflict on Kurdish independence, David Romano argues that the internecine conflicts in Iraqi Kurdistan have undermined efforts to achieve independence or autonomy. According to Romano, this has consequently created a situation where the Kurdish independence movement has been framed as premodern, divided and tribal, and hence incapable of representing Iraqi Kurdistan in any institutionally enshrined autonomy or political self-determination.⁸² As former U.S. secretary of state Henry Kissinger concluded, the Iraqi Kurds must deal with “forbidding geography, ambivalent motives on the part of neighbouring countries, and incompatible motivations within the Kurdish community itself.”⁸³ Indeed, the deep internal rivalries between the various Kurdish factions became major obstacles to a permanent solution of the Kurdish dilemma in Iraq.

In the wake of Saddam Husayn’s defeat in the Gulf War of 1991, the Kurds rose up against the Ba’ath regime. The Kurdish uprising subsequently led to the emergence of a *de facto* Kurdish state in northern Iraq.⁸⁴ This *de facto* state was considered a threat to the regional state system, and therefore it did not gain any legal recognition within Iraq or internationally.⁸⁵ The events of

1991 nonetheless changed Iraqi Kurdish opportunity structures remarkably.⁸⁶ Indeed, more than anything else, the Iraqi Kurds benefited greatly from the rising international attention and awareness of the Kurds in the aftermath of the Gulf War in 1991.⁸⁷

Enjoying a level of international support, the Kurds of Iraq moved a step closer to statehood when they held their first parliamentary election in 1992. In the mid-1990s, however, this experiment collapsed due to intra-Kurdish conflict that lasted until 1998 after the United States brokered a ceasefire—known as the Washington Agreement—between the KDP and the PUK.⁸⁸ Although it failed to stop the rivalry between the KDP and the PUK, the result of the Washington Agreement was “preservation of geographical areas of influence and security.”⁸⁹ Thus, the Kurdistan Region was divided into two administrations along the existing lines of areas already controlled by each party.

The Kurdish situation has witnessed a drastic change following the U.S. invasion of Iraq in 2003, which paved the way for a Kurdish federal state to be legally recognized within Iraq’s permanent constitution.⁹⁰ This forced the KDP and the PUK to end their division, and they signed the Kurdistan Regional Government Unification Agreement on January 21, 2006, which outlined how the two parties would share power in one government: the Kurdistan Regional Government (KRG).⁹¹

Describing the travails of the Iraqi Kurds, the above review of the historical and political development of Iraqi Kurdistan reveals that the present situation of Iraqi Kurds is a product of their struggle for self-rule; this stands out as the “most significant modern Kurdish nationalist achievement.”⁹² After decades of oppression, the Kurdistan Region is now recognized by Iraq’s constitution and the KRG as the official ruling body of the region and exercises executive power according to the Kurdistan Region’s laws, as enacted by the Kurdistan Parliament.⁹³ Although the Iraqi Kurds currently enjoy the country’s highest living standards and have more control over their region than they used to, the territorial disputes between Arabs and Kurds have the potential to pose a serious risk of violence and instability. This illustrates that the Kurdish question is still unresolved and the Kurdish ambition for obtaining a fully independent sovereign state remains alive.⁹⁴

CONCLUSION

After reviewing the historical evolution of the Kurdish issue, it can be concluded that external aspects have played a major role in developing/weakening the Kurdish nationalist aspirations. On many occasions the Kurdish desire for independence has been exploited by foreign powers for their own

interests.⁹⁵ As argued by Robert Olson, the Kurds have fallen victim to the great powers, who think that it is in their interests to cooperate with the new and increasingly strong states of the region and thus to acquiesce to the suppression of the Kurdish nationalist movements.⁹⁶ Therefore, when analyzing the impact of external factors on the current status of Iraqi Kurdistan and its future, one is reminded of Thucydides' observation, made more than 2,400 years ago: "The powerful exact what they can and the weak grant what they must."⁹⁷

Regarding the internal factors, intra-Kurdish rivalries "have hindered Kurdish political development"⁹⁸ and have had a negative impact on the development of a Kurdish sense of national unity.⁹⁹ The lack of ability to develop a unitary vision among the Kurds has been one of the major reasons behind the failure to establish an independent Kurdish state.¹⁰⁰ As David McDowall asserts, there have been grounds for doubting "the Kurds' capability of independence," because of serious internal weaknesses within Kurdish society.¹⁰¹ Apart from the fact that the Kurdish struggle for self-rule has been hampered by the bitter rivalry between competing nationalist groups, some of which have been used as pawns by the outside powers,¹⁰² the weaknesses in the Kurds' presentation of their claims have also played a part in this.

As examined above, the Kurdish issue in Iraq has been a source of instability. In particular, as some scholars believe, Kurdish possession of natural resources is the main reason why the issue may become even more important in the future.¹⁰³ The dilemma the Kurds face has thus placed them high on the agenda of not only Iraqi politics but also that of the Middle East. This is why they can no longer be ignored.¹⁰⁴ In addition to this, and more importantly, the political momentum of the Kurdish movement has the potential to bring back post-Cold War issues. This might mean that the challenges associated with breakaway ethnic movements, the treatment of minorities, federalism and possibly the creation of new states, will be brought to the forefront of Middle East concerns.¹⁰⁵

NOTES

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22. Klein (2007), *op. cit.*, p. 138.

23. *Ibid.*, p. 135.

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25. Denise Natali, *The Kurds and the State: Evolving National Identity in Iraq, Turkey, and Iran* (Syracuse: Syracuse University Press, 2005).
26. Hakan Özoglu, "Nationalism' and Kurdish Notables in the Late Ottoman-Early Republican Era," *International Journal of Middle Eastern Studies*, 2001, p. 404, Omar Sheikmous, interview with author, email correspondence, May 3, 2011.
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Chapter 9

Making Sense of Iraqi Kurdistan's Civil War of the 1990s

*Fingers to Claw Communities, Fingers to Break each Other*¹

Alan M. Noory

In the face of popular hopes and aspirations, the Kurdistan region of Iraq plunged into a devastating civil war in 1994. Nearly 10,000 people lost their lives, tens of thousands were displaced, and the region was split into two territories controlled by a single party in each. By the end of the 1990s, the fighting withered away and both sides came under multilevel domestic, regional, and international pressure to end the war and unify their so-called governing institutions. Despite all the pressure, both parties continue to control their territories, police, armed forces, and economy. For all intents and purposes, the 1994 Kurdish civil war is a war that never ended.

From a distance, the 1994 episode of the Kurdish civil war in Iraqi Kurdistan is a puzzle. The political mood changed from hope, cooperation, and even national unity to demonization of political rivals in the span of only three years. This was quite shocking for a number of reasons: (1) the Kurdistan region is the part of Iraq where most of the population is Kurdish and Sunni, and therefore its civil war presents a challenge to any ethno-sectarian explanation; (2) by 1990, most of the ideological and cultural divide between the two main political parties (Kurdistan Democratic Party—KDP and Patriotic Union of Kurdistan—PUK) had all but evaporated with the establishment of the Kurdistan United Front (KUF)—the framework alliance that united all armed factions in mid-eighties. This alliance was celebrated as an end to the claim of sole representation of all Kurds and Kurdistan communities by any one political party; (3) the vast Saddam-loyalist paramilitary army (known locally as Jash: Jackasses) received immediate full amnesty after 1991 and became fully integrated into the two political parties; (4) because of the

hopeful times and the popular support for the KUF, there was no authority vacuum after the collapse of Saddam's regime, and the withdrawal of his administration from most of Kurdistan region, prior to the 1994 civil war; and finally (5) there was significant international pressure on both political parties to demonstrate the possibility of developing democratic institutions of governance as a way to show the rest of Iraq the path away from Saddam's regime.

What, then, caused the rapid decay of the political atmosphere in Iraqi Kurdistan from hope and unity in 1991 to full-fledged civil war in 1994? In 1961, a local Kurdish landlord's determination to fight off the first agrarian reform in Iraq led to the longest lasting Kurdish armed rebellious movement in modern history against successive central governments in Iraq. In 1994, a dispute over ownership of a commercial property built on a contended agrarian land in a town from the same area sparked a civil war in the Iraqi Kurdistan region that split control over governance in the region.

This repeated theme of local conflicts migrating to larger national contexts, can be explained by the following:

- Land tenure in Iraqi Kurdistan, due to historical reasons, is highly contested on local community levels.
- The Iraqi property registration system, legal structure, and judicial system, continue throughout modern history to be ill-equipped to enforce equitable resolutions for these generational community conflicts over land tenure.
- With the historic weakness of central authorities in rural areas of Kurdistan, and the hostility toward their expansion by the local population, rule of law was never a viable or sustainable option in community conflicts over land tenure.
- The only viable strategy for different sides of communal conflicts lay in the resort to violence.
- The search for resources required utilizing kinship and other forms of social networks to identify possible violent elements from outside communities, in the larger socio-political context, such as violent political parties. To utilize such exogenous elements in their conflicts, locals needed to engage in a symbiotic relationship with the national-level violent elements. Local community elements acquired means of local dominance from the national elements, and in return adopted necessary national-level identities in support of the national-level dominance of the political entity they brought to their local conflict.
- The adoption of one national-level entity by one side of a local conflict was always seen as an invitation for the other local side to invite a rival violent national-level entity (in other words the oppressive central government apparatus).

- The outcome of this process has been multi-generational violent local conflicts that have provided the infrastructure for national-level violent movements, increased violent tendencies of the national-level politicking, and led to repeated episodes of national-level violent outbreaks in modern Iraq's history.

THE TORTURED HISTORY OF LAND TENURE IN IRAQ KURDISTAN

Iraqi Kurdistan entered the nineteenth century reform era of the Ottoman Empire with all agrarian land to be considered as owned by the state. This was due to centuries of waves of invasions and population displacement that did not allow for stable multi-generational assertion of property rights that would have been recognized as *Mulk Sirf* (pure ownership) in Islamic legal structure. The assertion of any form of tenure over agrarian land was therefore subject to the dynamics of local warlords and the center of the empire competing for power and domination over the peasant population. This was very fluid for centuries, as the geographic area of Kurdistan was the battleground of twelve major wars between the Ottoman Empire and Safavid Empire, and its successors, from 1514 all the way to 1823.

The rise of nation-states in Europe and the pressure they started to mount on the Ottoman Empire led to an attempt of revolution from above, in the mid-nineteenth century, aiming at redistributing land as a way to recentralize the functions of the state. In two reform edicts in 1839 and 1858, Sultan Abdul-Majeed dismantled the military's ownership of land and the tax collection enterprise. He announced that anyone possessing and farming state land exclusively and personally (not through rent or crop sharing)² for more than ten years would "own"³ the land after paying a set amount. The laws prohibited any one or a few persons from owning all land in any given village and asserted that all residents had to be given shares of the land.⁴ This land distribution plan was compromised by a loophole in the laws that suggested that if there was no one to farm in the village, then all land could be registered to one person. This loophole was exploited by a highly corrupt bureaucracy that was in charge of implementing the law.⁵ After the collapse of the Ottoman Empire after World War I, Iraq came under direct occupation of Great Britain. In an announcement to residents of Baghdad, the new British ruler of Iraq introduced his army's presence as liberators rather than invaders, and promised they would bring modernity to Iraq.

The British occupation administration entered a patron–client relationship with mobilized and armed socio-political entities that were/are diametrically opposed to the much heralded modernization and democratization objectives.

The British occupation of Iraq helped build a weak state headed by non-local militant tribal leaders with religious nobility claims and a Pan-Arab agenda, which decentralized power through reengineered tribalization of the society. The reengineering occurred through forcing non-tribal populations to belong to tribes,⁶ registering communally possessed tribal land as individual property of “friendly” tribe leaders,⁷ exempting tribes from civil and criminal laws of the land,⁸ advancing such exemptions with a regulation language that restrained any future Iraqi government emerging from the British mandate from changing it,⁹ “advising” the Iraqi government to allow tribal raids between tribes,¹⁰ and turning traditional patronage relations between peasants and landlords into contractual financial obligations that tied peasants to the land. These contractual obligations held them financially responsible for crop failure and prohibited them from leaving to cities if in debt to landlords. They also banned the employment of an indebted peasant by any other landlord, government agency, or private company.¹¹

This British strategic choice of reengineered primordialization of Iraq was based on harsh budget and personnel constraints. The bureaucratic readjustment to the new concept of mandate required an early Iraqi face on a very fragile British dominance. Nevertheless, it was introduced as merely discovering and following the “regular law of the country.”¹²

With this change, tribal structure was transformed from a communal social structure for survival, in a harsh ecological and socioeconomic environment, into a structure that was primarily sustained through the external power of colonialism. This new¹³ structure served as a tool of domination not only over the tribes but more importantly over the emerging civil society. The Iraqi Tribal Criminal and Civil Disputes Regulation in 1918¹⁴ excluded tribal land from the civil legal system and replaced civil courts with tribal arbitration councils, thereby making the social order a function of a careful balance of power between tribes that could be manipulated by the colonial administrators.¹⁵

Those tribal arbitration councils also had jurisdiction over the population of cities located within the territorial boundaries of the tribes, leading to the subordination of cities to the tribal structure.¹⁶ On the British watch, Iraq had some of the most notoriously concentrated land holdings in the history of colonialism.¹⁷

In Iraqi Kurdistan, state-sanctioned tribalization and empowerment of violent elements was further complicated with developing Kurdish nationalistic sentiments. In Province of Sulaimani, as late as 2008, less than half of the counties had full legal clarity (Settlement) in agrarian land tenure rights.¹⁸ A field study that I conducted in 1996 in fifty-three villages and agrarian communities confirmed this conclusion. I asked community representatives about their understanding of the status of land tenure in their own communities and

compared their response with official government records from Sulaimani Province's Branch of Agrarian Administration. I coded the discrepancies between the local understanding and government data as following: minor discrepancies of quantitative nature (such as how much land someone owns in the village) were coded (Minor), and discrepancies related to serious issues of tenure (such as who owns the land in the village) were coded (Major). In forty of the fifty-three villages, the population (represented by elders) had an understanding about property rights in the village that was seriously different from the government's records.¹⁹

The fieldwork pointed to another culprit for this sharp difference. A 1939 law that regulated state monopoly over private production and sales of raw tobacco prohibited farming tobacco without a license, in order to preserve food production and scarce water resources. Many influential landlords tampered with public records on availability of water resources on their property to gain licenses for the type of lands that were not considered suitable for tobacco farming. They then went around selling those licenses in the black market. This practice created a new layer of legal problems when agrarian land in Iraqi Kurdistan became the subject of three major land reform laws and tens of related laws and regulations, making the limits of government takeover/buyout of land from large land owners contingent on type of irrigation.

The problem of reliable public records continued in the tobacco monopoly era, during the implementation of land reform laws, and well into the modern day.

In addition, most of the agrarian land of Iraqi Kurdistan, especially since 1959, fell into military operation areas or in control by different Kurdish rebel factions. Even during short periods of peace, law enforcement was in the hands of elements in Kurdish parties that joined the movement specifically because it provided them with violent means to oppose implementation of land reform.²⁰

THE ILLUSIVE DREAM OF LAND REFORM (1958–1983)

In 1958, army officers seized power in an extremely polarized Iraq. Since then, Iraq witnessed several successive coups. Each was accompanied with promises of significant land redistribution and support for small family farms.

The result was layers of laws and counter-laws leading to a chaotic legal structure with devastating loopholes. This led to

- control of former landlords over irrigation in the redistributed land in the first major law of 1959, retention of the concept of crop sharing in a way

that practically enforced only peasants' contractual obligations and not those of the owners;

- continuation of the process of land registration (Tapu) to "owners," until 1975, in the same chaotic manner of the British occupation period;
- prevention of the civil court system from hearing any claims for damages in the implementation of land reforms, by concentrating all powers in the hand of the Agrarian Supreme Council with no right of appeal in any court; and
- clientelistic manipulation and slow walking of the redistribution process that was never completed until it was stopped by Saddam in the 1980s.²¹

In practice, problematic land reforms, implemented in the context of thirty years of almost continuous fighting between the Kurdistan Liberation Movement (KLM) and successive Iraqi regimes in most of rural Kurdistan, created an atmosphere whereby all sides of local conflicts over land tenure readily resorted to violence.

Of those who were interviewed in 1996, elders recalled multiple episodes of violent conflicts over land tenure in their villages in the fifty years prior to the 1991 uprising in Iraqi Kurdistan. In twenty-two of them, there was at least one side that did not have a legally accepted standing according to government issued property documents. Meanwhile, in the other twenty-eight, all sides had standing and could theoretically settle their dispute legally. Nonetheless, these actors chose to resort to violence rather than the mechanisms of law and order.²²

SADDAM'S LAND REFORM BY DEATH AND DESTRUCTION: THE ANFAL CAMPAIGN IN KURDISTAN REGION

After successfully crushing all forms of dissent, and then depleting Iraq's treasury on a miscalculated and devastating war against Iran, Saddam Hussein became subject to intense pressure from his international creditors. He started a massive campaign to redirect the state economic machine toward neoliberalism.²³

The redirection of policies could not be any clearer than it was in the agricultural sector, where the support for small farms' mode of production was officially declared unproductive by Saddam himself. He ended backlogged land distribution from previous land reforms. In a new set of laws (mainly decree No. 35 of "the Revolution Leadership Council" in 1983), the Iraqi state started annexing previously distributed land from peasants who refused to participate in the war, were unable to farm because of the devastating effects of the war, or who failed to meet newly set production quotas. That

meant if a peasant was drafted and went to war, and therefore could not farm, the land was subject to the law the same way as the one who decided not to go to war when drafted. The new legal structure gave the Minister of Agriculture the discretion to give full rights of "land ownership"²⁴ to large agro-businesses if they rent government-owned land.

By 1988, 99.4 percent of all government loans were given to investors in the agricultural sector, and all peasant populations received only the remaining 0.6 percent. Since then all loans were exclusively given to investors.²⁵ According to available data at the end of 1989, more than 38 percent of state-owned land, previously managed by the agrarian reform authorities, was repossessed and re-rented in accordance with the 1983 package of laws.²⁶

In Iraqi Kurdistan, there was a different picture. The region was practically shielded from this package of laws until 1988. They were not implemented until the end of Iraq-Iran War and the start of the notorious Anfal campaign against Kurdistan villages. Prior to 1988, many of the rural areas in the Kurdistan region were out of the central authorities' reach and under the control of various Kurdish rebel groups, along with a large population of Iraq-Iran war dissenters.

As for the areas of the region that were under the state's control, they were also shielded because most of the military-service-aged male population in those areas were registered in an alternative to military service in various state-organized paramilitary forces. These forces were charged with spearheading military attacks on the rebellious areas. In reality though, most of those registered in the paramilitary were farmers who either paid the paramilitary warlords for their registration cards or simply relinquished their monthly pay to the warlords in return for little or no service. This allowed them to keep their farming contracts with the land reform administration.

All these changed dramatically with a brutal campaign of genocide that the Iraqi regime chose a Qur'anic name for Al-Anfal.²⁷ This massive scorched earth military campaign lasted from February 1988 to September 1988. In eight months and in eight stages, the campaign destroyed at least 4,138 villages and small towns (as shown in the following table), displaced more than 1,400,000 residents,²⁸ among them 50,000–100,000 were women and children, who were taken away to concentration centers and are still being dug out of mass graves all over Iraq.²⁹

The rest of the displaced families were forced into "modern towns" that were built in wide-open areas, on what was previously prime agrarian land, and were surrounded by military observation towers. The agrarian land that was "yielded" from the Anfal campaign was re-registered as government owned, without compensation for even those with proper documentation of full private ownership.³⁰ Any attempt to access most of the "yielded" land

became an offense against the state. Orders were given to military and security personnel to shoot and kill any peasant or grazing domestic animal found on the “yielded” land.³¹ In the province of Sulaimani, the inaccessible land was more than 73 percent of total cultivatable land.

The invasion of Kuwait in August 1990, and the establishment of what proved to be a devastating 14 years of international embargo against Iraq, compelled Saddam’s regime to appreciate the strategic importance of agriculture and production of food. After years of neglect and abuse, the regime announced a “National Cultivation Campaign” by which all agricultural operations were centralized, regardless of ownership structure. Agrarian vehicles and machinery were allocated from all over Iraq to work based on where they were needed first. All possessors and owners of land were compelled to meet a production quota or lose their land without compensation. This was enforced, regardless of the type of possession,³² and without the right to bid to re-rent the land once it was put up for rent in public auctions.³³

Vast areas were rented according to formulas that allowed for the new renters to possess pieces of land that were, in some cases, more than twenty times larger than the average farming families’ possession. In other areas that were deemed security threats, “trustworthy” renters were rewarded with areas as much as forty times larger than the average possession.³⁴

Furthermore, in cases where no one came forward to rent recently “repossessed” land,³⁵ another order from the Revolution Leadership Council exempted anyone willing to invest in such areas from both the maximum limits of possession and rent.³⁶ In the Kurdistan Region this was implemented by a directive from Saddam’s office ordering all previously restricted or banned areas, for security and military reasons, to be transferred, without rent, to heads of paramilitary forces known as light brigades and security battalions.³⁷ The structure of land tenure in the sample study for 1990–1991 season is shown in figure 9.1.

In sixteen of the sampled villages, the multigenerational conflicts took a dangerous turn when they got reaffirmed in the context of a genocide. In another nine, a new side was introduced to the multigenerational conflicts that had no prior claims, and attempted to assert one since.

As for the original peasant families who used to possess the land before the Anfal campaign, the figure 9.2 demonstrates what happened to them in 1990–1991 agrarian season:

The pre-Anfal possessors in thirteen villages became seasonal workers employed by the new possessors who were rewarded for their participation in the Anfal campaign. This was a better fate than the one pre-Anfal possessors faced in twenty-five other villages, where they were not allowed the privilege of being seasonal workers on their own former land.

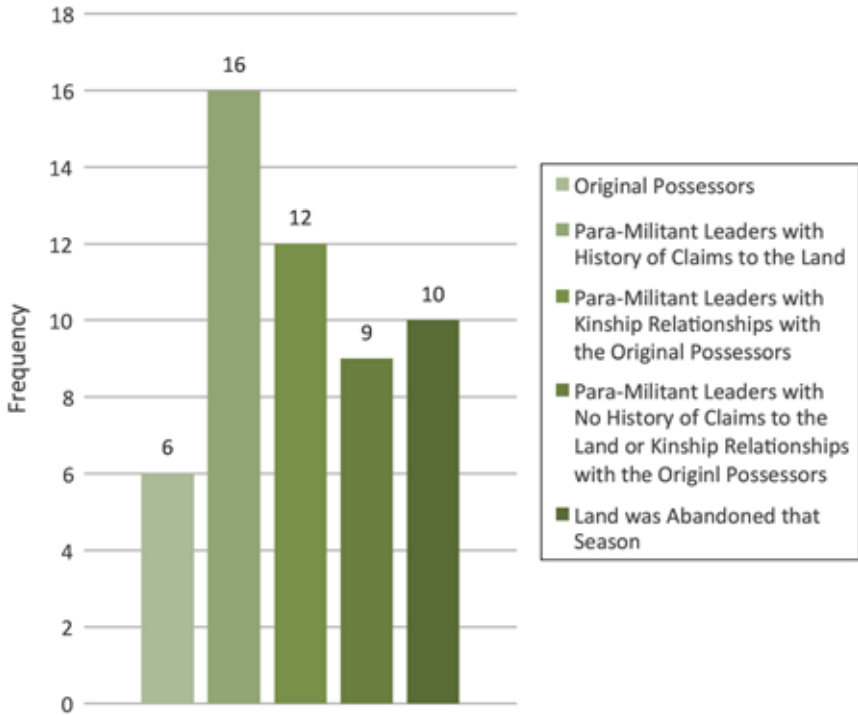


Figure 9.1 Who Controlled the Land in 1990–1991 Season in the Observed Villages/Population Centers in 1991 Study? *Source:* The author created this figure using data from his own fieldwork.

GHOSTS OF THE FAR AND NEAR PAST: KURDISTAN AGRARIAN COMMUNITIES IN POST 1991 GULF WAR

Although devastating on every socioeconomic level, the war of 1991 presented a political opportunity for Iraqi Kurdistan. This opportunity led to an uprising in March 1991, the crushing of that uprising in April 1991, negotiations with the central government in April 1991, a year of dual authority in most of the Kurdish region in 1991, and three more local uprisings within the same year. All of this eventually led to the withdrawal of Iraqi civil authorities, security apparatus, and army in October 1991.

As many of the paramilitary leaders merged into the two main dominant political parties (KDP and PUK), they managed to retain the organizational structure of their forces within the militia of the political parties and received their cooperation and blessing³⁸ for the wide-scale looting they performed.³⁹

The dual authority of the central government and the KUF created a chaotic legal structure regarding land possession/ownership in the agricultural

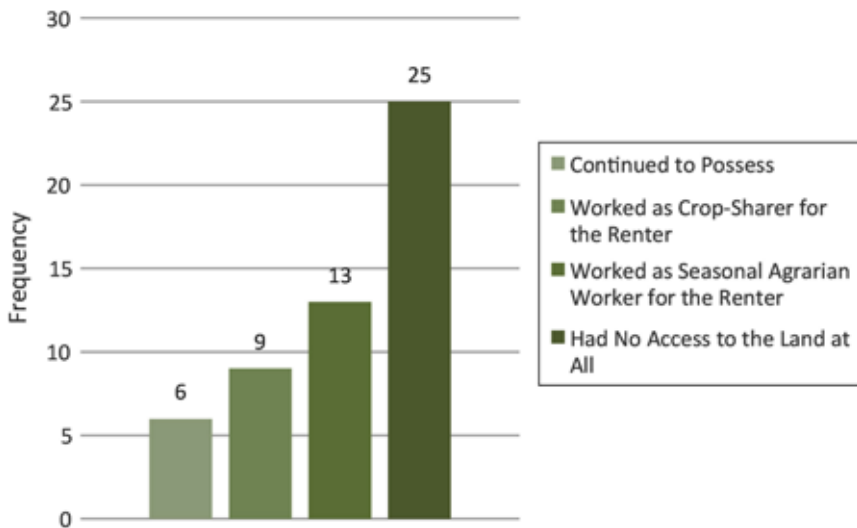


Figure 9.2 Status of Original Possessors' Access to their Land in 1990–1991 Season in the Observed Villages/Population Centers in the 1996 Study. *Source:* The author created this figure using data from his own fieldwork.

sector. On one hand, the central government was sending instructions and orders demanding the continuation of the post-Anfal structure, which denied original land holders' access to land and ordered the post-Anfal leases to be made permanent. On the other hand, torn between loyalty to peasants and its newfound interest in integrating the paramilitary leaders into their own power structure, the KUF instructed the same authorities to dismantle all contracts resulting from the Anfal campaign and ended the implementation of the 1983 laws. But for that year's harvest, KUF ordered 45–45 percent sharing of the harvest between the original owner/possessors and the post-Anfal leasers while it attempted to collect the remaining 10 percent for itself,⁴⁰ thereby allocating the harvest of hundreds of thousands of dunums to the former militia leaders.⁴¹

A year later, after the election and the establishment of the new Kurdish government, the Ministry of Agriculture issued another directive mandating the return of peasants to their lands. The issuing of this order for the third time in two years indicated the level of resistance that former militia leaders, and the new comrades, were mounting against the return of peasants to their lands.⁴² Meanwhile a legal framework for ending the post-Anfal conditions never materialized.⁴³

When pressed by local media, the Prime Minister of Kurdistan Regional Government (KRG) suggested that the legal framework for land ownership structure in Kurdistan was three-pronged: application of local customs in

border areas, Law No. 90 of 1975 in the rest of the areas recognized as Kurdistan Autonomous Region in Iraqi laws, and Law No. 117 of 1970 for the remaining areas under the KRG control.⁴⁴ That meant that a vast area of the region was, as far as the KRG was concerned, out of the reach of any law and was left to the so-called local customs to handle their chronic conflicts. In a bureaucratic power-grab intended to bolster its budget and revenue streams, the Ministry of Agriculture took over legislation and issued what was known as Instruction No. 2 in 1992. This proclamation canceled an article of the 1975 reforms that exempted peasants from paying rent to the government and attempted to tie the renewal of contracts to the collection of rent revenue. Only 3,864 peasants, possessing only 6.54 percent of total land owned by government in Sulaimani province, came forward to renew their contracts for 1993–1994 season, and that percentage declined to 1.6 percent by 1995–1996 season.⁴⁵ Instruction No. 2 also called once more for the return of land possession structure to its pre-Anfal condition. But yet again, it was neglected by the most powerful newly integrated warlords.

In the face of the authorities' unwillingness to enforce the return of peasants to their contracted pre-Anfal lands, a group of armed self-organized peasants from the Pishdar area (on the border with Iran in Sulaimani province) forced their way in the Spring of 1993 back onto their former contracted lands. At the time, the contested lands were owned by members of the Mirawdali tribe, which had a notorious past of semi-enslavement of their peasants in pre-reform days, resisting all land reform laws, and participating in the Anfal campaign orders to destroy peasant villages. This battle was significant beyond its local implications. The PUK, which built its reputation in the region by consistently supporting peasants in land tenure conflicts in the area, reversed itself and condemned the peasant uprising on the grounds of its challenge to the PUK's authority. But the PUK's choice, to support the losing side, diminished its historical dominance over the region and provided the opportunity for KDP operatives with land tenure conflicts to link their personal conflicts with their party's drive to regain political control over the region that they lost some twenty years earlier. In this fragile atmosphere, a conflict over agrarian land illegally converted to a commercial property in the Qaladze municipality prompted the PUK to attack and take over all local offices of the KDP in all the towns and population centers in the Qaladze and neighboring Rania territories on May 1, 1994. From then on, the events quickly snowballed into an all-out civil war in Iraqi Kurdistan and led to the split of the Iraqi Kurdistan region into two exclusive party controlled areas. It also forced massive migrations of supporters who found themselves in areas controlled by their new enemies. The inaction that marked the attitude of the government before May 1994 was replaced by the party takeover of government in both regions. Government bureaucracy was utilized to lend

legitimacy to what would otherwise be considered acts of revenge. Previous laws and their application were ignored in the newly found interest in expediting those land tenure conflict cases.

As part of the 1996 research, I examined reports of High Agrarian Commission (HAC) in Sulaimani. This is a commission to handle land tenure conflicts. Iraqi laws grant this power of courts to these commissions, because it bars civil courts from taking those cases. Members of a HAC are, normally, the highest-ranking agrarian engineers and law experts in the province's agrarian administration. They usually are assembled whenever reports of pending conflicts arise, or when a side of such a conflict requests an urgent government intervention.

I found that from 1991 to 1994, there were no HAC activities or reports. Yet once the PUK seized control over Sulaimani province, it activated HAC and illegally added political operatives with full membership authorities to HAC and sent them out seventeen times in one year to where the dominant political party sensed urgency. The decisions reached and documented in the HAC reports contained serious violations of the law and were passed despite the opposition of the professional members of the commission.

ON THE DEFINITION OF INSANITY

After the tiring years of impasse in the Kurdish Civil War, and with the collapse of Saddam's regime, the two territorial domains of Iraqi Kurdistan, the KDP region and the PUK region, accelerated efforts to unify the administrative and legislative bodies of "governance." The result was a series of laws. The most consequential among them were: Law No. 32 of the year 2007, and Law No. 1 of the year 2008. The mere act of legislation, in the context of governance in the Kurdistan region, is considered an achievement. Despite the claims of democratization and modernization, the region has been ruled, since 1994, by a single dominant party in each territory. Each one of them dealt with land tenure conflicts on localized bases, motivated only by buying/maintaining patronage and stopping the security threats that were originating from the dominant party in the other territory.

Could the new laws, however, be evidence for a fresh approach to governance that could prove capable of producing a citizenry-based and harmonized legal structure? A closer look at the structure of the new laws shows otherwise, unfortunately. Law No. 32 from 2007⁴⁶ reopens the door for those who can prove their actual possession and control of any land whose status was not settled, or whose court settlement decision did not gain permanence status, *prior to the issuance of Law No. 117 from 1970*. They may register the land as owned by the state with control and possession rights

granted to those individuals. Yet, a year later, the same legislative body, according to Law No. 1 of 2008,⁴⁷ gave control rights over the overwhelming majority of the same lands mentioned in the Law No. 32 to three types of other people.⁴⁸

- Farming families who met eligibility standards at the time of application and received the lands as part of the redistribution process of the land reform laws.
- Farming families, who met eligibility standards at the time of application and received the lands as temporary contractors and renewed since.
- Individuals and groups who did not qualify for redistribution or temporary contracts, yet still received the lands in accordance to “laws, orders, and instructions that were prevalent in Iraqi Kurdistan.”⁴⁹

Because the two laws promised the same lands to different people, it would be logical to assume that Law No. 1 of 2008 nullifies the key provision in Law No. 32 of 2007. But the 2008 law does not have a customary concluding article that nullifies any legal text, laws, or decisions that contradict any article of the new law. So, in fact, both laws are considered current and enforceable by design. On November 27, 2007, the Minister of Agriculture stated in a hearing in front of the Kurdistan Region’s National Assembly that, “We are not going to distribute land after the passing of this law. We (the state) no longer control any land. (. . .) There is an on-the-ground reality, and we are just registering it. In other words, we are not creating a new thing, we are only granting ownership rights.”⁵⁰

What the minister neglected to educate the members of the parliament about is the fact that his ministry, and the dominant political parties behind them, have two contradicting laws and can pick winners and losers by enforcing one and not the other.

With the recent laws adding more confusion than they solved, the conflicts of land tenure in Kurdistan are not going to be solved on the basis of citizenry and a clear unified legal structure any time soon. They will continue to be addressed in the tribal relations offices of the dominant political parties, and on the bases of patronage and political dominance calculations. In other words, in the foreseeable future, land tenure conflicts in Kurdistan are all tied to the dominance of the political party that enforced them. Therefore, those conflicts are charged and ready for a new round as soon as the map of political dominance begins to change. Eradication of violence requires the political will to address those conflicts in a citizenry-based mindset from political actors that are willing to cut ties with old conceptions of power and dominance. Until such a paradigm shift occurs, Iraqi Kurdistan is doomed to repeat a devastating cycle of violence.

NOTES

1. "The Fingers Break Each Other" is a title that one of the Iraqi Kurdistan warlords chose for his memoirs about the 1980s episode of Iraqi Kurdistan's civil war.

2. This is based on Abu Hanifa's idea that rent or crop sharing should not be permitted in Islam, therefore only those who personally farmed the land were meant to be privileged by the reform.

Despite the fact that Abu Hanifa's interpretation of Al-Quran (Islamic holy book) and Al-Hadith (Mohammad's teachings) is one of four main interpretations in the Sunni tradition in Islam, he stood alone in banning renting of land or crop sharing practices to make it impossible for person to possess or own what he/she can farm on their own.

Hadi Al-Alawy, an Islam historian brings to attention the fact that household slavery was never banned in Islam and since one's capacity of farming is measured by his/her whole family's available workforce, and since household slaves were considered a "part" of one's family, therefore, Hadi Al-Alawy suggests, other interpreters chose to ignore this particular teaching of Mohammad in this case so they would not encourage slavery as a mode of production in agriculture. This explains the reasons why other sects and interpreters have not taken the same position by Hadi Al-Alawy. See: *Chapters from the Political History of Islam* (In Arabic). Nicosia, Cyprus: Center for Socialist Studies and Research in the Arab World, 1995, p. 389.

3. Ownership was defined as the right to inherit but not to sell.

4. See: Naseer Al-Kadhimi, *The Communist Party and the Agrarian Problem in Iraq* (in Arabic), Nicosia, Cyprus: Center for Socialist Studies and Research in the Arab World, 1986, p. 72.

5. Hanna Batatu presents an example of ownership documents big landlords in Iraq had when the GB occupied the country; the document suggests that the area of the land is 14,708 dunums and the owner paid 5,000 rupees to register it in his name. Batatu writes "On inspection, the real area to which the title deed referred was found to be 60,000 dunums." The annual rent of the land was about 26,000 rupees, which was more than five times the price the "owners" paid for it. See:

Hanna Batatu. *The Old Social Classes and the Revolutionary Movements of Iraq: A Study of Iraq's Old Landed and Commercial Classes and of its Communists, Ba'thists and Free Officers*. New York, NY: Princeton University Press, 1978, p. 163.

6. The British political officer in Sulaimani province wrote to his superiors in 1919: "Every man who could be labeled as a tribesman was placed under a tribal leader . . . petty village headmen were unearthed and discovered as leaders of long dead tribes; disintegrated sedentary clans . . . were told to reunite and remember that they had once been tribesmen." Source: Hanna Batatu, op. cit., p. 94.

7. This happened despite the advice of the British expert Sir Dawson, who was brought to Iraq to recommend policy for dealing with commonly held land in Iraq. See: Trip, op. cit., p. 70 and 85. And yet another British expert (Lord Salter) suggested, more than thirty years later, that remaining state-owned land was so abundant that if it had been leased properly to landless peasants, there would not have been such a severe land tenure problem in Iraq, but instead, leasing policy was an integral

part of stripping the communally cultivated land to the benefit of the “friendly” tribal leaders. See: *Ibid.*, pp. 138–139.

8. This is reference to The Iraqi Tribal Criminal and Civil Disputes Regulation of 1918.

9. See: Batatu, *op. cit.*, p. 93.

10. Batatu refers to a troubling document that reviles “very reluctant” advice from the British high commissioner to the Iraqi government to grant the request of the tribal chiefs of Shammar and Anizah, two large tribes from west of Iraq, and permit raiding between them because “unless their tribes were permitted to carry on their traditional raiding, they (the tribal leaders) would not be able to keep them (their tribes) together under them (their tribal leadership)” Source: *Ibid.*, p. 98.

11. See: Tripp, *op. cit.*, p. 85.

12. See: Batatu, *op. cit.*, p. 93.

13. The best support for the claim that this tribal structure is a new structure that was imposed and manipulated by the occupying authorities is what the British political officer in Sulaimanya wrote to his superiors in 1919: “Every man who could be labeled as a tribesman was placed under a tribal leader; . . . petty village headmen were unearthed and discovered as leaders of long dead tribes; disintegrated sedentary clans . . . were told to reunite and remember that they had once been tribesmen.” Source: *Ibid.*, p. 94.

14. The regulation was crafted in such a way that restrained any future Iraqi government emerging from the British mandate from changing it, because it was a “regular law of the country.” Source: *Ibid.*, p. 93. In fact the emerging governments not only maintained that code but advanced it by legislating the Law Governing the Rights and Duties of the Cultivators (1933) that tied peasants to the land, held them financially responsible for crop failure and prohibited them from leaving to cities if in debt to landlords and also banned the employment of an indebted peasant by any other landlord, government agency, or private company. See: Charles Tripp, *op. cit.*, p. 85.

15. Batatu refers to a troubling document that reviles “very reluctant” advice from the British high commissioner to the Iraqi government to grant the request of the tribal chiefs of Shammar and Anizah, two large tribes from west of Iraq, and permit raiding between them because “unless their tribes were permitted to carry on their traditional raiding, they (the tribal leaders) would not be able to keep them (their tribes) together under them (their tribal leadership)” Source: Hana Batatu, *op. cit.*, p. 98.

16. See: *Ibid.*, p. 93.

17. See: Naseer Al-Kadhimi, *op. cit.*, p. 162.

18. For more on this see Bakhtiyar Mustafa Baban. *A Guide to Land Settlement in Sulaimani Province, with Settlement Related Laws* (In Kurdish and Unpublished), Sulaimani—Iraq, 2007.

19. Alan Noory, *Shopping for Identity: An Economic Explanation for the Post-2003 Violence in Iraq*, Unpublished PhD Dissertation, University of Missouri—St. Louis, 2012, p. 147.

20. For example, elders of a village in Penjwin county explained how their peers from six nearby villages were executed in public by a KLM party operative who

belonged to a family claiming religious nobility in a dominant Sufi sect, to force false testimony on the rest of elders in support of his claim of land ownership in the settlement process mandated by Iraqi laws in the 1970s. See: Alan Noory, *op. cit.*, p. 149.

21. See: Naseer Al-Kadhimi, *op. cit.*, pp. 248–270, 326–333.

22. Alan Noory, *op. cit.*, p. 145.

23. See: Abbas Al-Nasrawi, *op. cit.*, pp. 145–147.

24. This is a right that was never given to peasants in any of the many land reforms since Sultan Abdul-Majeed's reforms!

25. See: Republic of Iraq, Central Agency for Statistical Studies. Annual Census Collection of 1983 and 1990.

26. This percentage only went higher since then, but no national data was available.

27. Al-Anfal (The Spoils of War) is the name of the eighth Soora of the Muslims' holy book. In this text, Muslims in their stronghold of Al-Madina, were allowed to punish their neighboring Jewish communities, who are otherwise treated as believers of God, in the pre-Islam traditions of pillaging, to retaliate for conspiring with the siege of the "Infidels' Alliance" from Mecca on Al-Madina (627 AD). The intention behind choosing this name for the 1988 operations against the rural population in Iraqi Kurdistan, was a clear indication that the Iraqi regime was going to resort to any and all savage means to "punish" the population for their support of the rebellious groups that have occasionally supported Iran's war efforts from the areas they controlled during the Iran-Iraq war. This was also an admission that the campaign was not going to adhere to any norms of use-of-force sanctioned by the international community.

28. This calculation is made assuming an average of fifty households in each destroyed population center and an average of seven members in each household.

29. These are estimates of Human Rights Watch. See: Gorge Black. *Genocide in Iraq: The Anfal Campaign Against the Kurds*. New York: Human Rights Watch, 1993, ISBN: 1564321088.

30. The Iraqi regime did not even bother with deciding the legal fate of the "yielded" land, since it was not planning to allow access to most of it, for the foreseeable future anyway. But it was forced to address the legal status issue when it opened conditional access to areas that were banned since Al-Anfal Campaign, in 1990. Hence came the "Council of Revolution Leadership" Decision No. 367 in 9/7/1990 that penalized farming families for failing to use the land in agricultural activities, even though the state itself blocked their access to the land.

31. In a memorandum signed by governor of Sulaimani, director of Military Intelligence in the region, head of Ba'ath Party organization in Sulaimani, commander of First Army Division, director of Security Apparatus in Sulaimani, director of Civil Defense in Sulaimani, and director of Agriculture and Irrigation Administration in Sulaimani, the following were put forward as reasons for not allowing access to most of agrarian land in the Province: "A—Cultivating these areas would require the presence of the peasants during tilling, seeding and harvest. (. . .) B—The presence of peasants in these areas might lead to insurgent infiltration and would allow them to continue their destructive operations. C—(. . .) Cultivating these areas would require

building housing structures and barns, or at least tents, to protect from the elements, and as we explained, that will jeopardize the security of our military.” See Alan Noory. *Conflicts of Land Ownership and Their Role in Hindering Agricultural Development in Iraqi-Kurdistan: 1991–1995* (In Arabic). Unpublished Master’s Thesis, University of Salahaddin, Iraq, 1996, p. 120 (footnote).

32. See: Council of Revolution Leadership (CRL)’s Decision No. 367 in 7/9/1990, which was attached to communication No. 29478 in 11/28/1990 from Minister of Agriculture and Irrigation to All Branches of Agriculture and Irrigation Administration in All Provinces.

33. See Directive No. 5 in 1990 by Minister of Agriculture and Irrigation, on how to implement (CRL)’s Decision No. 367, that was attached to the above communication No. 29478 in 11/28/1990.

34. In a personal interview with Mr. Bakhtiyar Baban, in 5/25/1996, he mentioned that one paramilitary leader received 76,000 dunnums in Kalar. This would put him, in terms of control over agrarian land, on the same level with the last two royal families in the history of Sulaimani Province prior to the land reform of 1959; the (Baban)s who established the semi-independent Emirat of Sulaimani and built the city of Sulaimani, and the (Al-Hafid Al-Barzinji) family, the relatives of the self-proclaimed King of Kurdistan during World War I, who ruled the entire Province of Sulaimani and beyond. Another paramilitary leader received 36,000 dunnums in the same municipality of Kalar, while another 13,000 dunnums in Bazian municipality were given to a third paramilitary leader.

35. For reasons varying from social embarrassment or kinship relationship to former farming families that used to possess the land and all the way to harassment, threat of violence from former possessors, or blackmail from nearby security or military outposts.

36. CRL Decision No. 364 in 9/5/1990 and Directive No. 4 from minister of Agriculture and Irrigation to All Branches of Agriculture and Irrigation Administration in All Provinces explaining how to follow the CRL decision.

37. This is according to Directive No. 2534 in 1990 issued from the office of the president and had the legal power of an addendum to an existing law.

38. For example, minutes of the meetings of Kurdistan United Front, the collective leading body of the de facto authorities prior to elections in Kurdistan, revealed that deciding figures in both of the two main parties “sold” the unfinished Bekhma dam project site, with all its equipments, buildings, and vehicles to a former influential paramilitary leader, who, in turn, sold everything to Iranian merchants.

39. The level of the organized looting was devastating in all economic sectors. Statistics generated in a report by the central government’s agrarian authorities in the province of Sulaimanya in summer of 1991, indicated the loss of 68 percent of total tractors from the agricultural sector (a loss of 3,073 tractors). Although the report does not give the number of combines in the province before 1991, it suggests that the number is down to fifty-one working combines, while it estimates the needed combines to be 1,219. By 1993, the administration of agriculture sector in the province lost sixty-six of its own vehicles to looting. Another report in 1993 indicated that 55 percent of water pumps from irrigation projects in Kurdistan were looted (a

loss of 3,322 pumps). Source: Alan Noory, *Conflicts of Land Ownership*, op. cit., pp. 130–131.

40. This 10 percent harvest tax was without any legal merit, since all taxes on farming families were explicitly abolished by land reform laws since 1975.

41. In most incidents both the peasants and the former militia leaders resisted this order. In Erbil valley one of the former militia leaders who was renting 14,000 dunums, harvested 10,000 dunums of grains with the help of nearby Iraqi military posts and used the army artillery to burn the rest and run to the areas controlled by the central government. Source: *Ibid.*, p. 133.

42. See: Alan Noory, *Conflicts of Land Ownership*, op. cit., pp. 133–136.

43. The parliament was dominated by members of abusive landlord families from the pre-land reforms era and never actually brought to the floor for vote a (1993) proposal to unify the legal structure of ownership/possession of agrarian land.

44. See: Alan Noory, *Ibid.*, p. 137.

45. Ministry of Agriculture and Irrigation in Kurdistan Region, Sulaimani Branch of Agriculture and Irrigation Administration, Land and Takeover Administration. Unpublished data. 1996.

46. See: Legal Committee of National Assembly of Kurdistan. *Collection of Laws Specific to Ministry of Agriculture and Agrarian Land in Kurdistan Region* (In Arabic and Kurdish), Series No. 25 Erbil-Iraq: Shahab Printing House, 2008, pp. 109–115.

47. See: *Ibid.*, pp. 116–124.

48. See Article One of the law in: *Ibid.*, p. 117.

49. *Ibid.*, same page (My translation).

50. *Ibid.*, p.159 (My translation).

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Section IV

**CONTINUITY AND CHANGE IN
IRAN-KURDISH RELATIONS**

Chapter 10

A Contemporary Political History of the Kurds in Iran

Ahmed Y. Hamza

After the defeat of Iran's Kurdish opposition parties in a deadly armed struggle in the 1980s, the Kurds in Iran are viewed as the most passive compared to other Kurds in Syria, Turkey, and Iraq. The fate of the Kurds in Syria prior to 2011 was not a point of discussion for Kurds and non-Kurds, while now Syrian Kurds play a major role in the country. The military and civil struggle of the Kurds in Turkey continues despite an increasing authoritarian rule of the Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdogan. The independence referendum of the Kurds in Iraq in 2017 failed, yet Iraqi Kurds remain as a key political player in Iraq. In this Kurdish puzzle, it seems that the Kurdish piece in Iran is missing. However, this chapter tries to show a different picture of the contemporary political history of the Kurds in Iran, not in comparison to other parts of Kurdistan, but based on its historical confrontation with Persian nationalism. The chapter focuses on three periods, including the establishment of the Republic of Kurdistan in 1946, the armed struggle of the 1980s, and the emergence of civil struggle since the 1990s. During the first period, the 1946 Republic of Kurdistan established a strong national base limited to the Mukryan area in the province of West Azerbaijan. In the second period, the 1980s armed struggle, Kurdish nationalism spread further south to both the provinces of West Azerbaijan and Sanandaj. During the third period, Kurdish nationalism has developed further into the Kurdish provinces of Kermanshah and Ilam. The chapter argues that Kurdish nationalism among the Kurds in Iran has had a persisting political progress since the 1920s despite its military defeats by the current and former Persian regimes.

The Kurds in Iran mainly live in the northwest of Iran in the four provinces of West Azerbaijan, Sanandaj, Ilam, and Kermanshah. There are over one million Kurds in the north east area of Iran in Khorasan, but they have not been part of the Kurdish national movement.¹ There are also a significant

number of Kurds living in Lorestan, Hamadan, Tehran, and other cities across Iran. There is no reliable and agreeable data about the population of the Kurds in Iran. According to the Unrepresented Nations and Peoples Organization (UNPO), the Kurds represent about 11–15 percent of Iran's eighty million people.²

PERSIAN NATION-BUILDING IN IRAN

The process of nation-building in Iran started in the early twentieth century. Iran became a nation-state with clear borders, a modern army, and a unified educational and bureaucratic system during the twentieth century. Prior to this, Iran was ruled by different empires and various groups inside the current geography of Iran who identified themselves with dominant empires and religions. Kurds had principalities in which Kurdish chieftains ruled through the allowance or alliance of surrounding empires. Both the Safavid and Ottoman empires thought that it was costly and not very profitable to have control over Kurdistan, the land of Kurds, so they tried to use Kurds as a buffer zone between themselves; on the other hand, the Kurdish chieftains used the Safavid-Ottoman rivalry to maintain their self-rule. Evliya Çelebi (1611–1682), a Turkish voyager, described Kurdistan in the seventeenth century as follows:

It is a vast territory: from its Northern extreme in Erzurum it stretches by Van, Hakkari, Cizre, `Amadiya, Mosul, Shahrazur, Harir and Ardalan to Baghdad, Darna, and Dartang and even as far as Basra: seventy day's journeys of rocky Kurdistan. If the six thousand Kurdish tribes and clans in these high mountains would not constitute a firm barrier between Arab Iraq [*sic*] and the Ottomans, it would be an easy matter for the Persians to invade Asia Minor.³

There were several Kurdish emirates during the Safavid Empire, such as the House of Ardalan with Sanandaj as its capital, the Mukri confederation, and the Bilbas and Harki tribes (McDowall, 27).⁴ This long history of self-rule preserved the cultural identity of Kurds from assimilation and later became a major obstacle for a type of nation-building in Iran, Turkey, Iraq, and Syria that was based on a single language and identity. In one of the most extreme cases, in the sixteenth century Shah Abbas depopulated some nomadic Kurds from the west areas bordering with the Ottomans to the east to fight against the Uzbeks.⁵ Even these Kurds in Khorasan in the north east area of Iran preserved their cultural ethnic identity until present day.

The constitutional revolution (1905–1909) in the early twentieth century can be viewed as the first major period of promoting the idea of Persian nationalism. The constitutional revolution succeeded in limiting the arbitrary

rule of the Iranian king by establishing a national assembly and introducing new concepts like the rule of law and Persian patriotism, as well as improving Persia by and for its people.⁶ It is during this period that the Persian language was chosen as the formal language for the first time.⁷ The constitutional revolution was urban-based mainly in big cities like Tehran, Shiraz, Qom, and Tabriz. The revolution weakened the despotic rule of the king, but failed to establish a modern army to materialize its concepts. Thus, by World War I, Iran was more divided and various regions abandoned the authority of the central government in Tehran.⁸

After WWI, in the northwest area of Iran near the city of Urmia in the province of West Azerbaijan, Ismail Agha (Simko), a Kurdish chieftain, established his rule in several cities. Through his personal skills, Ismail Agha was able to bring together several Kurdish tribes of the Avdovi (Simko's tribe), the Mamedi, and the Kardar.⁹ From 1918 to 1922, Simko created a government ruling over several cities including Urmia and Mahabad. Simko defeated the government forces repeatedly until 1922 when Reza Khan, as the minister of war and through his modern army, ended Simko's rule. To maintain his power, Simko tried to attract the support of such great powers as Britain and Russia, but failed to do so.¹⁰ In his region, Simko tried to be the only powerful leader.

After WWI, the Assyrians under the leadership of Mar Shimun became another powerful group near Urmia. Mar Shimun needed an alliance, as he was non-Muslim in a region surrounded by Muslims. In March 1918, Simko met with Mar Shimun to discuss an alliance, but then killed him right after the meeting.¹¹ The murder of Mar Shimun was the start of the end of the Assyrians' power around Urmia. Some scholars, like Farideh Koochi-Kamali, view Simko as merely a tribal leader since the Simko rebellion lacked any political organization or strong ideological base; Simko looted Kurds and Turks in the same manner in order to reward his armed men.¹² Simko used nationalistic rhetoric even talking about the establishment of an independent Kurdistan as a tool to justify and maintain his personal power. Most of Simko's activities were pragmatic tactics to expand and maintain his personal power rather than commitment to Kurdish nationalism.

There are other scholars like Kamal Soleimani who consider Simko a national leader. Soleimani refers to several reasons for the national dimension of the Simko government, including the establishment of the first Kurdish school in Iran, the publication of a newspaper named *Kurd* in both Kurdish and Persian, and the use of the Kurdish language as the official language of his government.¹³

After his defeat in 1922, Simko went to Iraq and Turkey and tried to reorganize his forces for returning to Iran. Eventually, through a trap set by the central government, Simko was killed in 1930 in the small Kurdish city of

Oshnavieh.¹⁴ For his military skills and tribal base Simko can be seen as a failed version of Mustafa Barzani among the Kurds in Iran as the foundation of the central government in Iran was stronger compared to the Iraqi government. The defeat of Simko helped Kurdish nationalism in Iran to transform from a tribal base to a more organizational and impersonal one.

From 1921 until 1941, Reza Shah established a modern army, effectively collected taxes, and tried to build a nation-state out of Persian identity at the expense of oppressing other non-Persian group identities. Reza Khan, acting as the minister of war and using a huge budget, ended all revolts in Gilan, Tabriz, Kurdistan, and Ahvaz.¹⁵ The centralization of power allowed Reza Khan to collect taxes effectively and enrich the government. The government budget during the rule of Reza Shah increased from 245 million rials in 1925–1926 to 3,613 million rials in 1940–1941.¹⁶ During his rule, Reza Shah introduced conscription and as a result, the Iranian army exceeded 100,000 disciplined and equipped soldiers.¹⁷

In this period, there was an attempt to focus on the pre-Islamic history of Iran. The national assembly in 1925 decided to use the Old Persian calendar instead of the Islamic calendar and also required every Iranian citizen to choose a family name to separate Iranian identity from Arabic and Islamic identities.¹⁸ The state promoted the Persian language. The number of students at public schools from the academic year of 1925–1926 to the academic year of 1940–1941 increased from 74,000 to 355,500.¹⁹ The government was able to communicate with a large audience across the country by using new communication technologies like the telegraph in 1926, cinemas, *Itelaat* Newspaper in 1926, and Tehran Radio in 1940.²⁰ Due to warm relations between Reza Shah and Nazi Germany and at the suggestion of Persia's embassy in Berlin, in 1934 Reza Shah ordered the name of the country to be changed from Persia to Iran to emphasize the Aryan race.²¹ Other policies of Reza Shah, like the forced removal of the scarf on women and ordering all men to wear European hats, were immature attempts to homogenize all groups in Iran. By 1925, Reza Shah established a military autocracy with no opposition party.

The Kurds experienced the rule of Reza Shah mainly through oppression. The Kurdish language and all non-Persian languages were banned and mocked in this period. In addition, Reza Shah forced Kurdish tribes to settle down in order to be controlled and taxed easily. Some of the Kurdish tribal leaders fled to Iraq and some were jailed until the removal of Reza Shah in 1941. For instance, Emer Khan Shkak, a Kurdish tribal leader, was in jail in Urmia until 1941.²²

The Persian army was the most important accomplishment of Reza Shah. Surprisingly, however, in August 1941 the Allied forces marched to Tehran with no resistance from the Persian army that was so determined in oppressing domestic dissidents. Iran was a vital transit road to provide supply for the

Soviet Union and defeat Nazi Germany. Britain controlled the southern part of Iran, while the Soviets took control of the North, and the central government remained in control of the central part.²³ The Mukryan area, the geography of the 1946 Kurdistan Republic, remained as a buffer zone between the Soviet and British forces. The Persian army was viewed as an alien and colonial army in Kurdistan. In September 1941, soon after some Soviet aircrafts flew in the northwest area of Iran's sky and distributed some papers in Kurdish and Turkish, the Persian army evaporated from this area; Hemn, a well-known Kurdish poet, described this event in his poetry, saying that the Persian army was gone after the distribution of two papers.²⁴ After the removal of Reza Shah and in reaction to two decades of systematic oppression, a strong national movement emerged in the free Kurdish areas. As soon as the government became weak in Tehran, the Kurds started to reestablish their self-rule.

THE ESTABLISHMENT OF THE REPUBLIC OF KURDISTAN IN 1946

After the removal of Reza Shah, the Kurds started their political activities centered in the city of Mahabad in the province of West Azerbaijan. First, a group of middle class and urban-based individuals in Mahabad established a secret political organization named *Komalaya Jyani Kurd* (Committee for the Revival of the Kurds) known as the JK. This organization wanted the independence of all four parts of Kurdistan through civil struggle. Among its founding members, there were two Kurds from Iraq. The organization also had representatives in Kermanshah and Sulaimani in Iraq; in addition, the JK published a journal named *Nishtman* (Homeland) to promote Kurdish nationalism.²⁵ The JK members had to swear on the Quran and the flag and map of Kurdistan to stay loyal to the Kurdish nation and work for an independent Kurdistan.²⁶ The JK founding members believed that they needed to enlighten the Kurds about their national rights and duties before turning to armed struggle. In addition, armed struggle required reliance on tribal leaders, who were committed to their personal power above any national project. This commitment of the JK to the intellectual awakening of the Kurds can be seen in the first number of the *Nishtman* Journal, writing about the Kurdish *aghas* (landlords) and tribal leaders as follows:

Use a little pragmatism and you will realize why the enemy [the Iranian government] gives you this money. Is it really for your happiness and freedom? No. You have enough common sense to realize what this money is for, and that money is never given away without strings attached. They know that this

money will result in the postponement of independent Kurdistan. Oh Kurdish Aghas and tribal leaders, reject greediness so that independence of Kurdistan is not delayed any further.²⁷

The activities of the JK became an intellectual and organizational base for the establishment of the Kurdistan Democratic Party (KDP) in 1945 and the Republic of Kurdistan in 1946. There are not clear written explanations for why the JK changed its name to the KDP, though scholars who studied different documents of this period such as Hassan Ghazi refer to several reasons including the rigidity of recruiting new members within the JK and its link with other parts of Kurdistan for establishing an independent Kurdistan.²⁸ Both Britain and the USSR were against the JK for its link with the Kurds in Iraq and its political goal of achieving the independence of Great Kurdistan.

According to the *Kurdistan Newspaper*, the formal newspaper of the KDP, the party was established in the beginning of October 1945 after a second visit from some Kurdish leaders led by Qazi Mohammad to Baku during September of the same year.²⁹ The first visit to Baku in November 1941 was a cultural one and the USSR wanted to know the Kurdish leaders more closely. However, the second meeting in 1945 was political, and the Kurdish leaders asked for the economic, military, and political support of the Soviet Union. In both meetings, the Kurdish leaders met Jafar Baqirov, the leader of Soviet Azerbaijan. For the Soviet Union, Azerbaijan was the priority because of cultural links and also because besides the Tehran government, Iraq and in particularly Turkey were against any political development of the Kurds in Iran.³⁰ The KDP, in contrast to the JK, was not looking for Kurdish nationalism outside the Iranian borders and was willing to incorporate Kurdish landlords and tribal leaders. The program of the KDP at that time focused on autonomy, the use of the Kurdish language in the Kurdish areas, and unity among the two nations of Azerbaijan and Kurds in Iran.³¹ A few months after the establishment of the KDP and shortly after the establishment of the autonomous government of Azerbaijan in November 1945 in Tabriz, Qazi Mohammad, the KDP president announced the establishment of the Republic of Kurdistan on January 22, 1946.³² Qazi Mohammad became the president of the republic. Three ministers of the republic were from the city of Bokan and the rest were from Mahabad. Qazi Mohammad was a religious judge of Mahabad from a respected family, so he could link the modern segment of the society, the middle class individuals of Mahabad, with the traditional segment, Kurdish *aghas* and tribal leaders. The republic tried to establish a modern army, yet at the beginning it had to rely on the military forces of tribal leaders. The republic had four generals including Mohammad Hussein Seifi Ghazi (Minister of War), Emer Khan Shkak (a leader of the Shkak tribe around Urmia), Hama Rashid Khan Baneh (a tribal leader responsible for the

northern borders of the republic), and Mustafa Barzani (a tribal leader from Iraqi Kurdistan).³³ Barzani's forces played a positive role in the protection of the republic, yet they were not a key element of the establishment. It is important to note that Barzani's forces came to Iranian Kurdistan as they were defeated by the British army in Iraqi Kurdistan and stayed several months as refugees in the border city of Oshnavieh until later they were invited to Mahabad to participate in the republic.³⁴

The Republic of Kurdistan made the Kurdish language the formal language of the government and schooling. The republic was a golden age for the revival of Kurdish literature as several journals were published in this short period including *Kurdistan Newspaper*, *Halala* (a women magazine), and *Hawar*, a journal containing the works of famous Kurdish poets; even Persian text books were translated to Kurdish to change the educational language from Persian to Kurdish.³⁵ In addition, the republic sent fifty students to Baku at the end of April 1946 to study at a military college; the Soviet Union provided some weaponry too, but it refused to give any heavy weaponry like tanks.³⁶ Under the rule of the republic, parents had to send their children to school. Beside the tribal forces, the republic made some efforts to recruit young men to establish a non-tribal standing army.³⁷ Since most of the republic's ministers and officials were urban-based and non-tribal, the attempt to establish a standing army was a strategy to reduce reliance on Kurdish tribal leaders. In terms of the economy, the republic relied on selling tobacco to the Soviet Union and started to collect taxes.³⁸ The Kurds under the republic were able to run their affairs with considerable freedom. In other words, the republic was the first taste of having de facto state institutions by and for the Kurds.

Before the withdrawal of the Soviet forces, the republic acted as a de facto state without much reliance or coordination with the central government in Tehran. In April 1946, the Republic of Kurdistan signed a twenty-year agreement with the government of Azerbaijan in Tabriz; the agreement emphasized the exchange of representatives, military and economic cooperation, the protection of the rights of Azeri citizens in the Kurdistan republic and vice versa, and cooperation between the two governments before any negotiation with the Tehran government.³⁹

Under pressure from the United States and with the promise of oil concessions, on March 1946, the Soviet Union announced the withdrawal of its forces in six weeks, and the Soviet troops left Iran in April.⁴⁰ The Azerbaijan government negotiated with the Tehran government with no coordination from the Kurdistan Republic. The Republic of Azerbaijan collapsed on December 11; some leaders of the Azerbaijan government fled to the Soviet Union and many members were killed.⁴¹ Some Kurdish tribal leaders who were against the republic asked the Tehran government to send the army to Kurdistan. Other tribal leaders tried to secure their personal power and safety

by fleeing to Iraq or cooperating with the Persian army. This condition convinced Qazi Mohammad to not fight against the Persian army, so he tried to prevent looting and mass killing in Mahabad. Later, Qazi Mohammad, Seifi Qazi, and Sadri Qazi, the representative of Mahabad in the parliament, were tried and hanged.⁴² Also, several military officers were hanged and most of the republic officials put in jail for several years. Although the 1946 Kurdistan Republic was defeated militarily, it became a source of national aspiration for new generations of Kurds.

THE MILITARY STRUGGLE OF THE 1980S

After the collapse of the 1946 republic, the political activities of the Kurds in Iran declined. Some of the 1946 political activists went to Iraqi Kurdistan and later joined the rebellion of Mustafa Barzani in the 1960s. From 1946 to the 1979 Iranian revolution, the only major event was a short period of armed struggle from 1967 to 1968 led by a revolutionary group of KDP cadres; the non-tribal leaders of this armed struggle were Sulaiman Moini, Smail Sharifzade, and Mulla Aware.⁴³ The KDP revolutionary group wanted to have military activities against the Iranian regime instead of joining the rebellion of Barzani in Iraqi Kurdistan. The armed clashes lasted for a few months as they were under attack inside both Iranian and Iraqi Kurdistan. Barzani's forces, because of their military and financial reliance on the Shah's regime in the 1960s, cooperated with the Persian military forces.⁴⁴

Mohammad Reza Pahlavi, the son of Reza Shah, became the shah of Iran after the removal of his father in 1941. He gradually became as autocratic as his father and oppressed all opposition parties, so by the end of 1978 different groups, from radical Marxists to traditional clerics, united against his regime. There were some political prisoners who were in jail for over two decades. KDP leadership members Aziz Yosefi and Ghani Bloorian were in prison for twenty-five and twenty-seven years, respectively; Yosefi was released due to his sickness in 1977 and died a year later while Bloorian was released in 1978 with some other prisoners due to public pressure.⁴⁵

From 1925 to 1979, the two Persian Kings created a significant gap in terms of development between the central Persian-dominated provinces and non-Persian provinces. As a result of the autocratic Persian nationalism, the Persian provinces of Iran became the center of development and non-Persian provinces became Iran's periphery. For instance, in 1976, 80 percent of households in the central Persian provinces had utility while less than 50 percent of the rest of the country had utility; the rate of literacy in 1976 on average was 47.5 percent in Iran while the Persian-dominated provinces had a literacy rate of 66.1 percent.⁴⁶

The 1979 Iranian revolution again resulted in a power vacuum in Iran, especially in the Kurdish areas. The KDP did not have much organization prior to the revolution. Some leaders of the KDP, including Abdul Rahman Ghassemlou, returned to Iran just a few months prior to the collapse of the Shah regime.⁴⁷ Although the KDP was unprepared, when the party had its first rally in Mahabad on March 11, 1979, about 100,000 people gathered; Ghassemlou, as the leader of the KDP, gave a speech, saying that “The Kurdistan Democratic Party is the party of Qazi Mohammed and this party wants autonomy for Iranian Kurdistan and democracy for Iran.”⁴⁸ On February 18, just a week after the success of the revolution, the KDP was able to control the military base of the army in Mahabad with the help of some Kurdish officers with no fighting. Once again after the 1979 revolution, the KDP was the leading party of the Kurds in Iran. However, this time the KDP was challenged by a new political party named Komala, whose leaders were young Kurdish Marxists. Komala had more educated members, especially in the cities of Sanandaj province. The Mukryan area, the area of the 1946 republic, was still the stronghold of the KDP. In the provinces of West Azerbaijan and Sanandaj, and some cities of Kermanshah province, the KDP and Komala took control and gathered tens of thousands of followers. The two parties not only had guns but the support of the Kurds in these cities. The political legitimacy of the two parties became obvious when they won in many Kurdish cities in the first free post-revolutionary parliamentary election on March 14, 1980.⁴⁹

After the 1979 Iranian revolution, Kurdistan was a political anomaly as Kurdish nationalism became the dominant discourse there while the Islamic discourse of Khomeini dominated across the rest of Iran. The domination of nationalist discourse in Kurdistan indicated that what happened in the 1940s, particularly the establishment of the Kurdistan Republic, had strong socio-cultural support beside the external support of the Soviet Union. The Kurds were a minority group, so they tried to attract the support of Khomeini for their Kurdish cause as he was the most charismatic Shia leader. When he returned to Iran on February 1, 1979, several million people welcomed him in the streets of Tehran. Ghassemlou met Khomeini in Paris and also on March 21 in the religious city of Qom in Iran. Ghassemlou asked for the autonomy of the Kurds in Iran, yet Khomeini responded that all groups in Iran suffered from the Shah’s regime.⁵⁰ The Islamic discourse of Khomeini had no place for the Kurdish nationalism.

Political tension between the KDP and Komala with Khomeini gradually increased until it turned to military confrontation. The Kurdish parties boycotted the referendum, which was a question of Yes/No to change the regime to the Islamic Republic. The Kurdish parties boycotted, arguing that the context of the Islamic Republic was not clear. Ideologically, both KDP and Komala were socialist in contrast to the Islamic discourse of Khomeini.

On March 18, 1979, after the KDP took control of the Mahabad military base, Komala tried to control the military base in the city of Sanandaj, but they failed and the army bombarded the city; the fighting in Sanandaj lasted for about two weeks and many civilians were killed.⁵¹ The Kurdish forces remained in Sanandaj and the Persian army could not control the city. The major military confrontation started in August 1979 in Paveh, a city in the province of Kermanshah. In a speech, Khomeini ordered all military forces to go to Kurdistan and clean Kurdistan from the infidel KDP and Komala.⁵² The military campaign of Khomeini lasted for about three months and many Kurdish civilians and armed forces were killed.

The KDP and Komala, with the support of civilians, won the three-months war, so Khomeini released a peace message to negotiate.⁵³ A series of negotiations between the government and the Representative Committee of the Kurdish Nation (RCKN) started. The RCKN included Shiekh Ezzaddin Hussaini, a prominent religious figure from Mahabad, the KDP, Komala, and Chriki Fedayi, a leftist group in Kurdistan. The RCKN published their autonomy plan in eight articles, emphasizing a national assembly for the Kurds in the four provinces of West Azerbaijan, Sanandaj, Kermanshah, and Ilam, the Kurdish language as the formal language of schooling in Kurdistan, and the Kurdish Peshmerga forces being in charge of security.⁵⁴ The head of the government delegation was Dariush Forouhar, who came up with another plan that gave limited autonomy. In the government plan, there was no national assembly; the Kurdish language was a course in school rather than the language of government offices and teaching, and there was no place or role for the Peshmerga forces.⁵⁵

The peace talks failed and in April 1980 another wave of military campaign against the Kurdish parties started. Gradually, the KDP and Komala lost control over the cities and continued a type of village-based guerrilla warfare throughout the 1980s. By the mid-1990s, even guerrilla warfare failed and Komala and the KDP became physically and politically remote from Iranian Kurdistan. The armed conflict was somehow inevitable. Internally, the Islamic Republic oppressed all armed and unarmed opposition groups. Thousands of leftist university professors under the name of the Cultural Revolution were expelled and thousands of Marxist prisoners were executed.⁵⁶ Externally, on September 1980 Iraq started war with Iran that lasted for eight years. In other words, the Islamic Republic of Khomeini became more autocratic and militaristic both internally and externally. The 1980s saw another military defeat of the Kurds by another Persian government. The Islamic Republic kept the centralization of power in the hands of Persians with the difference that this time Shia Persians had control of the power. Even after the defeat of the armed political parties, the Islamic Republic has not provided any group rights to the Kurds.

There are several reasons for the military defeat of Komala and the KDP. One reason for this defeat was the fact that the Kurdish parties had light weaponry while the Islamic Republic had heavy weaponry, including tanks and aircrafts. In addition, the KDP and Komala had ideological and resource conflicts. In 1984, the tensions between the two parties resulted in a three-year civil war in which hundreds were killed from each side. The civil war seriously lowered the popular support for the two parties. The young Marxist leaders of Komala, like Abdullah Mohtadi, promoted the idea that the KDP was a bourgeoisie and outdated party, so fighting against this party was as important as fighting the Islamic Republic.⁵⁷ On the other hand, Ghassemlou wanted to impose the hegemony of the KDP, and demanded that Komala recognize the KDP's revolutionary credentials.⁵⁸ In terms of diplomacy, only the KDP had international connections, mainly because of Ghassemlou; however, ideological blindness and irrational commitment to socialism caused Ghassemlou not to make any efforts to obtain the support of the United States, the most powerful enemy of the Islamic Republic.

In addition, the KDP of Iraq, under the leadership of Masoud Barzani in the 1980s, fought alongside the Iranian revolutionary guards against the KDP and Komala. The cooperation of Barzani's party caused the KDP and Komala to withdraw from many areas around Urmia faster and with more casualties. One reason for this cooperation was that the KDP of Iraq was in Iran prior to the revolution and later received support from the Islamic Republic.⁵⁹ Another factor for the failure of the armed struggle of the 1980s was the mobilization of the Azerbaijani Turks in the province of West Azerbaijan against the Kurds. Persians used Shia identity to connect to the Azerbaijani Turks and picture the Kurds as a threat, although the real threat was another Persian regime under the cover of the Islamic Republic. In the last four decades under the rule of the Islamic Republic of Iran, the identity of Azerbaijani Turks was banned and mocked.

Later, in the 1990s, in the Kurdistan Region of Iraq, many leaders and cadres of the KDP and Komala were killed by the agents of the Islamic Republic due to the internal disorder and infighting in Iraqi Kurdistan.⁶⁰ The Islamic Republic assassinated a long list of its dissidents in Europe including two leaders of the KDP; Abdulrahman Ghassemlou in 1989 in Austria and Sadegh Sharafkandi in 1992 in Germany.⁶¹ From the mid-1990s onward, the KDP and Komala have been in exile in Iraqi Kurdistan and experienced several splits. These Kurdish parties have not been able to update their human resources and strategies; they have insisted on armed struggle and their recruitment has been mainly among uneducated Kurdish youth of rural areas. The forced exile of these parties weakened their influence on the Kurds in Iran.

In 2004, the Kurdistan Worker's Party (PKK), the dominant party of the Kurds in Turkey, tried to fulfill the political gap created by the defeat of

the KDP and Komala by establishing the Kurdistan Free Life Party (PJAK) from its Iranian Kurdish members; after a series of clashes, PJAK ceased its military activities and focused on promoting cultural activities around Urmia, Kermanshah, and Ilam, where the KDP and Komala have been historically weak.

THE CIVIL STRUGGLE OF THE KURDS SINCE 1990

From 1997 to 2005, Mohammad Khatami became the president and a reformist atmosphere started in Iran. Internally, Khatami introduced the ideas of civil society and civil liberties, and externally he introduced the idea of *dialogue among civilizations*.⁶² Many NGOs and newspapers were established during the Khatami era. However, Khatami failed to fundamentally change the regime and during his presidency many writers, journalists, and university students were tortured and killed by the Iranian intelligence service. The Islamic Republic has been a unique dictatorial political system in which some non-elected positions like Supreme Leader and The Guardian Council of the Constitution have considerable power, reducing the power of the elected president and MPs. The Khatami era can be seen as a clash between the elected and nonelected segments of the political system. The reformist era, although failed, provided a base for a persisting critique of the Islamic Republic in terms of democracy and human rights.

In the sixth term of the Iranian parliament in 2000, Kurdish MPs with the leadership of Bahaeddin Adab, the MP of Sanandaj city, established the faction of Kurdish MPs. The faction was a clear attempt to shift the Kurdish question in Iran from a security problem to a legal and political one. The Kurdish parliamentary faction included MPs from all four provinces including Kermanshah and Ilam.⁶³ The faction could not continue for the following parliamentary terms, so Adab and some other political activists established the United Front of Kurds (UFK). The UFK has failed to give a legal and political cover to the Kurdish question as the political atmosphere became increasingly militaristic and authoritarian after 2005.⁶⁴

Kurdish civil activists used the concept of human rights to work for Kurdish rights. Mohammad Sadiq Kaboudvand, a journalist and human right activist, established the Kurdistan Human Rights Organization in 2005, which played an important role in reporting human rights violations in Kurdistan. Kaboudvand was arrested in 2007 and put in jail for ten years; in 2009, Kaboudvand received the Hellman/Hammitt grant and the British Press Award for international journalists.⁶⁵ In the Tehran prison, Kaboudvand released statements celebrating the establishment of the 1946 Kurdistan Republic and condemning organized violence including the assassination of Ghassemlou.

In addition to human rights activities, environmentalism has become a widespread theme in Kurdistan. Several environmental NGOs in different cities were established. The Green Organization of Chya (GCC) in Marivan in Sanandaj province has been one of the most active and famous green NGOs in Iran. On August 25, 2018, Sharif Bajour and Omid Kohnepoushi, members of the GCC, died while trying to contain a forest fire.⁶⁶ Thousands of people participated in their funeral. Kurdish environmental activists are part of Kurdish nationalism as they are trying to protect the environment of Kurdistan, and they are not part of governmental or non-governmental Persian organizations. Moreover, as part of the civil struggle Kurdish journalists and academics established journals and newspapers to promote awareness about the Kurdish question in Iran, Turkey, Iraq, and Syria. Azad Haji Aqai, a long-term Kurdish journalist and translator, in his interview with the author, characterized the Khatami era as a golden era for Kurdish publication since Kurdish students in this period started to publish weekly and monthly journals in many universities in Tehran, Kermanshah, Tabriz, Sanandaj, Ilam, and Hamadan.⁶⁷ In 2006, Haji Agai, along with some of his Kurdish friends, started to publish the journal of Rojev at Tehran University, which has provided a highly academic discussion of the Kurdish question.

The civil struggle of the Kurds in Iran has had some advantages over the armed struggle. It transformed the Kurdish struggle from a traditionally village-based approach in Mukryan and Sanandaj to educated urban centers in all four provinces. During the 1980s struggle, although the KDP and Komala had some influence in urban centers in the provinces of West Azerbaijan and Kurdistan, the villages were the backbone of their armed struggle. The civil struggle has lowered the cost of participating in the struggle and as a result it has been able to encourage urban-based and educated Kurds to take part in the struggle. In this civil struggle, Kurdish teachers, journalists, human rights and environmental activists, artists, university students, and store owners have continued to preserve and improve Kurdish identity.

In addition, in the armed struggle the Kurds could not overcome the heavy weaponry of Persian military forces, yet in the civil struggle Kurdish activists relied on new universal communication technologies like Facebook, Telegram, Twitter, and Instagram to promote Kurdish nationalism. The participation of the Kurds in several national events has been the result of the civil struggle. On May 13, 2010, the Kurds in many cities in Iran stayed at home and closed their stores in order to condemn the execution of several Kurdish prisoners, especially Farzad Kamangar, who was a Kurdish teacher and political activist.⁶⁸ Major Kurdish cities like Sanandaj, Paveh, Mahabad, and Kamyaran, each with hundreds of stores, went on strike on that day. On September 8, 2018, the Iranian regime executed three Kurdish political prisoners and fired long-range missiles at the headquarters of the Kurdistan Democratic

Party-Iran (KDP-I), which split from the KDP in 2006, in the Kurdistan Region of Iraq, in which sixteen members of the party were killed.⁶⁹ A few days later on September 12, Iranian Kurdistan experienced another unique public strike condemning the attack and executions.

There has been an increasing connection and solidarity between the Kurdish activists of the West Azerbaijan and Sanandaj provinces with those in Kermanshah and Ilam. On November 13, 2017, an earthquake struck the province of Kermanshah in which hundreds were killed and many buildings were destroyed. People across Iran sent aid to the earthquake-affected Kurds, and it became a national duty and campaign for Kurds to help the victims in the province of Kermanshah. Abubakr Maroufi, a Kurdish volunteer from the city of Mahabad, died in an accident while he was driving a vanload of aid to earthquake victims in the city of Sarpol-e Zahab in the Kermanshah province.⁷⁰ His death led to thousands respecting his body in each city while returning to Mahabad. In addition, new generations of Kurdish activists were born in Kermanshah and Ilam. In July 2017, some Kurdish cultural activists tried to launch a cultural summit with the participation of 450 Kurdish poets, writers, musicians, and language experts from Urmia, Sanandaj, Kermanshah, Ilam, Lorestan, Hamadan, and Khorasan. However, the Iranian intelligence service shut down the summit and arrested some organizers who were from the provinces of Kermanshah and Lorestan.⁷¹

The geographic limitation of the 1980s armed struggle caused some Persian intellectuals to reduce the Kurdish nationalism in Iran to the national struggle of Sunni Kurds. Hamidreza Jalaeipour, a prominent Persian political sociologist, in his writing about the 1980s armed struggle, has accepted that Kurdistan was a political anomaly after the 1979 revolution as the Islamic discourse had to fight for a decade in order to defeat Kurdish nationalism. However, he characterizes (and reduces) this national movement to the struggle of Sunni Kurds living in the provinces of West Azerbaijan and Kurdistan. Jalaeipour states that even those cities of the Kermanshah province that participated in the 1980s armed struggle are Sunnis.⁷² The Kurdish nationalism in Iran has been mostly secular and the Kurdish parties in the 1980s negotiations with the Tehran government and in their party programs never identify themselves as Sunni or even Muslim Kurds. The 1946, Kurdistan Republic could not expand even to Sanandaj because of the Persian army. In the 1980s, the Kurdish political parties did not have the opportunity to rally freely in Kermanshah and Ilam. Now the civil struggle has been able to expand Kurdish nationalism into Kermanshah and Ilam. In addition, Kermanshah and Ilam, after experiencing about four decades of a Persian Shia regime, remain as some of the most deprived areas in Iran.

Another interesting characteristic of the Kurdish nationalism in Iran is that in the last decades it has created an imagined community including the Kurds

in Turkey, Syria, and Iraq. The Kurds in Iran are sympathetic to events related to other Kurds outside Iran while they are less concerned about events related to non-Kurdish groups inside Iran. The Kurds in Iran came to the streets in 1999 to condemn the arrest of Abdullah Ocalan, launched aid campaigns in 2014 to 2015 for the Kurds living in Kobani city in Syria, and supported the 2017 independence referendum in the Kurdistan Region of Iraq. However, the Kurds remained inactive and dispassionate when in 2009 large protests under the Green Movement occurred in the Persian-dominated cities of Tehran, Isfahan, and Shiraz. Thus, the Kurds in Iran have the least solidarity with Persians and the most solidarity with the Kurds outside Iran's borders.

CHANGING POLITICAL STRATEGY TO ESCAPE ANOTHER MILITARY DEFEAT

A century of Kurdish nationalism in Iran can be viewed in a cyclical history of power vacuums, short periods of self-rule, and eventual military defeats. A power vacuum happened after WWI when Simko established a government for a short period until he was defeated militarily. In 1941, another power vacuum occurred, and the Kurds established the Republic of Kurdistan in 1946 until it was defeated militarily. Another power vacuum began in 1979 and Kurds took control for a short period until they were defeated militarily again. Are the Kurds in Iran doomed to another military defeat?

In each period Kurdish nationalism has achieved some progress, yet still the occurrence of another military defeat is very plausible. The political leadership of the Kurds in Iran is still waiting for another power vacuum while its military capability has not changed much. Almost all Persian intellectuals, even those who fled to western democracies, still oppose basic rights for non-Persian groups such as the right to be educated in their mother languages. The current popular Persian opposition leaders, Maryam Rajavi (the leader of the People's Mojahedin of Iran) and Reza Pahlavi, the son of the former Persian Shah, are far from democratic. Persians view the modern Iran in terms of a cyclical history too. For Persians, Reza Khan saved the territorial integrity of Iran in the 1920s and centralized power. In 1946, the Persian army ended the Iranian/Persian crisis of 1941 to 1946 by defeating the governments of Kurdistan and Azerbaijan and then centralizing power. In the 1980s, the Islamic Republic of Iran defeated Kurds and centralized power again. From current Persian intellectuals and opposition leaders, no non-Persian nation in Iran should have doubt that Persians want to rely on their military strength again.

If the Kurds, and more generally non-Persian nations in Iran, do what they have done in the past to deal with Persians, they will end up with another

military defeat. The Kurdish nationalism in Iran needs to change its political strategy in order to be able to defeat Persian nationalism. Most Kurdish political parties of Iran demand either autonomy or federalism. Demanding autonomy or federalism in Iran for non-Persian nations is a defensive and self-defeating strategy, as they have to wait and negotiate with Persians to achieve this political strategy. In other words, autonomy and federalism in Iran require the recognition of Persians as the biggest group, so once again Persians will be at the center and non-Persians at the periphery of Iran's politics. Kurds, Azerbaijani Turks, Arabs, and Baloch in Iran need to cooperate with each other to establish their own independent states. Kurds should have an active non-Persian strategy, looking for alliance with all enemies of Persians inside and outside Iran. Of course, the tensions between non-Persian nations with each other, in particular between Kurds and Azerbaijani Turks, are minor to the goal of establishing the four states. When another power vacuum happens in Iran, Kurds and other non-Persians should not wait for the Persian army to reorganize and then defeat these nations one by one; the long history of Persian oppression justifies any preemptive defense by non-Persian nations.

NOTES

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Chapter 11

Abdul Rahman Ghassemlou and the Kurdish Resistance in Iran

Carol Prunhuber

Secretary General Abdul Rahman Ghassemlou of the Kurdistan Democratic Party of Iran (PDKI) led the Kurdish national struggle for democracy and autonomy in Iran for eighteen years. On July 13, 1989, Ghassemlou was murdered in Vienna, along with two colleagues, while negotiating with emissaries of the Islamic Republic of Iran. The objective of this meeting was to find a solution to the Kurdish problem in Iran. But it was a trap that had been laid out for over ten years to assassinate the Kurdish leader.

The steps that led to this state crime are a reflection of the historical events of the Kurdish nation and Ghassemlou's life. His political program, totally contrary to that of the Islamic Republic, made him a target for the Iranian government. From the moment Ghassemlou emerged as a political force, his project "Autonomy for Kurdistan. Democracy for Iran" attracted the regime's rage.

His assassination was not only a tragedy for the Kurds of Iran, but for the Kurdish nation as a whole. Ghassemlou was a unique leader in the region. He was a visionary whose political program created a democratic and humanistic platform that managed to overcome tribal limitations. He knew that the Kurds had to be united if they wanted the national movement to grow. Division among conflicting Kurdish parties had often turned into violence weakening their national struggle. His own party suffered several divisions. Yet Ghassemlou was convinced that unity among the Kurds would put an end to the manipulation of his people by the different regional governments.

For millions of Kurds, Ghassemlou embodied a nation's hope for attaining recognition of their rights as a minority in a multiethnic Iran. With charisma, wisdom, and tolerance, he led the resistance of the Kurds of Iran against the theocratic regime of Ayatollah Khomeini between 1979 and 1989.

SUPPRESSION OF KURDISH IDENTITY

In the aftermath of World War I and the defeat of the Ottoman Empire, Kurdistan was swept by a wave of nationalism after the Treaty of Sèvres (August 10, 1920) declared their right to self-determination and promised the Kurds an autonomous state. Yet after the victory of Mustafa Kemal in Turkey and the Treaty of Lausanne in 1923, the Kurds were divided among the newly created states of the region.

Reza Shah Pahlavi's centralization and consolidation of power were the means to impose a uniform and indivisible Persian identity during his reign (1925–1941). In Iran, the Kurds and other minorities posed a problem for his Persianization project of establishing “one nation with one language and one identity.”¹

In Kurdistan, Ismael Agha, known as Simko, had become a nationalist leader opposed to the Iranian central government. He sought autonomy and self-determination for the Kurds. In 1930, he was murdered by Reza Shah's emissaries with whom he was to negotiate a peace treaty. After Simko's death, the Shah began a period of systematic repression within all Kurdish populated areas. Kurds were no longer allowed to write or teach their history, and their language was banned.

GHASSEMLOU'S CULTURAL AND POLITICAL BACKGROUND

Ghassemloo was born in 1930 and was a cosmopolitan intellectual with a fine sense of humor. He moved easily between different cultures and spoke nine languages with ease—Kurdish, Azeri, Farsi, Turk, Arabic, French, English, Russian, and Czech. Thanks to his education in Paris and Prague, he developed a true knowledge of the West. He obtained a doctorate in Economics and Political Science from the University of Prague where he taught economic development. In 1965, he published *Kurdistan and the Kurds*, a fundamental book on the Kurds “seen through the Marxist-Leninist teachings.”²

A member of the youth section of the Tudeh Party, the Iranian communist party, Ghassemloo understood early on that the Tudeh communists would not defend the nationalist aspirations of the Kurds. After the collapse of the ephemeral Kurdistan Republic in Mahabad in 1946 and the consequent occupation of the region by the Iranian army, the clandestine Kurdistan Democratic Party of Iran (PDKI) had come to depend entirely on the Tudeh party.³ In 1955, the PDKI cut all organizational ties with the Tudeh and became totally independent.⁴ For the Kurdish leader, a democrat had to be free and independent of a third party that could restrict his freedom of action. However, the Tudeh continued to influence the PDKI until 1980.⁵

As a young student, Ghassemlou considered himself a Stalinist: “At that time we strongly believed in that ideology until we began to hear rumors that there were arrests.”⁶ The Soviet invasion of Czechoslovakia in 1968 ended the Prague Spring and the ensuing persecutions, arrests, and harsh sentences broke Ghassemlou’s belief in Soviet communism. The beginning of his path to democracy had started.

POLITICAL VISION

Freedom and democracy, minority rights, and justice were the pillars of Ghassemlou’s vision. For him, it was vital to protect democratic freedoms and strengthen a proper democratic government in Iran. He believed that without a democratic regime in Iran, the Kurds could not achieve their rights, and without rights for the Kurds, the regime would not be democratic. Ghassemlou’s democracy included three indivisible aspects: social, economic, and political democracy.⁷ He also supported pluralism, tolerance, and acceptance of the opinions of others.

In analyzing what social democracy meant to his party, Ghassemlou wrote, “Our struggle for democracy will never be eclipsed by the struggle for national rights or class struggle. . . . While the Democratic Party [PDKI] survives democracy will be its goal.”⁸ Even though Ghassemlou condemned the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan, he considered the Afghan guerrillas to be fanatics. But he could not say it publicly since then it was not politically correct.

Ghassemlou recognized the dangers of giving legitimacy to and normalizing relations with fundamentalist insurgencies. He saw the detriment this posed to global human rights and its impact on the international community. In a WikiLeaks cable from the U.S. embassy in Baghdad to the U.S. State Department, Ghassemlou expressed his perplexity that “the president of the United States has received ‘a ragtag bunch of backward afghan fundamentalists’ and persists in trying to bolster ‘nonviable nicaraguan groups,’ while not affording attention to ‘true democratic groups’ who are fighting for ‘universally recognized human rights.’”⁹

According to Michel Bonnot, French doctor at the humanitarian organization *Aide Médicale Internationale*, Ghassemlou “understood that Communism was not for the Kurdish peasant. Rather he thought that social and political change had to happen slowly.”¹⁰ He could not ignore the fact that two-thirds of his political cadres had been trained by the Tudeh and that the ideological change would be slow.

Before the 1980s, the PDKI had been a fragmented party with no political agenda. Thanks to his experience in Europe, Ghassemlou managed to

create a modern and organized party. The political program of the PDKI not only claimed autonomy for Kurdistan, it also included economic, social, and cultural objectives: gender equality, compulsory education, political and religious freedom, separation between religion and state, and independence of the judiciary.

During a party convention, Ghassemlou introduced a brochure on socialism entitled "A Short Treatise on Socialism." He wanted the party to adopt it as official policy and to set aside the "existing socialism" prevalent among the revolutionaries and leftists. There was strong opposition within the party to this change. His persistence and reasoning capacity ended up convincing the majority to follow a new direction.

Ghassemlou taught the Kurds to feel proud of their identity and heritage. He understood that one of the keys for political and social progress in Kurdistan lay in self-esteem. "You will learn to speak and write in Kurdish," he would say to his men. Polygamy and arranged marriages were also banned by the PDKI. If these unions still happened and the party found out, the marriages would be dissolved. This was strictly enforced within the party and also in areas that the party controlled.

Equality between men and women was another of Ghassemlou's principles. It was not theoretical, and he pushed to have women's rights implemented within the Kurdish community. For him, a society could only be modern in as much as women participated in political and social activities and in the nationalist movement. His respect for women's rights won him the support of many Kurdish women.

According to G. Moradi, PDKI member from Kermanshah province, Ghassemlou's "strong belief in the equality of men and women" allowed Kurdish women to be regarded as equals within the party and the family circle. "Women were always encouraged by *Kak* [brother] Doctor to take a stand and speak up because no one else could do it for them," Moradi said.¹¹ Ghassemlou believed that no society could be complete or free unless women, the other half, had equal rights.

The Kurdish leader worked hard to integrate women into the Central Committee due to their own merits and not because of gender. There were special women's courses and sessions that he personally mentored. "Ghassemlou would argue that 'our struggle for national rights is not detached from the struggle for women's rights,'" explained Maryam Alipour, PDKI veteran women activist. She believed that "struggle for gender equality in Ghassemlou's belief was as important as the struggle for national rights."¹²

Ghassemlou firmly felt that the party could not depend on one man, nor should one person be the uniting factor. He recognized that one of the downfalls of the Kurdish resistance had been a tribal concept of politics based on the unconditional support of a chief and not of a particular political program.

He wanted to create an organization that would be able to survive him. About this key political observation, Ghassemlou said: "This is the first time that the Kurdish movement is not led by a tribal chief, which is why it always ended up failing in the past. It was always very easy to eliminate the movement. All you had to do was kill the leader."¹³

THE IRANIAN REVOLUTION

In 1978, Ghassemlou went to visit Ayatollah Khomeini in Neauphle-le-Château. From his exile, Khomeini was weaving the threads of the revolution in Iran. Though he met with many of those who opposed the Shah, Mohammad Reza Pahlavi, the Ayatollah did not receive Ghassemlou when he went to visit the cleric.¹⁴ Nevertheless, Ghassemlou publicly supported Khomeini because he considered that the Ayatollah, then symbol of the opposition, would succeed in overthrowing the Shah.¹⁵

Ghassemlou returned to Iran in late 1978 and began working with a weak and fragmented party. Many of the members of the PDKI had been executed, imprisoned, or were in exile. He laid the ideological and structural bases of the party, created clandestine committees, renewed the formation of cadres, and incorporated young activist members.¹⁶ In March 1979 after thirty years of clandestine operations, the PDKI officially announced that it had resumed its political activities. Soon after, Ghassemlou addressed his people in Mahabad for the first time. Tens of thousands of men and women from all corners of Kurdistan filled a football stadium. In his speech, Ghassemlou declared that his "party was ready to cooperate with the new regime as long as it guaranteed the rights of the Kurds."¹⁷ He announced the PDKI political program and asked the Tehran government to accept the claim of autonomy of the Kurds.

After this rally, Ghassemlou became a figure recognized not only by the Kurds, but also by the Iranian and foreign press. He had become the spokesman and leader of the national Kurdish movement, giving it a clear direction: he favored an independent Kurdish party that asserted the rights of the Kurdish people in Iran. He mobilized the resistance against the regime because he was able to communicate in a way that spoke to the hopes and desires of the population. Ghassemlou believed that if minorities within Iran had the right to self-determination and their rights were accepted, they would want to continue living within the boundaries of the country.

In March 1979, the PDKI presented a plan for autonomy that included greater cultural freedom, the ability to make decisions relevant to the region, lead the regional government, and establish a local Kurdish parliament. The plan did not proclaim separation from Iran; instead it recognized the

authority of the new government. However, Mehdi Bazargan, head of the new provisional government, rejected this plan and accused the Kurds of being separatists.¹⁸

During the turbulent months of early 1979, Ghassemlou began to prepare his armed force, the *peshmerga* (Kurdish guerrilla, literally means “he who walks before death”). At the same time, he sought dialogue with the central government. Even though he was meeting with government authorities—visiting Khomeini twice—Ghassemlou feared that the regime was looking to buy time. He stated publicly that the Kurds would support the government as long as it was democratic and accepted Kurdish autonomy.¹⁹

After his first meeting with Khomeini, it was clear the Ayatollah had no intention of respecting the Kurds’ demands. Because the Kurds did not receive a firm response to their demand for autonomy, they decided not to support the referendum for the creation of a new Republic scheduled for the end of March since the only option was an Islamic Republic. On the first of April, Khomeini proclaimed the Islamic Republic of Iran, “the first government of God” that “will establish justice and overthrow and bury the monarchy in the rubbish of history.”²⁰ Few voted in Kurdistan.

ADEPT, APPROACHABLE, AND COMPASSIONATE LEADER

Toward the end of the summer of 1979 the *peshmerga* controlled Kurdistan. In Mahabad, at Ghassemlou’s *daftar* or general headquarters, people came and went with total freedom. When Marc Kravetz, French journalist for *Libération*, visited the Kurdish leader at his house, he was surprised to find no gates there and total trust prevailing among the people. According to Kravetz, the atmosphere that reigned in Mahabad was in direct contrast to the oppressive and fanatical climate of the southern cities of Iran. “Here I found a political leader who spoke like a normal person. He analyzed the situation and given the forces with which he was confronted aimed to achieve some kind of tolerance and a national equilibrium that would permit a strengthening of the Iranian state. Ghassemlou was convinced that autonomy could be negotiated. It was already a fact because the Kurds had created an autonomous zone. Ghassemlou thought that this was the moment for dialogue,” Kravetz explained.²¹

Ghassemlou realized that under the iron grip of the ayatollahs, there could not be democratic progress in Iran or Kurdistan. “But we can’t declare a war,” he insisted. “Because it is a revolutionary government supported by the population, we must insist on our demands and negotiate until the last moment. We must take advantage of every opportunity. Yet we must also

prepare ourselves to resist. We must be vigilant and understand that someday we may be under the fire of bombs and a military attack."²² Several delegations of the PDKI met with Iranian authorities—always trying to avoid a war. "Ghassemlou hated war, because he knew what it would mean," said Sadeqh Sharafkandi, his colleague and successor.²³

According to French geopolitical analyst Gérard Chaliand, "He was a pedagogue in the meetings with the party cadres. He always conducted himself with a caustic spirit and humor. In the morning, he had meetings in the party's offices. It was a big house with a living room that held thirty people."²⁴ He would go to the battlefield, tour the region, and visit the families of the fallen peshmergas. Doctor Frédéric Tissot described him as "a dignified, serene leader who went to the front with his commanders. Some people repeatedly cautioned him that he needed to be careful."²⁵

Ghassemlou used to eat with his men in the daftar dining hall. "He ate simply, like them and was a very down-to-earth man. He spoke to his men with conviction, not needing to issue orders. There were about twelve thousand peshmergas who were utterly fascinated with their leader," Bonnot recalled.²⁶ Ghassemlou's love for his people and his peshmergas was evident in the way he related to them. When Ghassemlou visited them at the hospital he "would hold their hands; he knew their names, about their lives. He spoke to them about their village and their family. Ghassemlou had such an incredible human quality that he would listen to each and every one of the peshmerga and their stories," Bonnot noted.²⁷

HOLY WAR AGAINST THE KURDS

At the beginning of the revolution, Khomeini kept the liberals in power for strategic reasons. During the first months, the country enjoyed great political freedom. Despite having enormous influence on the population, at that point the clerics were not organized and had no political party.²⁸ With the creation of the Party of the Islamic Republic (PRI),²⁹ whose goal was to support the revolution and establish a theocracy in Iran, Khomeini began to displace the liberals and strengthen his political power. Clerics took over control of the economy, justice, and public administration. The law was dictated in the mosques and the revolutionary courts enforced it, often with firing squads.

The revolution dismantled the army for the sake of creating a new armed force, ordered by Khomeini: The Army of the Islamic Revolution Guardians (*Sepāh-e Pāsdārān-e Enqelāb-e Eslāmi*) known as the Pasdaran or Guardians of the Revolution.³⁰ This was a parallel military force loyal to the regime, in charge of internal security and borders.

In northwest Iran, the situation was worrisome. Struggles over land ownership, demonstrations against the government, and clashes between the peshmerga and the security forces increased day by day. The Kurds occupied military garrisons and police stations and the population rejected the arrival of large contingents of armed forces and the pasdaran. By June 1979, there were violent clashes between the Kurdish population and forces sent by Tehran.³¹

On August 3 amid this tense climate, elections were held for the Assembly of Experts in charge of drafting a new constitution for the recently created Islamic Republic. The Kurds participated and Ghassemlou won by an undisputed majority. He received an impressive number of votes, including those from the mosques where all the faithful were Azeris. He was also one of two elected secular candidates who did not practice Islam.

"I had so many votes, they were not able to eliminate me," remembered Ghassemlou. "I occupied the third place in the voting and I received a mandate."³² His message to the authorities was clear: "There is room for all in this country, where everything needs doing or redoing."³³ But his election was unacceptable to the clerics. For Khomeini, the Kurds were secular and left-wing. Therefore, they constituted a threat. For Islamic orthodox supporters, Marxism and liberalism were equally an anathema.³⁴

The new Islamic Republic did not tolerate differences whether they were ethnic, political, or religious—Shi'ism became the state religion. Also, ethnic minorities were not included in the new constitution and Khomeini had early on exhorted the faithful to "fight united and without compassion" against the atheists because "freedom without Islam, sovereignty without Islam, makes no sense." According to the Ayatollah, those who asked for a democratic republic, "proposed a republic without Islam, without a prophet, without imams," and this was contrary to Khomeini's project.³⁵ Iran adopted the Shia creed as the state religion and Khomeini became the supreme spiritual leader, the highest authority in the country.³⁶ As Ghassemlou feared, the revolution would become a clerical dictatorship.

On August 16, 1979 a few days before the opening of the Assembly of Experts session, armed Kurdish groups defeated the regime's forces in the Kurdish city of Paveh. Khomeini was enraged and "threatened to cast left-wingers into the 'dustbin of death.' . . . We gave them [the left-wingers] time and treated them mildly with the hope they would stop their devilish acts. . . . If they don't, we shall say the last word," he proclaimed.³⁷ Infuriated by the defeat of the army and the lack of "revolutionary enthusiasm," Ayatollah Khomeini appointed himself commander-in-chief of the armed forces and declared a "jihad" or holy war against the "Kurdish conspirators."³⁸

Given these events, Ghassemlou decided not to attend the opening session in Tehran the following day. On August 17, 1979, he watched the broadcast on TV from a friend's home in Mahabad. In Khomeini's opening statement to the members of the Assembly of Experts, the Ayatollah publicly condemned Ghassemlou and banned the PDKI: "We will take the PDKI leaders to the tribunals and we will judge them. The Kurds are the biggest *kofars* [infidels] and we will respond to their actions with consequences [as they deserve]." Khomeini condemned them as corrupt, subversive, saboteurs, traitors, and hypocrites: "You are not democrats," he raged. "You are hypocrites—you are dictators who masquerade as democrats."³⁹ They are like "a poison to the health of the revolution, no trace of them should be left in the country."⁴⁰

The Ayatollah demanded the armed forces "act decisively against the Kurds within the next twenty-four hours."⁴¹ Should they fail to do so, Khomeini threatened his forces that he would "deal with them in a revolutionary way."⁴² That night, the Ayatollah became Ghassemlou's mortal nemesis. Khomeini's *fatwa* was Ghassemlou's death sentence and the regime would take ten years to execute it.

On August 20, 1979, Khomeini sent Ayatollah Sadegh Khalkhali, head of the newly created Revolutionary Court, to Kurdistan to assess the tense situation in the region. Khalkhali, also known as the "Hanging Judge," followed the army as they passed through Kurdish cities. In his bloody summary trials, he ordered the immediate execution of hundreds of Kurdish adults and youth. One by one, as Kurdish cities fell to the regime's violent attacks, Ghassemlou declared that the revolt would not end and that it would continue as a guerrilla campaign from the mountains. Still the Iranian attack was relentless as the air force continued to bomb Kurdish cities.

After what became known as the "Three-Month War," the Kurdish forces gained the upper hand. On October 20, 1979, Ghassemlou returned victorious to Mahabad. The time had come for dialogue and to achieve a peaceful resolution to the Kurdish problem. Despite several meetings between the PDKI and authorities, the regime once again launched a fierce offensive in Kurdistan with aircraft and helicopter gunships. In order to protect the civilian population before they attacked the city of Mahabad, Ghassemlou ordered the peshmerga to withdraw toward the mountains. By December 1979, the Revolutionary Guards had regained control of Kurdistan, this time permanently. The war would continue for several years.

Between 1981 and 1982, the Kurds still controlled much of the mountainous villages of Kurdistan. Ghassemlou took advantage of this situation to strengthen the party's organization, establishing an administrative structure in the region. As the regime's forces advanced, the PDKI retreated more and more, moving toward the border with Iraq where they have remained since 1984.⁴³

TIME FOR DIALOGUE

For Ghassemlou there were three primary reasons for Khomeini's war against the Kurdish nation. In an interview with the *BBC Persian*, Ghassemlou said, "First we were demanding democracy, when he [Khomeini] was clearly against democratic values. He believed democracy is a Western system and was against the West. Second, we wanted autonomy, which was in opposition to Khomeini's so-called Islamic philosophy. He did not believe in [the notion of] nationality and nations' rights, but only in Islamic *ummah* [the world community of Muslims]. Third, the fact that virtually all Kurds are Sunni Muslims, and the regime in Tehran was Shi'ite."⁴⁴ Despite all these obstacles, Ghassemlou sought dialogue with the authorities. He insisted that war had been imposed on the Kurds and they had no option but to resist and defend themselves. Ghassemlou came to realize that the solution was not military but was at the negotiating table.

Though they led an armed resistance against the Iranian regime, Ghassemlou and the PDKI, unlike the revolutionary movements of the third world in the 1980s, rejected any type of terrorist action. "As a democratic organization, we have always opposed terrorist acts, whether hijacking planes, taking hostages, placing bombs or any action that could endanger the lives and safety of civilians. To renounce our principles, and thus lose our image as a responsible, democratic and humanitarian party for ephemeral publicity is useless and vain," he said.⁴⁵

In addition to opposing any act of terrorism, Ghassemlou was instrumental in the liberation of Europeans kidnapped by other Kurdish groups. He even paid for the freedom of French hostages, once with weapons and later with monetary compensation. These efforts allowed the Kurdish leader to cement a strong relationship with France and the Socialist Party, then in power. Thanks to them, Ghassemlou was able to establish contact with other European Socialist parties. In 1996 the PDKI joined the Socialist International.⁴⁶

In the WikiLeaks cable from the U.S. embassy in Baghdad in 1988, Ghassemlou confirmed he had promised the Italian ambassador that he would help liberate three Italians kidnapped by Jalal Talabani's Patriotic Union of Kurdistan.⁴⁷

RELATIONS WITH IRAQI REGIME

Due to the geopolitical situation of Kurdistan throughout their history, the Kurds have continued to maintain relations with their neighboring governments. Ghassemlou had lived and worked in Iraq on and off, staying in contact with the Iraqi regime. Yet he always kept his independence, never

collaborating militarily with Baghdad against Iran; this continued even during the war between the two countries.⁴⁸ Iraqi Kurdish politician Mahmoud Osman confirmed the PDKI's independence vis-à-vis the Iraqi regime. He declared that after 2003 the Kurds did not find any Iraqi intelligence archives implicating the PDKI in detrimental collaboration with Saddam's regime.⁴⁹

According to Kurdish leader Jalal Talabani, in 1980 when the Iraq-Iran war began, the government of Saddam Hussein offered Ghassemlou money and weapons to declare a Kurdish state in Iran. Ghassemlou replied that his goal was not secession, but autonomy for Kurdistan and democracy for Iran.⁵⁰ When the Iran-Iraq war started, the Iraqi government allowed all opponents of the Islamic Republic to settle on its border with Iran, and the PDKI established its headquarters there. PDKI members entered and left Kurdistan via Baghdad. However, the relationship with Saddam Hussein's regime was not easy. The Iraqis continually pressured the party to participate in military operations and share intelligence with them. But the PDKI had forbidden its members this kind of cooperation under penalty of expulsion from the party.

The implementation of operation Anfal by Saddam Hussein's regime, with attacks of chemical gases, displacement, and the subsequent disappearance of Kurds in Iraq greatly distressed Ghassemlou. Even though he could not publicly attack the Iraqi regime, he was vocal in criticizing the chemical attacks against the Kurdish population in 1988.⁵¹ Once again referring to the WikiLeaks cable from that year, Ghassemlou "did not go out of his way to criticize Iraq, but he could not resist a barrage of cutting remarks that clearly showed his disdain for Arabs for the Iraqi regime."⁵²

DIALOGUE WITH THE ISLAMIC REPUBLIC

The PDKI suffered several divisions and the final schism in 1988 affected Ghassemlou considerably. The dissident group accused him of leading the party away from "socialism to social democracy."⁵³ They also rejected negotiations with Tehran, despite the fact that Ghassemlou had always engaged in dialogue with the Iranian regime. He was convinced that the solution was not military but at the negotiating table.

1989 was a difficult year for Ghassemlou. Several circumstances had convinced him that the time to negotiate with Tehran had arrived. First, the violence of the Baghdad regime with the Kurds in Iraq had created enormous tension and friction with the PDKI. For Ghassemlou, the relationship with Iraq was shameful and unsustainable.⁵⁴ Second, the war between Iran and Iraq was coming to an end and Ghassemlou feared the two governments would agree to suppress the Kurdish rebellion in both countries.⁵⁵ This had happened in 1975 after the signing of the Algiers Agreement sponsored by members of the Organization of

the Petroleum Exporting Countries, between the Shah of Iran, Mohammad Reza Pahlavi, and Saddam Hussein. Third, the war had left the country ruined economically. With the deterioration of Khomeini's health, Ghassemlou thought the regime wanted to finally resolve the conflict with the Kurds.

In 1988, Akbar Hashemi Rafsanjani, then speaker of Parliament and soon to be president of Iran, reached out to Ghassemlou through Iraqi Kurdish leader Jalal Talabani⁵⁶ and proposed a dialogue with him. Ghassemlou traveled to Vienna with Abdullah Ghaderi, PDKI representative in Paris, to meet the Iranian emissaries. The negotiations were organized under extreme security measures by Talabani and held on December 30 and 31, 1988 and on January 19 and 20, 1989. At the last meeting, the negotiators agreed to continue in March.

Khomeini's health was failing and the struggle for succession had begun. The Iranians canceled the March meeting with the excuse that the regime's hard-liners opposed the negotiations. Talabani was told that they broke the negotiations because his people had not kept confidentiality.⁵⁷ The truth is that those first meetings were meant to assuage Ghassemlou's suspicions, making him feel confident about the negotiations. Once they marginalized Talabani, they looked for an intermediary to resume contact with Ghassemlou. They chose Fadil Rasul, an Iraqi Kurdish intellectual living in Vienna and friend of the Iranian regime. Although the PDKI was opposed to continuing the dialogue and believed that the regime would not make any concessions, Ghassemlou agreed to meet with government emissaries in Vienna in July 1989.

Ghassemlou agreed to meet with the Iranians without informing the party and attended without taking any security measures. The seasoned Kurdish leader fell into a careful trap, hatched by the highest echelons of the Iranian regime. Tragically, the goal of this second round of meetings was the death of Ghassemlou and his companions. His murder was part of a policy of state assassinations.⁵⁸

In 1980, one year after Khomeini took power, he created a list of 500 politicians and intellectual elite that he considered to be "enemies of Islam." The "enemies" were those who were openly opposed to the regime. Many had fled the country, but the regime hunted them down one by one. Ghassemlou's name was on that list. The Quds Force, secret elite of the Revolutionary Guards, carried out these murders. The elimination of dissidents became a fundamental part of the internal and external policy of the regime, and it continues to this day.⁵⁹

STATE TERRORISM

On July 12, 1989, Ghassemlou met in Vienna with the same three Iranian envoys from the previous meetings. He was accompanied by Abdullah

Ghaderi and the middleman Fadil Rasul. After that first meeting, Ghassemlou felt things had gone well. He was convinced that the internal situation in Iran following the death of Khomeini was propitious to him.

During the second meeting on July 13, Ghassemlou and his two companions were fatally shot. Ghassemlou died instantly from a bullet to the head and the two young Kurds succumbed to multiple gunshots. In the midst of this violent struggle, a stray bullet wounded the principal Iranian envoy. Thanks to this lost bullet, the assassination was not a perfect crime.

One of the Iranian emissaries escaped, and two were arrested. The wounded man, Mohamed Jafari Sahrarudi was taken to the hospital. The alleged bodyguard, Amir Mansur Buzorguan, after being interrogated and released, took refuge in the Iranian embassy. At the scene of the crime, Oswald Kessler, head of the Austrian anti-terrorist unit, said, "We have dead Kurds and Iranian survivors. The matter is clear. The rest will be politics."⁶⁰

The Iranian government began a fierce disinformation campaign blaming Iraq, and "hostile Iranian groups" for having committed the murder. But the evidence showed the Islamic Republic of Iran was responsible for this crime. The Iranian government began to pressure and threaten the Austrian authorities. In turn, the Austrian government was harassed by a political scandal, involving senior Austrian officials in weapon sales to Iran and Iraq, violating Austria's neutrality.⁶¹

The Vienna government yielded to Iranian pressure and allowed Sahrarudi to be taken care of in the Iranian embassy. A few days later, he was escorted to the airport where he left for Tehran on a flight with Iran Air. In Tehran, he was received as a hero and immediately promoted. Sahrarudi continued to rise and became head of the Intelligence Directorate of the Quds Forces.

In Vienna, the release of the only witness angered the public and the Austrian media. When the Foreign Minister declared that Iran had threatened reprisals if its citizens were arrested, the *Arbeiter Zeitung* newspaper replied: "The servile deference to Iran will protect Austria from the wrath of mullahs for a time. But it is an invitation that carries a message: 'Austria is beautiful; come here to commit murders.'"⁶²

In 1991 H el ene Krulich, Ghassemlou's widow, filed a lawsuit against the state of Austria for not opening an investigation into the crime, for freeing the murderers, and allowing them to leave the country. In 1992, the case was dismissed by Vienna's Appellate Court.⁶³ In addition to having released the only witnesses to the crime, the Austrian government blocked any investigation of the murder. Since then, the Austrians have continued to hinder any attempt to clarify the authorship of this crime. Commercial interests prevailed over human rights and justice.

In 2005, the Austrian deputy Peter Pilz called for a parliamentary inquiry that was rejected. According to Pilz's statements to the *Der Standard* newspaper, Mahmoud Ahmadinejad, the newly elected president of Iran and

former President Akbar Hashemi Rafsanjani, had allegedly been involved in planning the assassination of the Kurdish leader. In 2009, Pilz again accused Ahmadinejad. This time it was based on a confession of a German arms dealer to the Italian police. This man claimed to have delivered, at the Iranian embassy in Vienna, the weapons that murdered the Kurds. He also said that a so-called "Mohamed" who would later become president was present.⁶⁴

The murder of dissidents abroad continued for several years with the silent complicity of European governments that had business and commercial interests with Iran. The authorities in Germany, Austria, and France turned a blind eye, while the Iranian embassies organized further operations within their borders. The Iranian regime knew that it could kill its citizens and there would be no justice. This decision had serious consequences, not only for the persecuted Iranians but for the West: the regime emboldened by this complicity was spreading its terrorist networks throughout Europe and Latin America. On July 18, 1994, the Asociación Mutual Israelita Argentina (AMIA) suffered a car bomb attack. Argentine prosecutors accused the Iranian government of planning the attack and Lebanese Hezbollah of executing it.⁶⁵ Allowing these groups to grow and murder hundreds of exiles in Europe created a detailed plan for the next and most ambitious generation of terrorist networks that would end up attacking targets in the West.⁶⁶

The Berlin assassination in 1992 of Sadegh Sharafkandi, Ghassemlou's successor, and the consequent Mykonos Trial revealed the involvement of senior regime officials in criminal planning and the use of embassies to carry out these terrorist acts. The impact of this trial was that European Union countries withdrew their ambassadors for at least a few months. Germany expelled the Iranian ambassador and fourteen officials who worked in the intelligence section of the embassy in Berlin and also imposed commercial restrictions.

Thanks to these diplomatic and commercial sanctions, Iran stopped assassinating dissidents in Europe for more than a decade. However, the elimination of opponents continued in Turkey and Iraq. The Islamic Republic of Iran never stopped executing and eliminating dissidents inside these countries. In recent years, attacks against embassies and the staff of Israeli and Saudi embassies in the United States, India, Georgia, Azerbaijan, Thailand, and Kenya bear the Iranian mark.⁶⁷ Several of the detainees in these attacks were trained in Iranian military camps and were armed by their intelligence agency. In 2009, the Iranians tried to eliminate opponents in California and London seen as a threat,⁶⁸ sending a harsh message to silence their critics in exile. The fact remains that the murder of Ghassemlou and many other Kurdish and Iranian dissidents have gone unpunished. Abdul Rahman Ghassemlou and Abdullah Ghaderi were buried in Père Lachaise's Parisian cemetery.

For several decades, Ghassemlou had not been able to establish contact with the political leadership in America. The authorities would not grant

him a visa to travel to the United States. One month before his murder, he received an invitation from members of the U.S. Senate and House of Representatives to meet with them in August 1989. His valiant efforts to defend Kurdish rights and his opposition to the Iranian regime had finally born fruit. The results of this trip could have opened up important possibilities in support of his beloved Kurdish cause.

Ghassemlou's death was a severe blow to the Kurdish national movement. The subsequent assassination of his successor, Sadeq Sharafkandi, crippled the PDKI. It ended up weakening the Kurdish resistance for the next few decades. The division of the PDKI, as well as the fragmentation of other Kurdish parties, also severely impacted the Kurdish political struggle.

After Ghassemlou's assassination, the Kurds reacted by launching successful attacks against Tehran's government forces. Between 1991 and 1996, the regime retaliated with massive arrests and executions of PDKI members in Iran. They also targeted assassinations of party members exiled in Iraq. Kurdish villages were demolished and various Kurdish dissident groups in Iraq were bombed. In 1996, 3,000 Iranian forces entered northern Iraq in pursuit of PDKI peshmerga. This incursion provoked the displacement of 2,000 Iranian Kurds.⁶⁹ Soon after this operation, the PDKI abandoned their armed conflict against Iran. For decades, the party was constrained by the Iraqi government and the Kurdistan Regional Government (KRG) regarding its political work within Iran. Due to these constraints, the PDKI as well as other Kurdish parties became estranged from the population and lost much of their impact upon Kurdish society.⁷⁰

CURRENT DYNAMICS IN IRANIAN KURDISTAN

Today there are approximately 8–10 million Iranian Kurds comprising 12.5 percent of the total population of the country.⁷¹ They are the second largest group in the region and the third largest ethnic group in the country. This sizeable population has been living under economic, social, and cultural duress for decades. Mustafa Hijri, current secretary general of the PDKI, explains the dire situation of the Kurds in Iran: "We are denied education in our mother tongue, our history and cultural heritage are distorted [by the Iranian state], our environment is destroyed [. . .] the Kurdish provinces have the highest rate of unemployment [compared to the rest of Iran], poverty forces Kurds to resort to carrying goods on their backs on the border [between Iraqi and Iranian Kurdistan] in order to make a living, yet Kurdish couriers are killed [by Iranian forces], and the killings are so frequent that they have become a normal condition."⁷²

Since Ghassemloo's assassination, persecution against political dissidents has been unrelenting. Some Kurds had hoped that with the election of Hassan Rouhani in 2013, their lives would improve. He promised to provide services and equal opportunities for them.⁷³ Yet the Kurds remain second-class citizens. Excluded from any political participation, Kurds are oppressed, irrespective of whether they are Shite or Sunni.

Since Rouhani has been in office, human rights abuses have increased. Unfair trials have led to a rise in an almost daily number of executions.⁷⁴ By the end of his first four years as president in 2017, 328 Kurds had been executed and 400 were imprisoned for political or religious activities. Four hundred and forty-four Kurdish cross-border porters were killed or wounded by the regime's security forces.⁷⁵

This ongoing systematic oppression has led many young Kurds to join and reinvigorate various Kurdish political parties. In 2016 after twenty years, the PDKI decided to restart its political activism by sending its peshmerga across the border to reconnect with and encourage Kurdish civilian resistance. According to the PDKI, they did not carry out any operations against government military installations or forces in Kurdistan. The armed confrontations that did occur during this time were due to attacks of the regime against the peshmerga.⁷⁶ Though not yet united, other Kurdish parties have joined the insurgency along with Arab, Azeri, Baloch, and Turkmen organizations toward attaining federalism in Iran.⁷⁷

The PDKI has been warning the international community about the support that the Islamic Republic has been giving Salafist jihadist groups in Kurdistan. Mustafa Hijri denounced how Salafist jihadists were allowed to distribute propaganda in mosques in Kurdistan and Balochistan and recruit new young members.⁷⁸

Kurdish civil rights activist Mokhtar Houshmand explained that since Salafist Kurds reject the concept of nation, they have been "at odds" with activists and organizations that endorse statehood and independence for Kurdistan. Because these Salafist Kurds have confronted and attacked leftist and nationalist groups as well as Sunni religious leaders, the Iranian authorities have tolerated them.⁷⁹

While many Iranian Kurdish peshmerga fought ISIS in Iraq, a few of the actual Kurdish ISIS members committed terrorist attacks on the Iranian parliament and Ayatollah Khomeini's mausoleum in Tehran in 2017. Mustafa Hijri finds it suspicious that they were able to enter the Parliament and the mausoleum without any difficulty. Hijri worries that the Iranian regime is using this terrorist attack to implicate and associate Iranian Kurds with ISIS jihadists, sow division within the Sunni and Shite Kurds, and set the Persian population against the Kurdish people. "While it is true that ISIS—due in part to Iran's policy to nurture the Salafi jihadists in Iranian Kurdistan—managed

to recruit Kurds, those Kurds who have joined ISIS are few in numbers,” he explains. “More important, the Salafi jihadists are as opposed to the national identity and aspirations of the Kurdish people as the Islamic Republic of Iran.”

To this day, heavy clashes between peshmerga and the regime’s forces continue. Iran has been shelling and bombing Iranian Kurdish peshmerga and civilians within Iraqi Kurdistan. As recently as September 2018, Iran bombed Iranian Kurdish political headquarters in Koya, Iraqi Kurdistan, killing sixteen people and wounding forty-five.⁸⁰ This attack provoked the merchants and shop owners in Iranian Kurdistan to go on strike in protest. Due to economic hardship, border shutdowns and the detention and execution of activists, civil unrest has intensified with massive demonstrations and strikes.⁸¹

Even though the Islamic Republic of Iran achieved its goal of killing Kurdish party members, by murdering Ghassemlou they failed to destroy his lifelong political heritage. He and his legacy remain alive among the Kurdish population, ready to be sparked when the time is right. To this day, Ghassemlou remains a powerful symbol of resistance to the Islamic Republic. On the anniversary of his death on July 13, Kurds in Iranian Kurdistan and around the world commemorate Abdul Rahman Ghassemlou for the commitment and sacrifice he made for his people. His message of democracy continues to reverberate in the rugged mountains of Kurdistan and through the spirit of these indomitable people.

NOTES

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29. Internal conflicts within the PRI led to its dissolution at the end of 1980. But it had already fulfilled its function, the establishment of an Islamic Republic.

30. BBC, "Profile: Iran's Revolutionary Guards," http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/middle_east/7064353.stm (accessed December 10, 2018).

31. Prunhuber, *Dreaming Kurdistan*, 134.

32. Abdul Rahman Ghassem lou, interview with Jonathan Randal, in Prunhuber, *Dreaming Kurdistan*, 139. According to French journalist Chris Kutschera, Ghassem lou received over a third of the votes—113,773 of a total of 325,000 voters. Chris Kutschera, 170–171.

33. "The Life and Death of Abdul Rahman Ghassem lou (1930–1989)," in *Abdul Rahman Ghassem lou, a Man of Peace and Dialogue* (Paris: PDKI publication, 1989), 20.

34. See The Ideas of the Imam, "Prediction: The Falling of Communism," http://en.imam-khomeini.ir/en/n3772/The_ideas_of_the_Imam/Imam%E2%80%99s_Prediction/Imam%E2%80%99s_Prediction_on_the_Falling_of_Communism." (accessed December 10, 2018).

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'Freedom' in Iran," <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=DXIJWpde4vM> (accessed December 10, 2018).

36. According to article 110 of the new constitution the *Velayat-e-faqih* (Guardian of the Jurists) would be the supreme leader and would have absolute powers over the government and the country (Prunhuber, *Dreaming Kurdistan*, 142–143).

37. "Dustbin of Death Awaits Left, Warns Khomeini," *The Guardian*, August 17, 1979.

38. Menashri, *Iran: A Decade of War and Revolution* (New York: Holmes & Meier, 1990), 90.

39. Kutschera, 172; *Kayhan*, August 19, 1979 (Sunday, 28 Mordad, 1358), 3.

40. Menashri, 90.

41. "These schemers are non-believers in God. These schemer groups in Kurdistan and in other parts are evil groups," Khomeini raged. "They must be eliminated by force. . . . The army must destroy them. We will take hard grips against them. We will defeat them and all those who are in dialogue with them. . . . The prosecutor must punish all opposing political parties and their leaders. Throw away the hesitation, go defeat the evil." Khomeini, August 17, 1979, posted at *The Iranian*, <http://iranian.com/posts/view/post/21162> (accessed December 10, 2018).

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44. Abdul Rahman Ghassemlou, interview with *BBC Persian*, June 1989.

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47. WikiLeaks, "View of Iranian Kurdish Leader Qassemlu," *Embassy Baghdad*, February 16, 1988, Reference ID 88BAGHDAD855; see https://wikileaks.org/plusd/cables/88BAGHDAD855_a.html; Jalal Talabani, friend of Ghassemlou, was General Secretary of the Patriotic Union of Kurdistan of Iraq (PUK). Talabani became President of Iraq in 2005.

48. Prunhuber, *Dreaming Kurdistan*, 419; McDowell, 273–274.

49. Mahmud Osman in a speech he gave to members of the PDKI exiled in the Kurdistan of Iraq, October 27, 2011.

50. Prunhuber, *Dreaming Kurdistan*, 419.

51. Ghassemlou gave a critical interview to an Arab magazine about Halabja. Abdullah Hassanzadeh, interview with Carol Prunhuber, Koya Sanjak, Iraqi Kurdistan, July 2009.

52. WikiLeaks, "View of Iranian Kurdish Leader Qassemlu."

53. Hossein Khalighi, *Jan u Jiyan* [Life and suffering] [in Kurdish], vol. 3 (Stockholm: n.p., 2002), 277.

54. Hassan [Ibrahimi] Shiwasali, statement July 17, 2011, http://www.peshmergekan.com/index_a.php?id=8725; (translation by Salah Piroty). Shiwasali, military commander in the Sardasht region, was a member of the PDKI leadership and is currently an honorary member of the PDKI central committee.

55. Ibid.
56. Jalal Talaban maintained relations with the Iranian regime.
57. Talabani in Prunhuber, *Dreaming Kurdistan*, 384.
58. Abolhassan Bani Sadr interview with the author, Versailles, July 2009.
59. When Khomeini died in June 1989, the regime established a Committee on Special Operations. One of its functions was to continue the suppression and elimination of political opposition to the Islamic Republic. For information on the regime's murder policy see: IRANHRDC: <http://www.iranhrdc.org/english/>.
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62. Jonathan Randal. "The Hostage Drama: Austria Said to 'kowtow' to Iran in Murder Case; Reprisal Feared in Kurdish Leader's Death," *Washington Post*, August 2, 1989.
63. IHRDC (Human Rights Documentation Center), *No Safe Haven: Iran's Global Assassination Campaign*. New Haven, CT, 2008.
64. *Agence France Press*, Vienna, June 18, 2009, in Carol Prunhuber, *The Passion and Death of Rahman the Kurd: Dreaming Kurdistan* (Bloomington: iUniverse, 2010), 274.
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Section V

**IMAGINING KURDISTAN
FROM ABROAD**

Chapter 12

Diaspora Identity, Collective Memory, and Artistic Expression

Vera Eccarius-Kelly

Nishtiman (Homeland) project is a musical group that has performed interpretations of folkloric and traditional music from various regions of Greater Kurdistan since 2013. The sextet is directed by percussionist Hussein Zahawy, who grew up in London after his father escaped from Ba'athist Iraq. Other group members originate from Iranian, Turkish, and Iraqi Kurdish regions. *Nishtiman* is acclaimed for its reliance on instruments from all parts of Kurdistan, which has allowed the musicians to share a narrative of a multicultural “nation that was torn into four parts.”¹ In a 2017 performance in Germany, *Nishtiman* played a selection from its most recent album “Kobane” to honor the courage of Kurdish women fighters against the Islamic State (IS or ISIS). A dozen Kurds in the audience rose from their seats, held hands, and formed a mixed gender line to dance. The wider audience instinctively grasped that the Kurdish music and the communal dancing not only acknowledged cultural traditions but also represented an act of political defiance. The Kurdish struggle for an independent homeland was on full public display that evening.

Committed Kurdish activists throughout the European diaspora increasingly encourage public performances of Kurdish cultural unity and ethnic distinctiveness. Kurdish political events frequently rely on communal dancing, music, cultural celebrations, and festivities (such as Newroz or Kurdish New Year) for the purpose of elevating symbolically powerful messages. Undeniably, the communal dancing at the *Nishtiman* concert reflected an authentic Kurdish cultural expression, yet it simultaneously highlighted political demands for the liberation of Kurdistan. While the musicians from *Nishtiman* focused on sharing their artistic talents and interpreted a range of instrumental traditions, Kurdish activists at the concert added a layer of political significance. Tapping into the power of emotive cultural expression, activists encouraged the use of imagination to forge stronger bonds among Kurds.

The dancing Kurdish activists invited the public to witness their feelings, which amplified the layers of meaning and purpose. Social anthropologist Martin Sökefeld (2006) has long argued that political opportunity structures, mobilization practices, and interpretive frames shape communities into more unified diasporas, allowing emotional expressions to play a significant role in this process.² Cultural performances of Kurdishness at public events are often posted on YouTube and other social media outlets to share a sense of unified Kurdish emotion and to inspire frequent repetition.

A wide range of diasporic artistic expressions serves to elicit and promote stirring connections between increasingly hybridized Kurdish communities. Cultural and artistic expressions enhance the diaspora's ability to reinterpret their collective pasts for the purposes of building visions for a Kurdish future. By linking live Kurdish experiences to cultural expressions and particular moments in history, diaspora activists successfully weave syncretic notions of Kurdishness into a larger project of an imagined Kurdistan. Kurdish diasporas are not mere extensions of their homeland communities, but should be recognized as increasingly independent socio-political and cultural entities involved in imagining and shaping the future of Kurdish regions.

METHODOLOGY

This chapter specifically explores how and why self-identified activists and artists in Kurdish diaspora communities rely on the emotional power of collective memory and cultural messaging to advance a political agenda. As the example of the Nishtiman concert shows, cultural expressions can serve to politically engage and mobilize members of the diaspora. For the context of this chapter, the notion of cultural messaging relates to the deliberate use of ethno-political lenses to shape a diaspora's interpretations of its own cultures and histories. Activists rely on cultural messaging to encourage a process of questioning established state boundaries and to reinforce perceptions related to communally held values.

Kurdish activists have faced an exceptionally complex task when they aim to identify and pursue shared political agendas. Kurdish diaspora communities represent heterogeneous entities, whose members envision their homeland(s) of Kurdistan in many different and sometimes incompatible ways depending on personal, familial, and communal experiences. To speak directly to their political base, Kurdish activists predominantly rely on mobilization tactics that privilege social justice and human rights agendas. But in recent years, Kurdish activists have integrated cultural and artistic elements to broaden their appeal to a wider Kurdish audience.

All observations in this chapter relate to a series of interviews with diaspora Kurds in Germany and the United States³ to address the intersection of artistic expressions and political mobilization. Kurdish diaspora communities in Germany offer significantly more experience with political organizing than Kurds in the United States. Also in contrast to Germany, Kurdish communities in the United States have a more diverse migratory history. Snowball sampling was used to recruit interviewees among diaspora artists and activists, while participant observation provided detailed context. The existing scholarly literatures in the fields of diaspora⁴ and memory studies further contextualize the use of artistic expressions in Kurdish communities.⁵ Combining semi-structured interviews and participant observation with the existing scholarly understanding of diasporic mobilization also provides insights into evolving notions of ethnic identity. A mixed methodology was particularly helpful in this context because the research questions focus on the use of the human imagination.⁶

This chapter approaches mobilized Kurdish diaspora groups within the framework of victim diasporas.⁷ For this project, Kurdish activists and artists were asked to curate exhibits for an imagined Kurdish Museum. The driving research question focused on exploring the types of exhibits diaspora Kurds propose in relation to collective memory and cultural messaging. All participants in this project live in the United States and Germany and continue to maintain family connections in Turkey, Syria, and Iraq. The interview sample of Kurds linked to Iran was too small for inclusion. The participants were asked to explain the underlying motivations for their preferred artistic expressions and displays.⁸ The exhibit ideas in this chapter should not be understood to represent unified positions held by all or most Kurdish diaspora organizations or their mobilized membership. However, it is important to understand that Kurdish diaspora communities in Germany and the United States experienced divergent paths toward mobilization. The Kurdish diaspora in Germany has been mobilized since the 1980s and continues to be strongly linked to Kurdish provinces in Turkey (Bakur). In contrast, political activism is just emerging among members of US-based diaspora communities. Kurds in the United States are deeply divided in part due to the fact that they arrived from a wider range of geographic areas and experienced intra-Kurdish conflicts in Kurdistan Iraq.

The perspectives of twenty-five self-identified diaspora Kurds have been included in the following discussions. The interviews took place between August 2014 and May 2018 and the participants range in age from twenty-five to fifty years. To guarantee confidentiality, they are identified through a randomized numbering system and their familial linkage to particular parts of Kurdistan. The participants describe themselves as supporters of secular and socialist organizations. Fifteen participants live in the German cities of

Cologne, Düsseldorf, and Duisburg and ten participants reside near Washington, DC/Virginia, New York City, and Albany.

DIASPORAS AND COLLECTIVE MEMORY

The literature on diasporas initially privileged research on exiled Jewish populations but expanded to include many ethnic groups to more broadly examine how diasporas preserve their cultures in exile, memorialize their experiences in the homeland (often related to trauma and victimhood), and reshape their understanding of identity.⁹ Robin Cohen (2008) proposed to pursue a rigorous typology of five sub-categories within diaspora scholarship to gain a deeper understanding of specific communities and their socio-historical contexts as victim, labor, trade, imperial, and cultural diasporas.¹⁰ While Kurdish experiences overwhelmingly fit within the category of a victim diaspora, an argument can be made to include some Kurds within the category of labor diaspora. Much of the ground-breaking work related to victim diaspora focused on Jewish, Greek, and Armenian populations, and African communities.¹¹ During the 1990s, Kurdish communities mainly appeared in the scholarship related to their status as internally displaced populations and as refugees, or were examined in connection to Kurdish involvement in armed conflict.¹² Over the past twenty years, however, scholars systematically discussed the role of diaspora communities in a more global context and focused on mobilization strategies as part of a growing trend of interdisciplinarity¹³ and transnationalism in the social sciences.¹⁴

Studies on transnational Kurdish communities predominantly focused on various European countries but such communities, of course, can also be found in North America, Australia, and Asia.¹⁵ Kurds have long maintained cultural, political, and economic relationships with their ethnic brethren beyond the established nation-state boundaries. Diasporic mobilization structures typically rely on circles of activists with varying levels of commitment and political engagement.¹⁶ The so-called core or principle participants tend to forcefully claim their ethnicity to energize or mobilize more peripheral members of the larger diaspora community. In contrast to core activists, mere sympathizers tend to participate predominantly when called upon. Diasporas, of course, also have silent, passive, or entirely disengaged members, who prefer to remain uninvolved or apolitical. For a number of reasons they might be focused on their personal lives or keep their distance from the vast majority of political events. But at times of intense crises, even uninvolved members of the Kurdish diaspora can be activated to amplify the communal voice. Recent examples include large-scale Kurdish protests across European cities against the incursions of the IS and major fundraising and publicity efforts to assist

refugees. Core diaspora activists hope to integrate larger numbers of formerly uninvolved or passive community members into their structures and rely on diverse mobilization approaches to increase their appeal.

Common Kurdish protest activities emphasize the principle of self-determination in the homeland and frequently rely on claims to ethno-cultural distinctiveness.¹⁷ Core activists identify Kurdishness as a state of living in opposition to Turkish, Arab, and Persian domination by resisting the systematic denial or erasure of their separate ethnic identity. Within this larger framework focused on the state of injustice, Kurdish diaspora communities often construct their specific sub-identities in relation to particular historical and political moments. In large part, Kurdish collective memories continue to be determined by narratives related to ethnic cleansing, expulsion, and genocide. As such, Kurds in the diaspora express a need to create a safe and free homeland to guard against the destruction of Kurdish culture and society. Collective memories are also significantly shaped by current and ongoing political events. Past injustices become linked to current injustices as particular moments are highlighted for political purposes within diaspora communities. In addition, the desire to control how injustices and suffering are remembered within Kurdish communities and how these memories are represented publicly to non-Kurds continues to produce much discussion within Kurdish political circles.

It is important to recognize that collective memories tend to be malleable and constantly undergo revisions. This process does not make them any less real or persuasive for communities involved in recalling particular experiences. Collective memory can also serve to advance or spread particular ideologies.¹⁸ Yet, official history has often escaped similar criticism even though the reconstruction of the past often reflects a specific self-serving image of the state or the nation. Maurice Halbwachs (1980) identified memory as a phenomenon that was not exclusively formed in the past as often assumed.¹⁹ Instead, he proposed that memory is predominantly shaped and reshaped during the present, and continuously shifts within communities as a result of emerging social and cultural trends or influences. Halbwachs (1992) significantly advanced our scholarly understanding of memories as representing collective experiences that are recalled through others, even if these others did not personally participate in (or experience) a particular recalled event.²⁰

Agnew (2004) argued that “memories establish a connection between our individual past and our collective past (our origin, heritage and history).”²¹ Memories of communal emotional pain and traumatic physical agony are part of imagined Kurdish art exhibits and other cultural manifestations of identity, of course. In this context, it is important to distinguish between references to collective memory as expressed by members of victim diaspora and utterances of nostalgic ideas. Ethnic communities can embrace nostalgic

tendencies that encourage an uncritical view of the past by emphasizing selectively positive aspects of history. This sometimes allows state agencies to shape specific communal emotions for political purposes.²² For obvious reasons, victims of trauma, who as individuals or as families encountered enslavement, expulsion and genocide, such as Yezidi Kurds,²³ Alevi Kurds, and Feyli Kurds (and others), have little patience for such expressions of nostalgia. Instead, they tend to insist on a process of recalling the crimes that were committed against them, memorializing acts of resistance, and vigorously preserving what remains of their heritage. In essence, asking Kurdish activists or artists to “translate” communal memories into imaginary exhibits creates an opportunity for them to recall and memorialize particular moments of their collective memories. At the same time such a project can transform communal and collective memories into more contemporary expressions of political resistance.

KURDISTAN IN GERMANY

An estimated 1.2 million ethnic Kurdish immigrants and their descendants live in Germany.²⁴ Since the majority of European Union (EU) countries list immigrants by their nationalities instead of tracking their ethnic identities (or linguistic preferences), Kurds are often counted as Turkish, Iraqi, Iranian, and Syrian immigrant populations. Moreover, European-born children of Kurdish immigrants have accepted German, Belgian, Dutch, and other citizenships, and hence are counted as German, Belgian, or Dutch citizens. This reality further complicates estimates related to the size of Europe’s increasingly diverse Kurdish diaspora communities.

From a socio-political and geographic perspective, a number of trends can be identified among Kurdish diaspora communities in several German-speaking countries (Germany, Austria, Switzerland, as well as neighboring Belgium, and Luxembourg). To excavate the underlying causes for a distinct identity formation among some Kurdish diaspora communities, this section focuses on Germany, which represents the most numerous, politically mobilized, and vociferous representation of Kurdish communities in Europe (along with Germany’s neighboring countries).

Over the past several decades, Germany’s Kurdish diaspora was predominantly linked to the Turkish-controlled areas of Kurdistan. However, it is important to recognize that the civil war in Syria increased the presence of new cultural and ideological Kurdish influences in Germany. Recent arrivals of Kurdish refugees in Germany (including 150,000 to 200,000 Yezidis) will likely continue to shape Kurdish diaspora communities in the future. In 2015, some 150,000 Kurds from Syria and Iraq received permission to enter

Germany.²⁵ By December 2016, German officials noted that nearly 80 percent of all new asylum applicants from Turkey identified as ethnic Kurds.²⁶ Politically mobilized Kurds once again looked for protections as the Turkish state cracked down on legal Kurdish parties to silence dissent. This development paralleled the high rates for asylum applications by Kurds from Turkey during the height of ethnic repression in the 1990s. Similar trends and developments could be observed throughout the Benelux countries (Belgium, the Netherlands, and Luxembourg) as well.

It is important to distinguish the Kurdish diaspora in Germany from Kurdish communities in the United Kingdom, France, and Sweden (as well as the Nordic countries more broadly). While the United Kingdom has a highly mobilized Kurdish diaspora, it is influenced by homeland politics in Kurdistan Iraq, Turkey, and Syria. The Kurdish diaspora in France has deep linkages to Iranian Kurdish areas, but also to Iraqi Kurdistan and to Kurdish regions in Turkey. In Sweden, the Kurdish diaspora is quite different in terms of its class structure and educational background according to Khalid Khayati and Magnus Dahlstedt (2014) as it “display[s] a high level of cultural, political and social diversity.”²⁷ They come from all parts of Kurdistan, have a highly differentiated social background and engage in various skilled occupations in Swedish society.” While Sweden attracted educated groups of Kurdish writers and artists, the Kurdish diaspora in Germany initially represented predominantly rural migrants and an emergent working class. Since the outbreak of the Syrian civil war in 2011 and the rise of the IS in 2014, Kurdish diaspora communities in Germany have become significantly more representative of Iraqi Kurdistan and Syrian Kurdish regions as well.

Multiple intertwined sociopolitical factors contributed to an accelerated formation of a distinct identity among Kurdish diaspora members in Germany. Public attitudes in Germany toward Kurds represented a mixture of disregard for domestic Turkish developments and a general disinterest in the political struggles of working class immigrants. German policy-makers never grappled with the repercussions of assimilation experiences for Kurds in Turkey. Few officials understood that language prohibitions existed in Turkey; that Kurdish children had been forced to attend regional boarding schools to “civilize” them; that Kurdish villages and cities had been Turkified; and that a homogenization process was underway in Turkey. From a Kurdish perspective, German society was nearly as hostile to Kurds as the Turkish state since sociopolitical attitudes paralleled those advanced by the Turkish state.

Many Kurdish families initially arrived in Germany in the hopes of improving their economic status,²⁸ but others entered into foreign labor agreements to escape the repressive political and cultural climate in Turkey.²⁹ After labor recruitment from Turkey ended in 1973 and politicized Kurds entered the country as asylum applicants, Kurdish political dynamics shifted

toward ethnic mobilization. Turkey's military coup in 1980 created perfect conditions for a rapid emergence of waves of Kurdish radicalization.³⁰ In the decade following the coup d'état, tens of thousands of Turkish citizens, many of them ethnic Kurds, arrived as asylum applicants to escape persecution in Turkey. The makeup and structure of Kurdish diaspora groups adjusted from predominantly apolitical migrant clubs to homeland-oriented challenger organizations. Migration scholars Stephen Castles and Mark Miller (1993, 276–7) suggested at the time that one-quarter to one-third of all so-called Turkish asylum seekers were ethnically Kurdish and that a fair number of them sympathized with the Kurdistan Workers' Party (PKK).³¹ The PKK provided Kurds in Germany with detailed information about the mistreatment of their brethren in Turkey, Iran, Iraq, and Syria. Aliza Marcus (1993) argued that the Turkish military's use of extreme violence drove Kurdish communities to support PKK guerrillas.³² Pro-PKK publications such as *Azadi* and *Kurdistan Rundbrief* regularly accused the German government of embracing Turkey's "Kemalist perspectives on Kurds" and suggested that "only political activism can change the country's [Germany's] discriminatory and racist policies toward Kurds."³³

By the 1990s, diaspora Kurds in Germany expressed grievances that were often based on ethno-national demands. They protested in the streets for human rights improvements in Turkey and demanded the formation of an independent homeland.³⁴ However, among the most crucial factors that led to a rapid formation of a separate Kurdish identity in Germany (and several other countries just across the border) was the availability of open democratic structures. Kurds gathered in neighborhood organizations and formed clubs to take advantage of the discursive and associational space afforded to them. This stood in dramatic contrast to the Kurdish experience in Turkey.

The capture of the PKK leader, Abdullah Öcalan, in 1999 brought about noticeable changes in Germany. 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. Kurdish diaspora activists in Germany initiated a slow and often painful process of disentangling their political agendas from the PKK. While core diaspora activists continued to exert pressure on German society by calling attention to the mistreatment of Kurds in the homeland, they moved away from targeted violence and instead relied on protest actions including demonstrations and mass gatherings.³⁵ 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 block highways; they disseminated pamphlets, informational literature, and documentary films; and Kurds utilized social media tools to share information that facilitated new mobilization efforts.³⁶ While aggressive public relations campaigns served a

clear purpose, Kurds also developed a parallel approach that pursued insider lobbying strategies and structured political participation on the EU-level.

The first decade of the 2000s also brought about the rise of a professional and highly educated generation of diaspora Kurds in Germany. Many achieved university degrees and traveled widely, often escaping their parents' and grandparents' social constraints. Yet, German society continued to focus on the PKK instead of identifying the emergence of diverse perspectives in the Kurdish diaspora. A twenty-six-year-old participant in this project complained in March 2018 that "every time you read something about Kurds a paragraph is included about the PKK; even in stories about the integration of Kurdish refugees or a cultural celebration. Why do they always add a random paragraph about the PKK? Are we forever condemned to see the same paragraph about Kurds in every article (Participant X)?"

University educated Kurdish human rights activists, journalists, and professionals collaborated with human rights organizations, political parties, and lobbying groups to initiate transnational networking efforts. Instead of speaking about the pursuit of an independent Kurdish homeland, this generation of activists embraced culturally based Kurdish grievances such as the right to study and speak *Kurmanji*, to select Kurdish names for their children, and to operate independent media programs. Cultural claims helped activists to strongly assert their communal distinctiveness. While the open display of nationalist Kurdish flags, banners, and colors had been a practice for decades, an emphasis on memory and remembrance, and an emotional attachment to claims of cultural Kurdishness emerged as a more recent effort to unite the diaspora. As such, *Newroz* celebrations, traditional musical performances, group dancing, photographic exhibits, and video installations have risen in symbolic significance within Kurdish diaspora communities.

Since 2010, an annual Kurdish Film Festival has taken place in Berlin to feature a variety of Kurdish filmmakers and their projects. Frequently particular films or documentaries are selected because they are banned by Turkish authorities. This dichotomy creates ideal conditions for Kurdish directors to discuss their projects with an energized and aggrieved audience in Berlin. Similarly, galleries across the country have long partnered with Kurdish artists to display photographic exhibits, multimedia or video installations and collages to allow visitors to hear, feel and see fragments of Kurdish life. In 2018, for example, the Kunstverein Hannover featured video installations that showed street scenes along with their sounds by Iraqi Kurdish artist Hiwa K.³⁷ On a more communal level, it is worth noting that Rojava Solidarity Committees have organized traveling photo exhibits (and fundraisers) in support of women's equality under the title "Rojava—Spring for Women." All of the above mentioned examples clearly illustrate that diverse artistic expressions

can frame particular political ideas for the purpose of (re)imagining Kurdishness as a liberated and emancipated state.

ENVISIONING A KURDISH EXHIBIT IN GERMANY

How might Kurdish diaspora artists and activists in Germany curate a Kurdish exhibit? What displays would they select and why? Suggestions made by diasporic Kurds clearly indicate that political activism and artistic expressions intersect in Germany. It is noteworthy that Kurdish participants in this project often defined themselves as leftist and socialist, while others also claimed a specific sub-identity such as Alevi Kurdish, Dersim Kurdish, and Yezidi Kurdish. Kurdish diaspora activists and artists referred to specific moments of trauma as having shaped their ethnic consciousness and informed their drive to produce creative work. Among the most frequently mentioned communal traumas were Kurdish struggles against the IS, the brutal treatment of Kurds by the Turkish regime, and the genocidal Anfal and poison gas attacks by Iraq under Saddam Hussein. Assertions of Kurdishness helped activists and artists to distinguish Kurdish ethnicity from Turkish, Arab, and Iranian ethnicity.

The exhibit suggestions discussed in the following paragraphs offer insights into the types of collective memories that are preferred by mobilized members of Kurdish diaspora communities in Germany. Countering state-centric (predominantly Turkish-dominated) histories and narratives represented an essential theme among members of the Kurdish diaspora in Germany. The interviews revealed that participants expressed a sincere commitment to creating Kurdish exhibits that would be free from manipulative and controlling political influences. Some participants linked collective historical experiences, for instance state authorized violence against Kurdish villages, to specific exhibit ideas so that they could tell stories of painful communal losses. In this context, a “Memorial Wall” was suggested to display images of Kurdish life before and after Turkish military interventions. One artist proposed to produce a huge collage of photos to show Kurdish communal life such as children playing, street vendors displaying their wares, and people pursuing their daily activities, while on the opposite side a documentary would reveal the process of systematic and violent destruction of Cizre by the Turkish regime in 2015 (Participant XI). This artist also made a reference to the Kurdistan Memory Program as an example of the use of photographic exhibits and videos to address communal trauma.³⁸ Another artist proposed that Kurdish artistic expressions should “provoke an emotional response, create dissent, and politicize the soul because art helps to inspire greater human freedom (Participant XII).”

Almost all participants struggled to define what authentic Kurdishness should mean in the context of an exhibit. Authenticity for individual Kurds was most often linked to familial knowledge of culture, Kurdish history, and language skills. Kurdish activists often referred to efforts of having to “sanitize” and “purify” Kurdish history from colonial domination by Turkey (and other countries). One artist proposed to curate a “unique and collaborative photographic exhibit of South Africa under Apartheid and Kurdish society under Turkish domination” to be able to show how “Kurds are humiliated, paraded around after arrests, or tortured by police and in prisons (Participant XIII).” One activist argued that “for centuries regional powers have cancelled our stories . . . we never gain access to our own history. We are nothing; we are nobody . . . we should have the right to study and speak about our common history (Participant XIV).” Others preferred that the Kurdish homeland be reimagined in an exhibit without the presence of “shaming” and “public humiliations and denigrations” as experienced in interactions with the Turkish security apparatus and its bureaucracy (Participants XV and XVI).

Kurdish diaspora artists in Germany were predominantly interested in (re)producing and preserving Kurdish cultural traditions, and focused their exhibit ideas on folkloric expressions such as songs, group dances, and musical performances with traditional instruments. In this context, artistic expressions and political messaging clearly intersected since the preservation of cultural traditions involved public performances of Kurdishness in Germany. One participant suggested that a community center offer Kurdish dancing lessons, exhibit traditional Kurdish clothing, and invite visitors to learn about the experiences of Kurds in Turkey (Participant XII). While this suggestion might appear to be entirely innocuous, in the frequently acrimonious interactions between highly politicized segments of Kurdish and Turkish communities in Germany such an event might require a city permit and a security detail.

Some participants emphasized the preservation of literature and literary contributions by Kurds. One participant commented that “we have written literature, too, and a lot of poetry, and a tradition of exceptional contemporary novels in all Kurdish languages,” to ensure that Kurdish cultural contributions would not be minimized or infantilized by displays of poor village life that is dominated by farming and animal husbandry (Participant XVII). These suggestions indicate that both Kurdish diaspora artists and activists in Germany rely on collective memories of trauma, and reflect on the awareness raising potential of artistic and cultural expressions.

Abstract gallery art appears to play a lesser role in this process, however. Interview participants expressed a preference for representational art such as photographic exhibits, photo collages, documentaries, and video installations as a way to democratize communal knowledge about Kurdish identity.

While some participants mentioned the importance of sharing their projects with non-Kurdish audiences as well, many focused on strengthening internal Kurdish unity rather than establishing linkages with potential allies at this point.

SPLINTERED KURDISH COMMUNITIES IN THE UNITED STATES

In contrast to Germany's sizable Kurdish diaspora community of over one million people, only 30,000–40,000 Kurdish Americans and Kurdish immigrants live in the United States at present. The exact size of these Kurdish communities is difficult to confirm, in part because past census data failed to capture Kurdish Americans as a separate category but also because growing numbers of Kurds arrived as refugees in recent years (and are officially listed as Syrians and Iraqis). Kurds are also among the groups that have overstayed temporary entry visas or crossed the U.S. border without valid papers.³⁹ In addition, Kurds are leaving Turkey as a consequence of state violence and some make their way to U.S. ports of entry (San Diego via Cuba and Mexico, for example) to apply for asylum in the United States. With mounting pressure on Kurdish communities, it is reasonable to assert that the number of Kurdish refugees from various homeland regions in the United States increased significantly since 2015.

It is not well known that a steady stream of Kurdish refugees and political exiles settled in the United States since the 1970s, particularly following dramatic regime changes in Iran and Iraq. Kurds moved predominately to urban areas of southern California such as Los Angeles and San Diego, and to the upper Midwest, including Nebraska, Minnesota, and North Dakota. The largest Kurdish community can be found in Nashville, TN, but many Kurds also decided to move to New York, New Jersey, and Washington, DC. Various Kurdish communities have protected their cultural and linguistic heritage as the formation of Kurdish cultural organizations has demonstrated. For example, the Fargo-Moorhead Kurdish Community of America (KCA) is a cultural organization that connects Kurds in Minnesota with those in North Dakota. Kurds from Iran can often be found in California and Kurds originating from Iraq settled predominantly in Nashville and the upper Midwest; more recent arrivals from Turkey and Syria are often dominant among the urban East Coast Kurdish communities. In general, Kurds in the US are significantly more socioculturally and religiously diverse than in Germany.

A wave of Kurds from Iranian Kurdistan settled in the United States following the Islamic Revolution in 1979. Politically active Kurds feared repression under the theocratic regime. Just months after the revolution, Ayatollah

Khomeini ordered Iranian forces to bomb Kurdish towns and villages and to eliminate activists through summary executions. Iranian Kurds, who managed to escape, quickly qualified for asylum in the United States. Meanwhile in Iraq, Saddam Hussein crushed Kurdish resistance in the genocidal Anfal campaigns, which culminated in poison gas attacks in and around the Kurdish town of Halabja in 1988.⁴⁰ About 5,000 Kurdish civilians perished after the Iraqi air force dropped sarin gas and other nerve agents on unsuspecting Kurdish communities.⁴¹ Throughout the 1980s, the Iraqi regime destroyed an estimated 4,500 Kurdish villages to undermine agricultural activities and murdered between 100,000 and 180,000 Kurds. Many of the survivors and displaced Kurds applied for refugee status in the United States.

Another significant migration of Kurds to the United States took place between 1996 and 1997, after hostilities pitted the two major Kurdish political parties in Iraqi Kurdistan against each other. The Kurdistan Democratic Party (KDP) controlled by Masoud Barzani and the Patriotic Union of Kurdistan (PUK) led by Jalal Talabani competed for predominance. They internationalized the conflict by reaching out to regional allies and former enemies. The PUK established an alliance with Iran and the KDP collaborated with Saddam Hussein, resulting in 30,000 Iraqi troops entering the northern Kurdish city of Erbil. Large numbers of Kurdish refugees left the region and crossed the border into Turkey aiming to escape the intensifying violence. President Clinton ordered a military intervention to prevent the Ba'athist Iraqi regime from reestablishing a power base in Kurdistan. A significant number of Kurds shaped by this internecine conflict has settled in Nashville, TN, which today claims to represent the single largest community of Kurdish immigrants in the country. The Tennessee Kurdish Community Council (TKCC) suggested that its community numbered between 15,000 and 17,000 Kurds in 2017.

Finally, during the past five years about 2,000 Kurdish immigrants arrived in the United States who had worked as interpreters with members of the U.S. military or international humanitarian organizations. The Pentagon expressed concern that the number of Iraqis (including Kurds), who received permission to enter the United States through a special visa program was too small to maintain the necessary levels of cooperation.⁴² Since the beginning of the Syrian war in 2011 and the emergence of the IS in 2014, there has been an increase in the numbers of Kurdish asylum seekers in the United States. That said, according to the Migration Policy Institute, of the Syrian refugees who resettled in the United States only 3 percent speak Kurdish.⁴³ Among them have been members of the Yezidi minority (some claim Kurdish ethnicity, others insist that they represent a separate ethnic group), as well as Kurdish activists carrying Syrian passports, whose political engagement exposed them to growing violence and repression.

KURDISH ACTIVISM AND ART IN THE UNITED STATES

Since Kurdish diaspora communities in the United States are sharply divided reflecting particular communal experiences with state and internecine violence, genocide, and repression, activists have failed to create a more unified sense of identity. Kurdish diaspora communities are also socially and religiously at odds since some focus more on maintaining socially conservative values, while others are fiercely leftist and socialist. Kurdish diaspora communities in the United States encounter exceptional challenges when they organize themselves around shared political visions. Many Kurdish communities in the United States are dominated by first generation and often male leaders, whose perceptions can be frozen in place in part because of past trauma and internal Kurdish divisions. Some continue to be skeptical of new mobilization tactics that tend to be embraced by younger university educated Kurds.⁴⁴

Furthermore, the sheer geographic size of the United States has presented a barrier to organizing Kurdish gatherings and to produce the sociocultural connectedness that inspires lasting activism. Attending political conferences and traveling to participate in protest events is an elite privilege for Kurds in the United States. Kurds with means access such events, furthering suspicion among less educated or financially vulnerable diaspora communities that hidden agendas could play a role. The lack of communication and exchange of ideas among various diaspora communities has incited further distrust and fragmentation. One participant proposed that a Kurdish exhibit in the United States would need to emphasize “the many paths to America” to be relevant for the entire diaspora: “I always notice that Kurds internalize very specific histories and do not think broadly about larger Kurdish rights; we have not yet managed to free our minds from the state-centric principles we absorbed (Participant XVIII).” Two exhibit ideas suggested in this context referenced the Holocaust Museum in DC, where visitors receive physical passports with identities before walking through the exhibit halls (the passports list names, ages, gender, country of origin, and information about death or survival of a person/family). One Kurdish participant highlighted that it would make sense to hand out such passports to visitor of a Kurdish exhibit to be able to learn more about daily experiences in the four major regions of Kurdistan: “I like the idea of creating special passports for Kurds with Kurdish colors and various languages,” she stated (Participant XIX). Another participant described how he imagined “five dark tunnels leading to specific Kurdish historical moments: the Halabja poisoning; ISIS attacks on communities; Diyarbakir prison accounts; public executions in Iran; and stories of exile (Participant XX).” The growing mobility among highly educated Kurds may eventually speed up the potential for a more unified understanding of Kurdish identity.

Kurdish scholars and PhD students in the United States increasingly pursue opportunities to carry out fieldwork among Kurdish diaspora communities in such locations as London, Paris, or Berlin. They observe organizational mechanisms in other diaspora communities and appreciate the digital technologies that are used to communicate ideas across geographic spaces and historical periods. Kurdish artistic expressions can provide some hope for crossing such sociocultural and political fissures over time. Paintings, video installations, and short-film documentaries in particular highlight and challenge schemes of repression by linking memories of conflict and pain to lived Kurdish experiences today. While such efforts to mobilize Kurds in the United States are in their infancy, narrating collective experiences through artistic expressions may be one of the few ways through which the fragmented diaspora can identify more common ground. “Art speaks to all of us and we can appreciate the beauty in it. We can explore the many colors and materials that are used in paintings to express a vision, and we can dream together to foresee a different world,” intimated one participant (Participant XXI). Another Kurdish activist proposed to rely more actively on “art therapy to help Kurds process the many layers of trauma” but said it would be unethical to display such projects in a public space (Participant XXII).

In 2010 Syrian Kurdish artist Lukman Ahmad arrived in the United States as a refugee and settled in the Washington, DC area. His paintings rely on religiously syncretic symbols and frequently integrate images of his sister, who was threatened by the Syrian regime. Ahmad often examines particularly painful Kurdish experiences and memories in his work and explores how they may have shaped Kurdish communities over time.⁴⁵ His paintings are inspired by both personal and communal experiences and have in part informed human rights circles in Washington, DC, about Kurdish art. Another example worth mentioning in connection to Kurdish artistic expressions in the United States was the 2014 San Francisco Kurdish Cultural Festival. Organized by Maher Sinjari, a graphic design student from Kurdistan Iraq, the festival focused on tangible experiences such as Kurdish music and dancing but also featured an exhibition of paintings by Kurdish artist Khairy Adam from Kurdistan Iraq. Adam’s paintings depicted Kurdish women in traditional clothing in a style best described as contemporary realism.

Finally, the Miami Film Festival in 2017 merits some attention, because its organizers invited Kurdish director Hussein Hassan Ali to premier his film “The Dark Wind” in North America (the event was sponsored by the German Consulate General in Miami). The film centered on the experiences of a young Yezidi woman who was ostracized by communal elders following her abduction and rape by the IS. However, director Hussein Hassan Ali was unable to obtain a visa to enter the United States in order to speak at the Miami Film Festival and eventually withdrew his application in protest of the

Trump administration's rigid entry requirements for Kurds.⁴⁶ National media outlets in the United States offered minimal coverage of this act of protest, further demonstrating to Kurds that their experiences mattered little.

The three examples highlighted fundamental challenges for Kurdish artists and activists in the United States. While core activists and artists on the East Coast with familial linkages to Kurdistan Iraq, Turkey, and Syria are just as motivated, mobilized, and committed as in Europe, their organizational structures remain weak and unsustainable. Socialist oriented Kurdish activists cannot imagine collaborating with or endorsing political figures with financial connections to the Kurdistan Regional Government (KRG). They see the KRG as repressive, corrupt, and closely aligned with the Turkish regime. U.S. foreign policy decisions have furthered such divisions by categorizing Kurdish communities into "authorized allies" and "troublesome militants" based on very narrowly defined security and regional interests. While Kurdish diaspora communities in the United States are not mere representations of their homeland regions, they continue to be deeply influenced by homeland politics to this day.

Kurdish artistic expressions in the United States cater to more elite tastes and are not widely accessible to broader audiences beyond large urban areas. When Kurdish artistic projects are political in nature, they are rarely disseminated beyond specialized festivals or university environments. Non-elite Kurdish communities throughout the United States may be interested in traveling exhibits or would like to access social media based artistic projects, but little communication exists between dispersed communities to raise awareness. In addition, Kurdish art exhibitions continue to be framed as international or foreign art instead of receiving broader recognition from communities of artists in the United States. High-profile Kurdish artists often visit the United States from abroad for special shows or exhibits, but tend to return to their creative hubs in Europe or the Middle East. While the constant exchanges between European and U.S.-based Kurdish activists and artists may overcome such obstacles, it is likely going to take another decade of outreach efforts before Kurdish communities in the United States identify a common vision.

Kurdish collective memory in the United States continues to be dominated by particularistic socio-cultural and geographic notions. Some communities memorialize the victims of Saddam Hussein's Ba'athist regime while others demand that the suffering of Kurds in Iran be highlighted more frequently. Along the East Coast younger and often educated Kurdish activists want to shame Erdoğan's Turkey and feel inspired by socialist principles in Rojava. Divisions and disagreements are palpable and each Kurdish community claims particular collective memories, symbols and ideological notions. Zuhdi Sardar, an artist from Kurdistan Iraq who has been in California for

nearly fifty years, stated that “I paint life as I have lived and imagined it in this world and worlds beyond. I paint to bridge the past and present . . . I paint to look back and look ahead when it comes to the Kurdish struggle for freedom.”⁴⁷ So far, however, Kurdish artists in the United States remain geographically and ideologically divided and have not managed to assist in inspiring a shared diasporic vision for Kurdistan.

Artists and Activists in Germany:

Participant X: Male participant with familial linkage to Turkish Kurdistan.

Participant XI: Male participant with familial linkage to Turkish Kurdistan.

Participant XII: Female participant with familial linkage to Turkish Kurdistan.

Participant XIII: Male participant with familial linkage to both Turkish and Syrian Kurdistan.

Participant XIV: Male participant with familial linkage to Turkish Kurdistan.

Participant XV: Female participant with familial linkage to Turkish Kurdistan.

Participant XVI: Male participant with familial linkage to Turkish Kurdistan.

Participant XVII: Male participant with familial linkage to Syrian Kurdistan.

Artists and Activists in the United States:

Participant XVIII: Female participant with familial connections to Kurdistan Iraq.

Participant XIX: Female participant with familial connections to Kurdistan Iraq.

Participant XX: Male participant with familial linkage to Turkish Kurdistan.

Participant XXI: Female participant with familial linkage to Syrian Kurdistan.

Participant XXII: Male participant with familial linkage to Turkish Kurdistan.

NOTES

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2. Martin Sökefeld, “Mobilizing in Transnational Space: A Social Movement Approach to the Formation of Diaspora,” *Global Networks* 6, no. 3 (2006): 275–279.

3. New York City/Jersey City and Washington, DC/Virginia tend to be the centers of Kurdish political activities in the US (although only about 3,000 Kurds reside within the vicinity of these areas).

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Chapter 13

Diasporic Narratives of Assimilation and Resistance

Barzoo Eliassi

Following the collapse of the multiethnic and multi-religious Ottoman Empire, the Turkish Republic was proclaimed in 1923. Since its inception, the Turkish state has attempted to coercively assimilate the Kurds. Turkishness was celebrated and asserted as the master identity of this new Republic through a negation of the existing non-Turkish constituencies that were historically present within this political geography. For many decades, the Turkish state and mainstream media have deliberately denied the Kurds a political voice to represent themselves as sovereign political subjects. Through describing political claims by the Kurds as an expression of “feudalism,” “barbarianism,” and “backwardness,” the Turkish state has attempted to prevent the Kurds from achieving recognition as an ethno-political identity or asserting themselves as the second territorial-linguistic community after the Turks.¹ After 1980, the Turkish state and media frequently referred to political and armed Kurdish dissent led by the Kurdistan Workers’ Party (PKK) as a case of “terrorism.”²

In order to craft a homogenous entity, the Turkish state initiated and implemented population polices and social engineering among non-Turks as a technique of nation formation. The predominantly Kurdish regions were imagined as the “badlands” of the Turkish Republic that assumedly needed to be tamed and civilized through a Turkification process. Following a colonial discourse, the Kurds were imagined as the “Red Indians” of America who were deemed as culturally and economically unfit for the modern world and would either undergo gradual assimilation or elimination.³ Accordingly, Kurdish identity was devalued as not having a place in the modern world and urged to subsume itself under the universality of Turkish identity that not only claimed to be the universal identity of Turkey but also the root of “all world civilizations and languages.”⁴

Although the Turkish assimilation policies have been relatively successful, the Kurds remain the main force that challenge the sovereign Turkish identity and seek to reformulate the political principles of inclusion in Turkey.⁵ In sum, coercive assimilation policies, displacement, destruction of Kurdish villages, violence, and denial have thus structured Turkish politics against the Kurdish population.⁶ As a consequence of deprivation and military confrontation between the PKK and the Turkish state, several million Kurds have left their homes in Western cities of Turkey. Thousands of villages have been destroyed and over 2.5 billion acres of forest have been burned by the Turkish state.⁷ This forced displacement, whether economically or politically motivated, has contributed to formation of a Kurdish diaspora in Western Turkey. The Kurdish diaspora in Western Turkish cities has been viewed as a “Kurdish invasion,” where Kurds are racialized both in public and popular discourses as inferior⁸ and culturally incompatible with modern city life and represented as backward, criminal, violent, and separatist.⁹ Many Kurds have co-opted these negative images and equate Kurdishness with ignorance, incivility, and with an interest in their ostensibly parochial identity.¹⁰ This orientalist discourse deployed against the Kurds aims to create a hierarchical political order and buttress the idea of Turkish identity as the master identity that needs to be embraced by the Kurds in order to enter a civilized social order. Paradoxically, while the existence of an ethno-political Kurdish identity has been historically denied, muted, and punished by the Turkish state, ordinary Turks both recognize the Kurds as a different ethnicity and vindicate exclusionary discourses with reference to their real or alleged differences. In popular Turkish representation, Kurds are both viewed as disrupting security and benefiting scroungers.¹¹ Following negative media and political representations that either define the Kurds as a problem or nonexistent, the Kurdish diaspora in these Turkish cities are both de-constituting themselves as Turkish by adapting and assimilating into a Turkish identity and/or constituting themselves as Kurds as a form of resistance toward assimilation.¹²

From the 1970s onward, as a result of political oppression and violence and economic deprivation in Iran, Iraq, Syria and Turkey, hundreds of thousands of Kurds have migrated to Western Europe in search of political, cultural, and economic rights and security. It is in the context of liberal democracies and multicultural integration policies in Western Europe, juxtaposed with processes of globalization and the proliferation of information technologies, that a highly politicized Kurdish diaspora has emerged. Migration has been a transformative experience for many Kurdish migrants who have fled Turkey and have attempted to shake off their imposed Turkish identity and/or alter their pattern of identification with the Turkish state. Against this background and based on a qualitative inquiry and interviews

with thirty Kurdish migrants in Sweden and the United Kingdom, this chapter will investigate politics of belonging among the Kurds of Turkey, engage with the ways they have experienced Turkish assimilation policies, and assign meaning to these experiences in diasporic contexts. Moreover, this chapter will explore the politics and limits of resistance that attempt to subvert Turkish assimilation discourses and reclaim Kurdishness in the context of political violence in Turkey.

CRAFTING NATIONAL SAMENESS THROUGH ASSIMILATION

The concept of assimilation can be best understood within the context of modernity and the nation-state. Through design, manipulation, management, and engineering, modernity aimed to impose order upon the society and remove ambivalence that the differences of ethnic minorities represented.¹³ Modernity has not only made the need for recognition central in human lives, but also produced conditions in which recognition is often denied.¹⁴ The term assimilation, which means making alike or similar, was first applied within biology. The first usage that can be dated goes back to 1578 and referred to assimilation as “acts of *absorption* and *incorporation* performed by living organisms.” Unambiguously, “assimilation” stood for *conversion*, not a self-administered change; it was an action performed by a living organism on its environment. It meant “convert into a substance of its own nature.”¹⁵ It was first during 1837 that the term of assimilation was generalized and became common currency due to the escalating nationalisms. Bauman argues that what made assimilation so attractive to its advocates was the asymmetry of assimilation as a social practice and the unequivocal unidirectionality of the process. The subordinated cultural groups thus needed a radical change to transform themselves in order to become more identical with the dominant identity that functioned as a normative point of reference. The ambition to achieve cultural and linguistic uniformity within the realm of the nation-state entailed a far-reaching cultural crusade and intolerance to difference. The modern nation-state functions as a designing power that promotes similarity and uniformity through defining what is order and chaos, filtering the proper from the improper, and legitimizing one form of life as superior to others. In order to achieve these political goals, the nation-state resorted to assimilation policies.¹⁶ Assimilation as such became a declaration of war on ambiguity and those who were deemed as *foreign* or not *sufficiently native*.¹⁷ This required a nationalizing project to distinguish between the fitting and worthy nationals from the unfitting and unworthy nonnationals. It is in this context that *core* members/citizens

were filtered from the culturally and linguistically *marked* and stigmatized subjects of the nation-state.

The political vision that assimilation represented lured the culturally different and victim to fall into the trap of ambivalence with the idea that the putative marked subject can gain an admission ticket “to the world free from the stigma of otherness.”¹⁸ This requires inferiorized groups to obliterate the ascribed stigmatizing differences that they carry in order to meet the conditions that the gatekeepers of the dominant group had set. This situation can create distress for inferiorized groups who are objectified and meticulously examined and assessed by the dominant group that determines the meanings of their conduct. When an inferiorized group applies for an entry into the dominant group through its adaptation to the values of the dominant group, it effectively provides the dominant group with a position to act as “the *arbitrating power*, a force entitled to set the exams and mark the performance.”¹⁹ The project of assimilation and its mechanism can be summarized as a nationalization project that seeks to create legal, linguistic, cultural, and ideological unification within the territorial boundary of the nation-state. In order to deal with cultural heterogeneity, the nation-state often responds with cultural crusades, impatience, and intolerance against differences that supposedly threaten national and political integrity of the state. Since the states were nationalized and nations were *etatized*, the state stipulates the conditions for citizenship through political loyalty, trustworthiness, and devotion to cultural uniformity. This leads to a nexus between citizenship and cultural conformity.²⁰

The main Turkish strategy to assimilate the Kurds has been through language. For the founder of the Turkish republic, Mustafa Kemal Atatürk, a person who claimed to be a member of the Turkish nation must unconditionally speak the Turkish language. Although nationalism and racism can be formulated in different ways due to specific political and historical contexts, they can easily collaborate in constructing an exclusionary political community.²¹ Consider how the first prime minister of Turkey, Ismet Inonu, expressed his idea about the Turkification process of non-Turks: “Nationalism is our only factor of cohesion. . . . In the face of a Turkish majority other elements have no kind of influence. We must Turkify the inhabitants of our land at any price and we will annihilate those who oppose the Turks.”²²

This entails that being Kurdish and becoming a future Turk through violent assimilatory practices have produced wounded Kurdish subjectivities within the boundary of the Turkish state and in transnational and diasporic contexts. Diaspora is both a place and a social location from which Kurds frame their understanding of what assimilation meant to them as Kurds in Turkey and what it means to them now living in diaspora, and how they respond and resist its power on their subjectivities. Unlike the state-linked Turkish

diaspora that often reinforces Turkish statehood and the dominant position of the Turkish language and identity, the stateless Kurdish diaspora frequently challenges the Turkish state and attempt to subvert the Turkish mastery and refashion the hierarchical order that denies non-Turks the right to be legitimate constituents of the society.

Below, I will draw upon the narratives of the interviewees to show how assimilation has structured the subjectivities of the Kurds during their childhood and adulthood and how they respond to the persistent and internalized effects of Turkish assimilation policies on members of the Kurdish diaspora in Sweden and the United Kingdom.

OUTLAWING AND DEHUMANIZING KURDISH IDENTITY

The main strategy of the Turkish state has been based on a cultural war juxtaposed with military violence to erase the biographies of the Kurds in Turkey. Kurds have both consented to and violently opposed these assimilation practices, which impinge on Kurdish identity formation in its different forms. This entails that life for a Kurd in the Turkish nation-state has been and is still difficult and at times very dangerous. Kurdish assimilation into a Turkish identity has not been a simple journey since it has been based on coercive and violent practices.²³ From the moment the state defines who is the assimilator and who is the object of assimilation, a hierarchy is constructed between different members of the nation-state.²⁴ Shivan, who was a teacher in Mardin before migrating to Sweden, talked about the difficulty of being a Kurd in Turkey and recalled events and lived experiences of state and popular violence targeting Kurds. He underlined how Turkishness has entailed construction of Kurdishness as an outlawed identity:

In my homeland in Kurdistan, I was a foreigner. In my homeland, my name was forbidden, my language was forbidden, my flag was forbidden, naming our homeland and children were forbidden. We were a forbidden people. (Shivan, fifty-year-old man, Sweden)

The account mentioned earlier converges with the formulation of Bauman that assimilation entails a form of war on identities and languages which are viewed as a threat to national community and national sameness.²⁵ It is worth noting that Kurds and other non-Turkish groups were not foreigners to these lands but *foreignized* through Turkish representations that attempted to spatially erase non-Turkish cultures, religions, and peoples. Leyla recalled

her father's move to Bursa from Kurdistan and the way he was treated when declaring his Kurdishness to a Turkish family as new neighbors:

During the 1970s when my father was living in Bursa, he told a Turk that he was Kurdish. The Turk told him: "Do Kurds eat people?" They were afraid that our family would cut their heads while they were sleeping. We lived as neighbors during 3 years and he became so sad when we moved from the neighborhood and lamented about his earlier perceptions about the Kurds to my family. He said that he has been brainwashed and taught to not see Kurds as human beings. (Leyla, fifty-three-year-old woman, the UK)

This story indicates how negative stereotypes and stigmatization shape dominant Turkish perceptions of the Kurds not only in the past but also at present times, where Kurds are viewed as a security problem by unsettling the ontological security of the Turkish nation and its discourse of ethnic homogeneity. Moreover, this intersubjective encounter above reveals both the power of stereotypes and dehumanization of the Kurds and the productive and positive transformation in the relationship between member of the dominant Turkish group and the minoritized Kurds. In a similar context, Evin, who was born in Lebanon but grew up in Izmir, shared her experiences of otherness as a Kurd in Izmir:

I remember it was taboo to say that I am Kurdish in school or speak Kurdish because it was Turkish that was the rule. In school everybody knew that you were Kurdish. It was during a gymnastic class that a teacher asked me the meaning of my name. She said that name cannot be Turkish and I said that it was Kurdish. She did not like the word Kurdish. Everybody in the class got a good grade in gymnastics except me. The funny thing is that I was the most sportive student in my class. Our Turkish neighbor told us once in Izmir: "I hope that a bee can sting your tongues so you can never be able to say the word Kurd." (Evin, thirty-nine-year-old woman, Sweden)

This entails the institutional discrimination often collaborated with popular and everyday discrimination against the Kurdish identity. Through these institutional and everyday encounters and experiences that Evin referred to above, Kurds were pushed to undervalue their Kurdishness in order to become somebody or attain some form of mainstream intelligibility in the gaze of the dominant Turkish group. In the context of postcolonial identity formation and subjugation, Radhakrishnan contends that it is important for identities to enjoy legitimacy both in the eyes of themselves and others. Otherwise "they are bound to languish within their histories of inferiority, deprived of their relational objective status vis-à-vis the objective conditions of other identities."²⁶ These histories

of inferiority become more tangible when the interviewees discuss and remember the experiences of their denied Kurdish identity within the boundary of the Turkish jurisdiction, as the next section of this chapter will demonstrate.

INTERNALIZING KURDISH SUBJUGATION AND TURKISH SUPERIORITY

When asked about his experiences of growing up as a Kurdish child in Turkey, Aram pointed out that claiming a Kurdish identity was like putting yourself behind prison bars and resisting Turkish citizenship. This made many Kurds comply with the Turkish state in order to earn a living. Moreover, he argued that to assert yourself as a Kurd was equated with being a “traitor” who either had to leave Turkey or be exempted from enjoying societal resources in Turkey. This shows how complicity with the assimilation policies was partly based on pragmatic reasons. However, this is just one part of the story since cultural stigmatization and subordination were central in constructing a subordinated Kurdish identity. The state power uses different social institutions to constitute a group by “imposing on it common principles of vision and division, and, thus a unique vision of its identity and an identical vision of its unity.”²⁷ By creating this identical vision of unity, the Turkish state managed to displace and alienate Kurdish identity. To become a Turkish citizen, Kurds were urged to show that they had erased traces of Kurdish biographies and deculturated in institutional and everyday life. Aram provides an account of how his father invested in Turkishness and strived to attain the status of a “civilized citizen,” an experience that resembles a colonial situation:

We had a shop where I worked as a tailor and it was close to the police station. Several of my customers were Turkish police officers. When these police officers came to our shop, my father urged us not to speak Kurdish but Turkish. He was ashamed of speaking Kurdish and he wanted to assert himself as Turkish and modern in front of the Turkish police officers. Speaking Turkish was considered as being a civilized person. You could see this attitude among both younger and older generations of Kurds. (Aram, forty-eight-year-old man, Sweden)

This illustrates that while the Kurdish identity or language was assumed to represent backwardness, Turkishness was conflated with civilization and modernity. This instilled a sense of cultural inferiority that the Turkish state has sanctioned. It is not a question of individualized experiences but has wider relevance that cut across generations. Hassan, who is an Alevi Kurd,

painfully remembered his subordination due to his ethnic and religious background, given that the majority of Turkish and Kurdish population are Sunni Muslims. Hassan provides an account about the effects of Turkish assimilation on Kurdish subjectivity:

I went to school when I was 5 years old. You do not realize this thing as a kid until you go to school where everything was in Turkish. When we Kurds spoke Kurdish with each other we were beaten up by the teachers. This was during the 1970s. I mean you go to school and the teacher asks you something in a language you do not understand and then he smacked you because you do not understand Turkish or the question. Gradually, your Turkish becomes better and you forget your own Kurdish language. It feels awful that you are Kurdish and you cannot speak your own language. Turkish language was everywhere, in the street, in the literature, radio and TV. Many people from my village say that they are Turkish because they deny their Kurdish identity. The Turkish state has really worked on making this people to lose their Kurdish identity. The Kurds start to be ashamed of their Kurdish identity and think that Turkish identity is a superior identity. I remember when we were kids and when some of us spoke better Turkish, that person was viewed as better than others. We were systematically beaten by the teacher when we did not speak good Turkish. When I was 10 years old and moved to Istanbul, I was ashamed of not speaking Turkish with a good accent because my friends were all Turkish and they could do remarks about my pronunciation. But I learnt to speak without any accent. The education system in Turkey makes you push yourself to be as Turkish as possible so you can fit in. (Hassan, fifty-three-year-old man, the UK)

Hassan's experiences illustrate how assimilation works and how the Turkish identity due to its hegemonic state-sponsored position punishes non-Turkish identities and conquers non-Turkish bodies and minds. Hassan attempts to construct an interpretative framework to understand how Turkish identity gains hegemony in the wider society as the master identity that shapes institutions, appraises, and hierarchizes differences as well as structures and conquers the subjectivity of the Kurdish subject. In the context of intensive and coercive Turkification processes of non-Turkish identities and spaces, the Kurds needed "to struggle to inhabit a world, which has been made for others."²⁸ Mastery and knowledge of the dominant language provides the colonized subjects with credentials to different forms of privilege and recognition at the cost of those colonized subjects who have failed to alter and transform their subjectivity by learning and embodying the culture and language of the master identity.²⁹ According to Bourdieu, states use education to construct, legitimize, and impose a language in order to craft national sameness, common consciousness, and mental structures.³⁰ Aram provides a context how the symbolic power of Turkishness affected Kurds through education:

In school, we were humiliated on a daily basis. This humiliation was normalized since we as Kurdish children had to declare that we were Turks and that we were prepared to sacrifice our lives for the Turkish nation and state. As a Kurd, you feel that *you are mentally raped by the Turkish state*. This was an extreme form of humiliation. If you could not master the Turkish language in a good way, you were also exposed to negative treatments by the teacher but also ran the risk of receiving a low grade. You could also be punished if you could not express yourself well in Turkish, which many Kurdish children could not because their parents could not speak Turkish so well. The teachers consisted of both Turks and Kurds. There were very few Kurdish teachers who were aware of their Kurdish identity. Many Kurdish teachers were stricter against the Kurdish students because they wanted to show that they were loyal to the Turkish nation and state. (Aram, forty-eight-year-old man, Sweden, [emphasis mine])

Aram above uses a sexualized language to depict the penetration of Turkish language and identity into the minds and bodies of the Kurdish children and the everyday humiliation they were subjected to. In her reading of the postcolonial writer Edouard Glissant, Britton argues that language can be used as a vehicle to achieve control and command. While colonized subjects might politicize language as a means of struggle and a basis for political mobilization against the colonizer, it is also true that educated elites within the colonized group due to the feeling of inferiority can use the dominant language for social promotion and mobility and to overcome the instilled colonial subjection.³¹ For the Kurdish teachers in Aram's accounts, one way of gaining recognition among the Turkish teachers were expressed through asserting themselves as super-Turks by being guardians of Turkish mastery and language. It is this situation that explains how the dominant group gains the position of being the "the *arbitrating power*, a force entitled to set the exams and mark the performance."³² Despite the attempts of these Kurdish teachers, Aram pointed out that they could not conceal their Kurdish identity while speaking Turkish due to their distinct Kurdish accent. Ambivalence constitutes Kurdish identity formation. If they would invoke that they are Turkish as the political vision of the assimilation represented in order to be admitted a national ticket to the privileged Turkish identity, they would not be accepted as legitimate and core members of the Turkish community due to their accent and differences that revealed their Kurdishness. In addition, if they would affirm their differences and demand rights, public recognition and acceptance of their Kurdish identity and language in everyday and institutional life, this would entail further exclusion and arbitrary violence and incarceration.

The interviewees above have talked about individual Kurds who have been exposed to practices of assimilation that have heavily affected the definition of self and other. To cast the net wider, the Kurdish movements that have

at different times opposed the Turkish state have not been able to escape the domination of the Turkish language even when they frame a political template for political liberation of the Kurds. Aram, who was a member of the Kurdish party *Ala Rizgari* (The Liberation Flag) during the 1980s, talked about this contradiction and the penetrating depth of the Turkish assimilation:

Even our political party that was revolutionary and wanted to create a free and an independent Kurdistan communicated its relationships and dialogue through the Turkish language. Many of our comrades could not speak Kurdish or spoke a very limited Kurdish and could not express themselves properly. We wrote, read and discussed politics in the Turkish language. We spoke Turkish as much as we could. The Turkish language was instilled into our spinal cords and we were deeply indoctrinated by the Turkish state. Sometimes within our party, somebody could suggest that we could speak Kurdish, but that person was immediately considered as a chauvinist and nationalist. It is very contradictory, because you fight for an independent Kurdistan, and you do not have the will to speak Kurdish. Why should you have an independent Kurdistan when your people speak Turkish? (Aram, forty-eight-year-old man, Sweden)

In relations of cultural inequality, speaking an oppressed language like the Kurdish language becomes associated with a subversive identity that violates the allegedly bonds of solidarity between different constituencies that Turkish language promises. Such a romantic conception of the Turkish language as a neutral and a vehicle of communication in a multilingual context conceals the historical and the present violence that has been constitutive to Turkish nation-building. In a similar context, Havin, whose parents were born in the Turkish city of Konya talked about Kurdish families moving there more than hundred years ago to establish disparate Kurdish communities and adopt different cultural positions vis-à-vis the politically normative and sanctioned Turkish identity. Havin contrasted her own village with another Kurdish village around the same city that had made efforts to assume a Turkish identity by depicting Havin's village as "uncivilized farmers." While both villages consist of relatives, their position regarding the Turkish identity is different since members of the other village speak only Turkish and try to act more sophisticated by creating a Turkish atmosphere in their homes. Havin, who has assumed a strong political position against the Turkish state, talked about her visit to the predominantly Kurdish city of Amed (Diyarbakir) and the question of language for the pro-Kurdish party The Peace and Democratic Party (BDP) that has now ceased and been replaced by The Peoples' Democratic Party (HDP):

When I was in Amed, I was told as a form of a joke that "if you want to learn Turkish, you should go to BDP." This was a joke circulating in Amed among

members of BDP. They use irony to show the power of the Turkish language even among a Kurdish party. (Havin, twenty-seven-year-old woman, Sweden)

This leads to the question of internalized racial oppression that can function as a suitable theoretical perspective to understand the psychic and material effects of internalization of Kurdish inferiority and Turkish superiority. Internalization of Turkish superiority among Kurds contributes to the material, psychic, and cultural dominance and privilege of the Turkish subject.³³ It should be underlined that by focusing on internalization of Turkish superiority, my intention is not to blame the Kurds, who are the primary victims of these structures of ethnic inequalities that benefits the Turkish identity. Pyke argues that systems of oppression assert themselves by coercion and overt repression in tandem with winning the consent of the oppressed group. Following Gramsci's conception of hegemony, Turkish identity has also gained its current position not only by violence, but also by controlling how reality is constructed and what kind of ideology and knowledge about nationhood is produced. The dominant group's knowledge and identity often circulate across the society and shape the everyday life, institutional life, the practices of organization, and the bureaucratic order.³⁴ This universalization of Turkish identity assumes itself as reflecting the interests of dominated ethnic and religious groups in Turkey. From the moment the Kurds identify with the dominant group and its institutions and hegemonic national narratives, they adopt to the repressive structural arrangements that keep them down and sustain their subjugation. This leads to the question of resistance in the context of assimilation within the framework of the nation-state but also in diasporic contexts that have created new opportunities for the Kurdish diaspora to reframe and refashion its conceptions of Turkish identity as the allegedly unifying force in a diverse but divided society.

LIMITS AND POSSIBILITIES OF DIASPORIC RESISTANCE

In Turkey, following the dominant political grammar of the Turkish state, Kurds are subjected to daily political violence and misrepresentation that reduce the political struggle of the Kurds to a question of "terror." As I have discussed above, internalized oppression among Kurds is central to how the Turkish state secures its grip on the Kurdish population as its subject and subordinate others. However, this is not to say that Kurds are passively adopting to an oppressive social system. The empirical data show that gender, religion, and education often play an important role in assuming and framing different experiences, perspectives, and narratives about how Kurdishness has been

constituted, with subjectivation and/or enacted resistance and complicity with power.

Pyke underlines that there is a theoretical fixation with resistance and that it is often adopted by scholars who pursue liberation of subjugated groups. Although Pyke agrees that it is problematic to depict a group merely in terms of powerlessness and victimhood, its position cannot entail that we can detect resistance everywhere to illustrate the ineffectiveness of power and the resilience of the dominated groups. Individuals and groups often adopt a variety of strategies like complicity, accommodation, and the maintenance and reproduction of power.³⁵ For instance, if we exaggerate the level and the scope of Kurdish resistance to Turkish domination, there is a risk to underestimate the oppressive structure of the Turkish state that often limits the very basis of agency. This is not to say that Kurds are not able to resist or respond to the unequal power relations that they experience.

As we will see below, there is a wide range of positionalities that Kurdish individuals can adopt to deal with, comply, and/or resist Turkish assimilation. In the context of political and cultural normativity of Sunni Islam as the binding tie of the Turkish nation, Hassan narrated a story about the strategies that the Kurdish Alevis adopted in order to pass as “good” Sunni Muslims:

You do not need to go to mosque if you are an Alevi. When you did not go to the mosque, people suspect that you are an Alevi, so some Alevis visit the mosques just to avoid being discriminated against. During Ramadan, Alevi families tend to wake up and put the light on late just to show that they are praying and fasting. You are fooling yourself and others around you. The Turkish system never protected the Alevi's citizenship rights because they never recognized Alevi as a religious group. Many Alevis thought that the Turkish Republic will be a better place for them than the Ottoman Empire, but the Turkish Republic committed the worst massacre against the Alevis during 1930s. (Hassan, fifty-three-year-old man, the UK)

Alevis belong to a Muslim Shi'a community and constitute the largest religious minority in Turkey. Although Alevis are denominated as Shiites, they have their unique interpretation of Shi'a Islam that is not only repudiated by Sunni Muslims but also by other Shi'a communities. The experience of Hassan above shows the intimate link between Sunni Islam and Turkishness in constructing hierarchies of religious and ethnic belonging.

The experiences of otherness and discrimination that Hassan underlined above were also shared by another interviewee Lana who remembered the isolation and non-acceptance that her Kurdish Alevi family (from Malatya) experienced while living in Istanbul. While Lana's family disclosed to their Turkish Muslim neighbors that they were Alevis and Kurdish, another

Turkish Alevi family who lived in the same building did not dare to disclose their religious identity due to fear of discrimination and isolation. Lana points out that her mother was very politically aware in Turkey and did not want to accept the position of otherness that was assigned to Alevis and Kurds. This political consciousness has been transmitted to Lana who offers a critical stance toward Kurdish Alevis who endorse the Kemalist ideology that is by definition and in practice anti-Kurdish:

I am so ashamed of some Alevi people because they still believe in Kemalist ideology and many of them vote for the CHP (Republican People's Party). Have they forgotten who committed the massacres against the Alevis? I cannot understand them and will never understand how Alevis can vote for this party. They believe in their perpetrators and they are insulting me as an Alevi. I have these arguments with my Alevi friends and distant relatives in Turkey about this issue. Some Alevis are more dangerous than the Sunni Muslims because they can be more Kemalists than anybody else. They think that voting for CHP is the way to protect them from Islamism. Why do not you vote BDP [current HDP] that is secular and very women-friendly. (Lana, thirty-two-year-old woman, the UK)

This illustrates how differently members of the same constituency can take a stance toward the Turkish Republic despite experiencing collective sufferings due to their ethnic and religious identity. However, this also shows that while Lana views both Islamism and Turkish nationalism as a threat against Kurdish Alevis and women, many Kurdish Alevis vote for the Republican People's Party (CHP) as a means to obstruct and resist the dominance of Islamism and downplaying if not outright rejecting their Kurdish identity. However, in both cases, they view their political positions as *resistance* toward political and religious ideologies that pose an existential threat to the Alevis and Kurds. A potential effect of these disparate ideological orientations is division and weakening of bonds of solidarity among Kurdish Alevis. While talking to Lana, she said that the political movement of the PKK has given her a home that functions as a site of resistance to think about her identity and her place in the world as a woman and as a Kurdish Alevi. Lana is very critical about Kurds who facilitate the normalization of the Turkish identity and demonization of Kurdish identity. Below, we see two examples of how she sees assimilation as a danger both in Kurdistan and in diaspora:

I refuse to go to some restaurants in Northern London because the people are Kurdish and they call them Turkish restaurant or food. I told them to take away the Turkish and put Mediterranean food or restaurant. Because all this food cannot be Turkish. Some of them must be Kurdish or influenced by Kurdish food. I feel that I belong to Kurdistan and when I go there, I feel more as a Kurd than I ever do. I was in Diyarbakir last year with my friend. I love Diyarbakir

and I feel that I belong to that city. We were going around and revisited some of the places that I have seen. We stopped at one very historical building called Hassan Pasha Hani and it is very popular now for its food and the historical building itself. When we were there, we were looking around and said that we are in Kurdistan, right? She said, yeah. But I said that people are talking Turkish. We turned around and we saw a Turkish flag. We said that this is Kurdistan only in our hearts and if we want to change this, we have to change it rapidly. Otherwise this occupation will not go away. It is not something that can change with a click of a finger. The Kurdish movement (PKK) has achieved successes. Now in Turkey, Kurds can say that they are Kurdish. People can request for the right to education in their languages. People can listen to Kurdish music. This is a reflection of the struggle of the Kurdish movement. It did not happen over one night. Lots of people have lost their lives, their homes and their children for the sake of the Kurdish struggle. (Lana, thirty-two-year-old woman, the UK)

In the narrative accounts that Lana offered above, Turkishness intrudes into the minds of the Kurds through language, food, and spaces. Lana was not the only interviewee to react negatively toward those Kurds who named their restaurants as Turkish. There were two major reasons why they chose Turkish names. The first reason is related to the success of Turkish identity to exteriorize itself and gain political legitimacy as the master identity of the nation-state, Turkey. The second reason behind this naming was the fear of the Kurdish restaurant proprietors that Turkish, Arabic, and Persian customers would avoid these restaurants for having “political names.” In other words, while names belonging to the dominant nations are assumed to be unifying and creating social cohesion, Kurdish names were feared to be viewed as “divisive,” “parochial,” and “secessionist” by members of the Turkish diaspora and to a lesser extent Iraqi and Iranian diasporas. This strategy of naming by Kurdish proprietors is also based on economic pragmatism, a stance that was harshly rejected by some interviewees as a “bad excuse” by “Kurds who sell their identity for Turkish money.” Naming a place or a shop is also about making public claims. Picking Turkish names for restaurants and shops is more common among Kurds of Turkey than for instance Kurds of Iraq who enjoy a relatively autonomous Kurdish region where Kurdish identity is not penalized but publicly endorsed and lived. This is a good example of how oppression and assimilation can have transnational effects on people whose identity has been othered culturally and linguistically.

For Lana, the PKK is the political movement that has created a politically conscious Kurdish subject that challenges the dominance of the Turkish identity and has constructed a “resilient” subjectivity among Kurds. Although Havin underlines the importance of the PKK and HDP for the Kurdish identity, she could not understand why command of Kurdish language was

so poor among people who viewed themselves as Kurdish and fought for Kurdistan:

I am not a member of the PKK or BDP (current HDP), but I am critical of their language policy. I usually meet Kurds who are supporting the PKK and BDP, but do not speak good Kurdish. I tell them even if you go up in the mountains and fight and become a martyr for the Kurdish case, I am more Kurdish than you because as long as I speak Kurdish, I am maintaining my difference and identity that Turkish has tried to destroy. I know that these are strong words and very provocative. I am not saying this because I do not have respect for martyrs. If there is something that I believe in, it is our Kurdish language. I find it funny when I see Kurdish politicians in the Turkish Parliament advocating for the Kurdish question, but barely or do not speak Kurdish. I am so ashamed of these people. They should start learning Kurdish and then their claims become more legitimate. When you do not want to learn Kurdish, you have accepted that you are a Turk, and not a Kurd although you fight for the Kurdish question. (Havin, twenty-seven-year-old woman, Sweden)

Havin discursively constructs a hierarchy among different forms of resistance that Kurds can adopt. It might not come as a surprise that Havin chooses the Kurdish language as the major site of resistance given that it has been the main target of the Turkish state. What might contradict Havin's approach is the fact that despite lack or poor command of the Kurdish language, these putative Kurds have not given up their communal belonging given that Kurdish identity is still criminalized and punished in institutional and everyday life. Moreover, while many interviewees talked about experiences of shame for not knowing the Turkish language during childhood and adulthood, Havin expresses her aversion toward Kurds who do not speak Kurdish. This is the opposite direction of how Kurdish subjectivity can be constructed that does not tolerate Turkish superiority or Kurds who speak Turkish in their everyday life. Although Havin directly blames the PKK for not endorsing the importance of the Kurdish language, it is worth mentioning that it was largely thanks to the diasporic activism and transnational practices of PKK supporters that Kurds launched their first satellite channel (Med-TV) in 1995. Med-TV came to be seen as a national television station due to its ambitions to include the diversity of Kurdishness in terms of culture, music, history, language, and dialects.

While diaspora is a risky place for groups who struggle for cultural rights and survival in the country of origin, there are persistent members of Kurdish diasporas who view maintenance of the Kurdish language in exile as a victory against the oppressive states in the Middle East. This idea is strongly promoted and popularized among the Kurdish diaspora in Sweden, most notably by the Swedish Kurdish stand-up comedians Özz Nûjen who argues

that Kurds did not flee Turkey and came to Sweden to become Swedish but to continue being Kurdish. This can, however, be easily interpreted by nationalist forces in Sweden as the reluctance of the Kurds to integrate or assimilate into the Swedish society and invest in cultural ghettoization. Despite the significant differences between Turkey and liberal democracies like Sweden and the United Kingdom, Kurds as a culturally endangered group face the pressure of assimilation with varying intensity in the countries of origin and in diasporic contexts. Yet migration can become a transformative force in the context of liberal democracies that provide some form of space for cultural recognition of ethnic minorities. Consider how Shivan frames this transformation following his migration to Sweden and the productive encounters with Kurds from other parts of Kurdistan who speak Kurdish:

A Turkish lawyer who was working for a human right organization visited Sweden and we went there to listen to him and see what he had to say about the situation of the Kurds in Turkey during 1990s. There were many Kurds there from different parts of Kurdistan. I wrote down some questions that I wanted to pose to this Turkish lawyer. There were around 100 persons listening to his speech. He was speaking Turkish and there were Kurdish and Turkish interpreters. Kurds from Southern Kurdistan (Iraq), Western Kurdistan (Syria) and Eastern Kurdistan (Iran) were asking their questions in Kurdish and the interpreters translated their questions into Turkish. I had written my questions in Turkish and I felt what a shame that I as a Kurd have to pose my question in Turkish. I asked myself why cannot I pose the questions in Kurdish about Kurds? I became so angry and sad. I felt guilty as not being able to speak my Kurdish language. Why cannot I express my feelings, decisions, and words in Kurdish? I took the paper on which I had written the questions in Turkish, tore it into many parts and threw them away. I said that I will not pose any questions. Then I swore to myself: by God, by God, by God, I will start as soon as possible so I learn Kurdish and will not let an invader language take over my life and control my tongue. I wanted to become a Kurd who can express his feelings in Kurdish. I was so upset and in pain. The day after, I went to the library and during six months, I was there from 10 o'clock to 3 o'clock and studied Kurdish by my own. I read all the Kurdish books in the library. After six months, I became a new human being. I gained my language and not only that, I have even become a teacher in Kurdish language and teach Kurdish kids in Sweden. If you really want to learn Kurdish, then you will learn it but you need a strong will and a strong sense of Kurdishness. (Shivan, fifty-year-old man, Sweden)

Politics of emotion as a social force are central to constituting and strengthening a Kurdish identity, particularly in times of crisis and existential threat that the states pose to the Kurds in the Middle East. It becomes illustrative of how guilt, shame, and pain enter the politics of Kurdish identity as transformative social forces in diasporic contexts, as Shivan illustrated, from not knowing

Kurdish to learning and teaching Kurdish to Kurdish children in Sweden. Shivan also points out that representatives of the Gülen movement contacted him in 2012 in order to open a school and hire him as a teacher. During the meeting, Shivan continues, they represented themselves as intellectuals and asserted their willingness to support Turkish students in Sweden. Shivan viewed them as fostering Turkishness and asked them about their political goal. The representatives of the movement replied that they wanted to serve God and Islam. When Shivan asked them about the language of instruction and what flag to use, they replied the Turkish language and the Turkish flag. But Shivan said that he could not work under a Turkish flag. The representatives of the movement lamented and said “in what way will it hurt to have a Turkish flag?” Shivan countered them with a question: “in what way does the Kurdish language and Kurdish flag hurt your Turkish feelings, not now but for almost a century?” According to Shivan, this movement wants to synthesize Islam with Turkishness.

Kurt maintains that Islamic governmentality in the Kurdish region of Turkey and colonial rule goes hand in hand not only to legitimize state authority but also to mute Kurdish claims to justice, representation, and equity. Dominant Turkish representations have succeeded to produce a discourse about “bad Kurds,” who supports the PKK and HDP and “good Kurds” who are against the PKK and support the ruling Justice and Development Party (AKP) in Turkey. In order to achieve the status of “good Kurds” and escape the stigma of Kurdishness, many Kurdish individuals present themselves as Muslim Kurds who supports Islamic brotherhood and unity by underlining their aversion toward the PKK and the Kurdish movement. While Kurdishness is rendered absent and assigned societal stigma, the AKP has managed to produce and strengthen a division among Kurds in terms of goodness (desirable) and badness (undesirable) through an Islamic discourse that sustains and asserts the superiority of Turkishness. Kurt argues that there are two main reasons why this AKP strategy can be successful. The first reason is related to decades of discrimination and impoverishment experienced by Kurds and the survival strategies that they have adopted in order to “pass” as “good and loyal citizens” of the Turkish state. The second reason for this support of assimilationist discourse concealed in religious terms is linked to the strong religiosity and social conservatism that prevail in the Kurdish region.³⁶ In the same vein, Gurses contends that the role of Turkish Islam as peacemaker in Turkey has been overstated given that the Islamists movements in Turkey are heavily marked by Turkish nationalism in their approaches to the rights of Kurds. Hence, Islam in Turkey not only can provide an alternative to Turkish nationalism and the Turkish nation-state as a political template, but also functions as a political tool to undermine the Kurdish opposition and rights in the name of a deceptive universalism.³⁷

It is not only Kurds from other parts of Kurdistan (Iran, Iraq, and Syria) who do not consider the century-long politics of assimilation and criminalization of Kurdish identity in Turkey by blaming Kurds of Turkey for not speaking Kurdish or investing time and energy in learning the Kurdish language. However, this critique came also from some Kurds of Turkey who viewed assimilation as a “betrayal” of Kurdishness and an indication of “mental enslavement.” Indeed, this division also creates categories like “good Kurds” who stick to its identity and language and “bad Kurds” who stick to the so-called enemy language or the invader language. Consider how Heval frames his understanding and attitude vis-à-vis the Turkish language when spoken as the main language among Kurds in Turkey:

When we go back to Turkey and Kurdistan, our relatives in Turkish cities speak more Turkish and I don't want my children to play with them because I get so angry at those parents who have not been able to teach their children Kurdish, but in this village in Kurdistan (Mardin) where my parents come from, they speak Kurdish. My relatives think that if they speak Kurdish, they cannot be included in the Turkish society, exactly in the same way as immigrants are having it in Sweden, where you speak Swedish so you become integrated. However, there is a major difference. Sweden allows and even gives you right to receive education, at least for now, in your mother tongue. We fled from Turkey because we could not have a Kurdish identity or speak Kurdish. I do not mind people speaking Turkish, but I do mind when Kurdish parents speak only Turkish to their children when they for instance cook. My parents have always talked to me in Kurdish. I travelled to Turkey this summer with my youngest son who is five years. My oldest cousin who is almost 40 years old started speaking Turkish with me and I told him, I feel ashamed when I see that my youngest son speaks Kurdish and you are talking to me in Turkish. He realized how wrong it was. I told him, shame on you, you are Kurdish, speak Kurdish! Language is so important for us Kurds. I told my cousin, that I would not visit him again if he spoke Turkish with me next time. He agreed to speak Kurdish. (Heval, thirty-year-old man, Sweden)

While Havin earlier attacked Kurdish politicians and the Kurdish political movement for being allegedly indifferent toward the Kurdish language, Heval directs his harsh critique against those individual Kurds and parents who do not speak Kurdish and thus fail to transmit the Kurdish language to their children. Moreover, Heval provides an interesting account about how integration is framed in the context of the nation-state and majority-minority relations. Integration in both the Turkish and the Swedish context, although framed differently, does not dissolve the ethnic hierarchy that exists but constructs hierarchies of belonging by measuring how much members of minority groups adhere to the dominant cultural values.³⁸ Inclusion in the national

community is stipulated by dominant culture, language and history-writing. Yet, the Swedish state has been more inclined to accommodate ethnic pluralism than the Turkish state which has viewed minorities as a threat to political and territorial integration of the Turkish nation. In Sweden, Kurdish children have the possibility to receive education in the Kurdish language one hour per week until they graduate from upper-secondary school. Heval's case shows that members of the diaspora can have leverage and affect the subject positions of Kurds living in Turkish cities and Kurdistan, by highlighting the primacy of the Kurdish language to maintain the Kurdish identity. This is an expression of identity politics, but an identity politics that occurs in the context of denial and subordination. Heval not only reinterprets history and culture in Turkey that have devalued Kurdishness, but also attempts to redefine and change the prevailing identification patterns of Kurds that have been structured by the Turkish state. While Kurds can be contained territorially by the nation-state borders of Turkey, Iran, Iraq and Syria, the diaspora provides a unique opportunity to engage in constructing boundaries that underlines the communal bonds of the Kurds as an oppressed nation. This has been further enabled and facilitated by the proliferation of Kurdish satellite channels and social media. It is in diasporic contexts that Kurds from different parts of Kurdistan can encounter and negotiate their commonalities and differences.

The Turkish state, following the footsteps of colonial states, has been aware that Kurdish children and particularly Kurdish girls and women need to be the main targets of cultural assimilation via education. This is, of course, related to the idea that women are often viewed as the biological and cultural reproducer of national boundaries and cultural symbols.³⁹ It was in the educational context that proud and loyal Turkish subjects could be crafted in the Kurdish regions of Turkey. Aram reflects on how his father's treatment of his mother in relation to her "poor" command of the Turkish language has been transmitted to his brother in the city of Diyarbakir, which is oftentimes viewed by the Kurds as the capital of Kurdistan of Turkey:

The indoctrination of Kurdish men and women were different because Kurdish women were mostly at home and you speak mostly Kurdish when you are at home. The assimilation of women was not as aggressive as of the men. Kurdish men were out in the public, worked, studied, and sat in the coffee shops and adopted the Turkish language even more. But the Kurdish we spoke was also very limited because we did not have right to develop our Kurdish language in school. It was a Kurdish for daily conversations without depth. But it is thanks to the mothers that some Kurds still speak Kurdish. Some Kurdish women were also bullied by their Kurdish husband for not speaking Turkish. My father used to tell my mother: "You have lived all your life in Turkey and Diyarbakir but you still do not speak Turkish." My older brother is still like that. Last summer (2013), when I was in Kurdistan he told his wife: "why don't you speak good

Turkish when you have lived in Diyarbakir for 50 years?" A person who does not speak Turkish is regarded as a deficient person. My brother does not question why Kurds do not speak good Kurdish but questions the Kurds who do not master the Turkish language. I told my brother that his wife was more normal than he is because she speaks Kurdish in a city inhabited mainly by the Kurds. He felt ashamed when I said that because nobody has ever told him that in that way. He is becoming more aware of this. (Aram, forty-eight-year-old man, Sweden)

Diyarbakir holds a special place in Kurdish history in relation to the oppressive structure of the Turkish state. Kurdishness was not only banned and stigmatized in the public spaces like schools but also in Turkish prisons where speaking Kurdish was severely punished. A big sign in Diyarbakir Penitentiary hailed the imprisoned Kurds: "Speak Turkish, talk a lot."⁴⁰ Sungun points out that the Turkish state targeted Kurdish women in order to reproduce a culturally racist discourse that devalued Kurdishness and celebrated Turkishness as a superior identity. Thus, the Turkish state framed the Turkish language as a means of "civilizing" Kurdish women in Turkey. In order to achieve this, Turkish institutions encouraged detaching Kurdish women from their allegedly "backward" and "primitive" Kurdish identity and language. Kurdish women were not only encouraged to transmit Turkishness to their children, but also to discourage and prevent their children from joining the PKK and picking up arms against the Turkish state. Kurdish women who joined and served Turkish institutions came to be represented as guardians of Turkish patriotism.⁴¹ The Turkish fear of Kurdish women still reverberates given that the PKK has attracted thousands of young Kurdish women to its rank who fight both the patriarchal structure of the Kurdish society and the Turkish state violence against the Kurds in general.

Although this is beyond the scope and the primary focus of this chapter, it is important to note that several of the interviewees talked about the resentment and aversion that Turkish diasporans felt when they encountered Kurds who emphasized their Kurdish identity and their language. While they did not enjoy the political freedom to endorse and live their Kurdish identity and language in Turkey, Kurdish diasporas viewed Sweden and the United Kingdom as important places to formulate resistance against the Turkish state and invest in the Kurdish language. For instance, Hassan talked about himself as being active on Facebook and sharing news about the Turkish atrocities against the Kurds. When a former Turkish friend found him on Facebook and requested friendship, it did not take long before his Turkish friend sent him a message underlining the link between terror, Kurds, and the PKK and unfriended him. One of the moments in which they enacted resistance toward being named as Turkish or speaking Turkish was while visiting Turkey and

being stopped at Turkish airports. Several of the interviewees spoke only English, pretending not to know Turkish and refused to speak Turkish, which infuriated the Turkish staffs at the airport who in turn harassed and denigrated the Kurdish citizens of Sweden and the United Kingdom. Heval provides an illustrative account of how this encounter can take shape:

I visited Turkey when I was 16 years old. In my Swedish passport, the place of my birth is written. They know that it is the Kurdish part of Turkey. They started speaking Turkish to me, but I spoke English with them. I told them that I am Kurdish and if you can speak Kurdish, I can speak Kurdish with you. My father got scared that I was assertive because he had experiences of being beaten up by Turkish gendarmes. The Turkish staff told me that I was a Turk and I should speak Turkish. He spat in my face and called me a traitor. What Could I do? Nothing. (Heval, thirty-year-old man, Sweden)

Although Heval talks about his incapability to respond to the disdainful act and violence of the Turkish staff for spitting in his face, he has already provided a form of resistance to the Turkish state through his individual act in resisting to speak the language of power and reminding the dominant group that the subaltern Kurdish language is still alive and kicking despite decades of oppression and criminalization. While many of the encounters with Turkish immigrants were conflictual and sometimes dismissive and harsh, there were also Turkish voices who expressed fear and worry about the decline of a unifying Turkish identity for Turks and Kurds:

In 2013, I talked with a Turk from Istanbul who I met in Stockholm. We talked about the Kurds and PKK and the conflict between the Kurds and the Turkish state. He said that when he was younger, things were so much better. His father was a general located in the Kurdish region. As a child, he had seen the Kurdish region. He said that when he was younger there were no such things as Turks and Kurds, and we could talk to each other and play with each other. I told him that it is exactly the major problem that you do not recognize anything else than Turkish and the people you were talking to were Kurdish but you could not accept their differences, so they had to be Turkish. I told him that for you in order to exist, you had to adhere to a Turkish identity. This is why there were no differences. Today you cannot continue with your denial. I told him that we can continue talking to each other, but this time I speak to you as a Kurd and not as a Turk. He could not understand why we wanted to be Kurdish and not just Turkish. (Dilar, twenty-eight-year-old woman, Sweden)

This shows how Turkish universalism is translated into cultural and linguistic sameness where equality and difference are viewed as incompatible in constituting equal identities in a multiethnic society like Turkey. In a society structured by Turkish dominance, language, cultural values, and history writing,

it is not comprehensible how equality can be achieved without undoing the dominance of Turkish mastery and sense of entitlement and privilege. It is this sense of paranoia among Turkish subjects and the fear of waning ethnic privilege that have reinforced Turkish nationalism and resentment toward the Kurds as an “internal enemy” that allegedly aims to harm the fragile Turkish nation. As a consequence of this discourse, the dominant Turkish group adopts a victim identity to endanger minority rights that Kurds are seeking to achieve. This also explains why the Turkish state can so easily gain popular support to wage military and cultural war against the Kurds inside and outside of the Turkish borders.

CONCLUSION

This chapter is strongly influenced by the work of Zygmunt Bauman on the political vision of assimilation as a continuous war against cultural and religious differences that are viewed as a threat against national cohesion and the national security of the state and its national masters. It is mainly by fearing and securitizing the other that the security of the dominant nation can allegedly be secured. The Turkish state often uses a discourse of fear in order to justify political, cultural, and military violence against the Kurds. The nation-state constructs by dividing and classifying unmarked and organic citizens that allegedly represent the nation’s essence and identity, in contrast to marked citizens who are the others of the nation that presumably pose a threat to the continuity and the mastery of the dominant constituency that claims universality and state identity. As a consequence, the state creates an institutionalized and structural subordination of the dominated group and preempts it from achieving effective political, cultural and material power in the society. Similar to Bauman, Nagel views assimilation as a process through which the nation-state makes sameness and creates and reproduces conceptions of “who we are” and who are ethno-culturally and racially aliens “among us.”⁴²

This chapter has investigated the profundity of Turkish assimilation by targeting the Kurdish psyche and minds and instilling in them a sense of cultural inferiority. Education and language have been the main vehicles of the Turkish state to produce national sameness and foreignizing the Kurdish constituency as the linguistic alien of the Turkish nation-state. Since Kurds have been subjected to several decades of assimilation, the Kurdish movements face a double challenge. First, they need to mobilize against assimilation, which paradoxically and in initial stages at least needs to use the language of the assimilators to reach the assimilated Kurds and reverse assimilation through a linguistic struggle. These two tasks need to go hand in hand in order

to achieve some success in preventing the dissolution of Kurdish identity and language.

Kurdish demands for recognition of their identities and languages cannot be equated with simple essence-making claims. There is no way that Kurds can liberate and restore a pure essence that Kurds have allegedly lost due to political oppression of the states in the Middle East. Kurdish claim-making can also have important political effects like “self-naming and other-naming in the mapping out of antagonism. Claims to essences should always be placed in terms of their particular context of particular strategies, such as the struggles against domination, rather than be considered in abstraction.”⁴³ Due to the political vulnerability of the Kurds and the continuous violence they encounter and experience in the Middle East, anti-essentialist claims to Kurdish identity are viewed as perilous by many members of Kurdish diasporas since they potentially deepen an already fragmented Kurdish identity and benefit the political agenda of the states that reject Kurdish claims to political freedom and equal standing in the society.

In order to illustrate the Turkish state’s double standards regarding which group that qualify as object of assimilation and who are viewed as eligible to constitutional rights against cultural assimilation and erasure, it is apt to return to the contemporary ethnocentric and Islamist regime of Turkey led by Recep Tayyip Erdogan. In 2008, while addressing an audience of 20,000 diasporic Turks, gathered in Cologne, Erdogan asked his exiled countrymen to resist assimilation in Germany and added that nobody could expect them to assimilate since Turks in Europe should “be constitutional elements and not just guests” and “assimilation is a crime against humanity.”⁴⁴ One can wonder if Kurds will ever be given a place within the discourse of humanity in nationalist Turkish representations and imaginations regardless of their secular or religious frameworks. Denial and erasure of Kurdish identity, language, and culture continue to be the major constitutive vehicles of sustaining Turkish privileges and oppression of the Kurds across national borders.

NOTES

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Chapter 14

Return Mobilities of Highly Skilled Young British Kurdish People to Kurdistan

Janroj Yilmaz Keles

Recent years have seen increasing transnational mobility and return or counter migration of migrants, involving the rapid development of transport and communication technologies. The relative improvement of political and economic situations in the migrants' homeland,¹ as well as anti-migration hostility and the exclusion of incoming people from the labor market in settlement countries have also played a role.² In addition to the first-generation migrant's return practices, the 1.5 generation (having migrated abroad as a child), and the second generation (children of immigrant parents born in the country of settlement) have also become part of transnational mobility by migrating to their parental homeland.³ In this context, 1.5- and second-generation "return mobilities" have not only become a key component of the sociology of migration but are also an emerging issue of economic and political importance in many developing and post-conflict countries and regions.⁴

Existing economic theories, such as the Neo-Classical Economic Approach, the New Economics of Labour Migration (NELM), structuralist, and network approaches have primarily considered return migration of the first generation as the result of migrants' economic failure or success in the countries of settlement. However, a growing number of the identity and cross-border mobility-based sociological and anthropological approaches to return migration have challenged the economic reading of return migration. These transnational studies put more emphasis on transnational multi-connected, multi-referential relationships and engagements, cultural belonging and emotional attachment to homeland, and lifestyle choices as pull factors involved in return mobilities.⁵ The children of migrants' return mobilities have been seen as, "a result of their parents' continued sense of belonging,"⁶ and emotional attachment to their homeland. The memories of homeland experienced

by migrant children in childhood and adolescence during their regular visits or summer holidays in their parents' country of origin play an important role in their return mobilities. Wessendorf's study on Swiss Italians in Italy and Christou and King's study on German Greeks in Greece show that these childhood holidays create a longing for a familiar home and idealized social relations.⁷ Thus, return mobility becomes a project of, "existential return to the ancestral homeland."⁸ This "roots migration"⁹ is different from first-generation return migration because the children's transnational orientations are to a place where they have never lived. Combined with childhood holidays memories in the parental homeland during school and summer holidays, these instill a curiosity and longing for their roots which lead to a search for identity.¹⁰ Therefore, this form of return mobilities of 1.5 and second generation between the countries of "root" and "routes"¹¹ has been viewed as "roots migration"¹² or "ancestral return."¹³ However, this research over 1.5 and second generations mainly covered return mobilities within politically and economically stable countries, such as the migration of German Greek young people from Germany to Greece. To date there is little research about the motivations of highly skilled 1.5 and second generations of conflict-generated refugee diasporas to relocate from Europe to their parents' economically and politically unstable homeland.

We still lack a theoretical framework that conceptualizes the increasing return mobilities of skilled 1.5 and second generations of conflict-generated refugee diasporas to the conflicted region and links the different pieces of empirical knowledge. Drawing on research on the transnational mobility of British-Kurdish young people, including the highly skilled, from the United Kingdom to Kurdistan-Iraq, this chapter attempts to fill this gap. My central question in this study is: what factors influence British Kurdish young people to migrate to their conflicted parental homeland? To answer this question, I examine the motives of 1.5- and second-generation British-Kurdish professionals migrating from the United Kingdom to Kurdistan-Iraq since 2005.

While some scholars point out that children of migrants engage less frequently and intensely than their parents with their ancestral homes and may not be influenced by their parental homeland values, culture, and social practices,¹⁴ my research on the return mobilities of British Kurdish young people offers a different case. It appears that children from refugee-diasporas tend to be more interested in their ancestral homeland and engaged in various transnational practices if they have been raised in a homeland-oriented political environment.¹⁵ I argue that their return mobilities are less driven by economic considerations or nostalgia than by the emotional, ideological, and political elements associated with the collective trauma of their parents' displacement and their strong attachment to their imagined homeland. In addition, aspirations to develop Kurdish institutions and economy for a potential statehood

contribute to their willingness to be part of the nation-building project in their parental homeland. These interlocking processes in the diaspora and homeland form political transnational activities and influence their motives of return mobilities.¹⁶

This chapter focuses only on a minority: the extreme case of those who decided to migrate to their or their parents' homeland to be a part of the ongoing nation-building project of the *de facto* Kurdish state in Northern Iraq. This relatively understudied form of return mobilities may constitute only a small proportion of 1.5- and second-generation displaced diasporic communities, but it helps to explain the linkages of transnationalism, nationalism, conflicted region, and newly emerging migration trajectories. Therefore, this chapter is timely and relevant in better understanding the increasing return mobilities of young people to conflicted and post-conflict countries¹⁷ to either participate in the nation-building project or provide humanitarian aid. In focusing on return mobilities to post-conflict regions, I am responding to the call from Bolognani to develop a theoretical concept "around other motivations behind return possibilities."¹⁸

This chapter is organized as follows. First, the proposed methodology and data collection are described, as well as information about the Kurdish diaspora in the United Kingdom. Second, the existing literature and debates around return migration and return mobilities are briefly presented and their shortcomings are identified. Third, the relationship is set out between the literature on return mobilities and diaspora. Fourth, empirical data on return mobilities are discussed regarding the motivations of return mobilities, the strategies used to access the labor market in Kurdistan, the experience of returnees during the process of reintegration, and the unanticipated challenges of their new home.

METHODOLOGY AND BACKGROUND INFORMATION

This chapter draws on in-depth interviews to study the motivation and experiences of the 1.5 generation and the second generation returning from the United Kingdom to Kurdistan. It was carried out with thirty-two British-Kurdish young people of diverse age (18–35 years), gender, income, political affiliation, education, and occupation background in 2015–2016. Ten in-depth interviews were conducted face-to-face in London and via Skype with young people in Birmingham, Leeds, Manchester, and Portsmouth in the United Kingdom, followed by another twenty-two interviews with young returnees in Erbil and Suleymania (twelve face-to-face and ten via Skype). Of these thirty-two respondents, ten were living in the United Kingdom (six males, four females, three of them second generation) and twenty-two were

living in Kurdistan-Iraq (fourteen males, eight females, eight of them second generation). Access to participants was gained through gatekeepers, community organizations, the academic community in Kurdistan, and returnees' online and offline networks.

The young peoples' occupational backgrounds were as follows: two English language teachers, four university lecturers, four oil and civil engineers, a natural science researcher, three IT workers including a web designer, two medical doctors, two UN senior protection officers, two government officers, two media workers, two young entrepreneurs, five students, and three key informants with 1.5 generation background working for the Kurdish Regional Government (KRG) and Kurdish parties in the United Kingdom. Apart from the five university students, the remaining twenty-seven participants were university-educated and integrated in the labor market in the United Kingdom before their departure. While their parents escaped the war and experienced various immigration-related and other restrictions in the labor market in the United Kingdom, they have enjoyed access to education and social mobility in their professional life in the United Kingdom, with some of them working in prestigious occupations.

They were chosen because they are children of first-generation Kurdish parents, were born and/or educated in the United Kingdom, and have already moved or were about to move to their parental homeland. The semi-structured life-story interviews with British-Kurdish young people in Kurdistan focused on identity, ethnicity, home, homeland, politics of belonging, the impact of retold narratives and memories of their parents, their childhood transnational mobilities to Kurdistan (holidays etc.), experience in the United Kingdom, diasporic–transnational engagement, ties and networks, motives and root of return mobilities, and the post-return experience in their parental homeland. The interviews lasted between one and three hours. Interviews were also conducted in the United Kingdom with ten young people who were considering or planning to migrate to Kurdistan to understand their imagined Kurdistan, their transnational links, and test whether there is a continuation of return mobilities to Kurdistan after the Islamic State of Iraq and Syria (ISIS) attacks and to compare their responses with those already in the homeland. I have also used a quotation from my previous work on the Kurds in the United Kingdom which I conducted in 2013.

THEORETICAL DEBATE ON RETURN MIGRATION AND RETURN MOBILITIES

Different theoretical approaches have been employed to conceptualize return migration. The NELM focuses on economic perspectives of return

migration.¹⁹ The first approach considers return migration as a failure rooted in the underperformance of individuals unable to succeed in the labor market in the host country or dissatisfied by their inability to achieve the goals they aimed for when migrating to another country. As a result of this failure, some decide to return to their country of origin. This approach focuses only on labor migrants.²⁰ In contrast, the NELM approach considers return migration as a “calculated strategy.” Individuals migrate to another country where wages are higher. After successful achievement of goals (skill) or earning targets (accumulation of savings), they will return to their country of origin. This form of return migration is viewed as a “success.”²¹ However, both of these economic-based approaches ignore the fact that many migrants have strong intentions to return to their country of origin for emotional attachments, cultural and familial ties, and better job and business opportunities.²²

The structural approach has expanded these theoretical approaches by analyzing the decision to return in the context of the relevance of remittances within the economic and societal structures and realities of their homeland.²³ The structuralists emphasize changes and realities in the homeland that play a crucial role in the decision to return and play an intermediary role, but the negative local realities and structures may lead to re-emigration of the returnees. However, as with the above approaches, the structuralist approach pays little attention to the fact that some geographically displaced returnees seek to be agents of change in a post-conflict context and contribute to economic development or peace-building goals.²⁴ Indeed, they return to a homeland where economic and political conditions are unfavorable.²⁵

Scholars in the field of transnationalism have challenged the above approaches and consider return migration to be an integral part of transnational mobility. It is not the end of the migration process, but a transnational circular process based on multi-connectedness and multi-referential relationships between the country of “root” and country of “routes.”²⁶ Therefore, the term of “return mobilities” has replaced the term of “return migration” in the sociology of migration’s literature. The rapid development of communication and transport technologies makes it possible for migrants to build and sustain their networks in their “rooted” country via transnational media consumption, the internet, regular visits,²⁷ and even participation in cultural and political life in their homeland. This helps migrants to build social and cultural ties to their roots and negotiate their hybrid identities.²⁸

In an economic boom, higher incomes, salaries, career opportunities, and quality of social life may be relevant pull factors for return mobilities.²⁹ In addition, even if the economic conditions are unfavorable, strong emotional connections to close relatives in the homeland,³⁰ and socio-cultural and emotional ties to the homeland may also lead to return migration.³¹ These

transnational personal or professional ties also provide job or business opportunities for the transmigrants.³²

FROM DISPLACEMENT TO RETURN MOBILITIES

After this brief theoretical explanation on return migration and return mobilities, I will focus on the motivations and conditions for conflict-generated refugee-diasporas' return mobilities. While there are similarities between return mobilities of the children of labor migrants and conflict-generated refugee-diasporas, there are also specific factors affecting refugee-diasporas which lead to a different constellation of motivations. I will start by providing some details about the Kurdish displacement from their homeland and the myth of return of the Kurds to their homeland, as well as their long-distance engagement with their homeland. Displacement and forced migration from the disputed territory of Kurdistan (in the states of Turkey, Iraq, Iran, and Syria) has a distinct historical meaning in international migration. The coercive policies of the Iraqi, Turkish, Syrian, and Iranian states have caused permanent crisis and displacement and marginalized Kurds and other ethno-religious groups in the region.³³ In this context, the migration of Kurds to the western countries differs from the movement of labor-motivated migrations, as the majority of Kurds fled from discrimination, persecution, war, and hardship in the wider contested territory of Kurdistan.³⁴ This study focuses only on the Kurds from Kurdistan-Iraq. Shayan, the Kurdistan Regional Government (KRG) representative in the United Kingdom, states that significant Kurdish migration from Iraq to the United Kingdom began in the early 1960s and increased after the 1970s. This occurred when the Kurdish political movement pushed for Kurdish autonomy in Iraq but was defeated by the Iraqi government after a heavy war. Shayan goes further by stating:

We came to Britain in 1976; I think there was maybe a handful of Kurds from Iraq that came here in the mid-seventies as a result of the collapse of the Kurdish movement at that point. The numbers were probably small, but I think that it was significant that Britain took those high profile families as refugees. But really the numbers dramatically increased in the eighties with Saddam's genocide campaign in Iraqi Kurdistan, the chemical bombardment, the war with Iran, then later war with Kuwait. (Shayan, working for the KRG representative in the UK, 26.03.2013)

This permanent crisis led to the enactment of the antidemocratic state of emergency law, displacement, mass killing of Kurds,³⁵ the Anfal campaign against the Kurds, and even the genocide in the Kurdish-populated city of Halabja.³⁶ Events including the eight-year war with Iran (1980–1988), the

chemical gas attack on Kurds (1988), the invasion of Kuwait (1991), the Gulf War (1990–1991), the United Nations (UN) Security Council’s sanctions in the 1990s and the brutal response of Saddam’s regime to Shi’ite and Kurdish uprisings in 1991, dramatically increased the migration influx from Iraq to neighboring countries and to Europe.

The creation of a “safe haven” and later a “no fly zone” imposed by the UN Security Council in Northern Iraq in 1991 created a hope among Kurds in diaspora to visit their families and the places they were born. As a result of this political development, some Kurdish exiles returned to contribute to the establishment and political development of “Kurdistan Azad” (Liberated Kurdistan)—referring to the Kurdistan Region of Iraq under the control of the Kurdish authorities. Kurds sent to Eastern European countries for educational purposes by Kurdish political parties have also returned home after 1991, but the Kurds from western countries have mostly moved to the region temporarily to provide their knowledge and expertise in the institutionalization of the KRG. However, the majority of the Kurdish population in the Western countries were reluctant to return to their homeland due to the ongoing conflict with the Saddam Hussein regime, poverty, and political and economic instability in Kurdistan. They were the key actors in internationalizing the question of Kurdistan through their diasporic articulation and mobilization for the “homeland politics.”³⁷ They have also contributed to the reconstruction of Kurdistan through their remittances and waited for economic and political stability to return to their homeland. However, the internal conflict (1994–1997) between the Kurdish political parties, in particular between the Kurdistan Patriotic Union and the Kurdistan Democratic Party, has led to postponing the dream of returning home and caused further migration influx from Kurdistan to the western countries of Germany, Sweden, Denmark, the United Kingdom, and the Netherlands. Therefore, today the majority of people from Iraq in Europe, including the United Kingdom, are Kurds. The statelessness of Kurds has also impacted their lives in settlement countries where they have been registered according to their nationality but not ethnic affiliation. This policy has led to the invisibility of Kurds in the official data of European Union (EU) countries, including the United Kingdom,³⁸ and has hidden them from the public³⁹ leading to a paucity of statistical data on Kurdish migrants in the United Kingdom.⁴⁰ The Kurdish community organizations identify 250,000–300,000 Kurds from four parts of Kurdistan as living in the United Kingdom, but it is difficult to verify this claim.

The Kurdish diaspora, like other conflict-generated diasporas,⁴¹ became non-state political actors through their political remittances and transnational involvement in fundraising, demonstrations, cultural and political associations, and lobbying their settlement countries’ governments.⁴² The Kurdish exile organizations, such as student societies, local Kurdish associations,

representatives of political parties and the KRG and, most recently, the Kurdish media have crucial roles in articulation and mobilization of the Kurdish diasporic population for homeland politics and orientation with the homeland politics. The dream of return remained an important psychological construct among the Kurds from Kurdistan-Iraq until the collapse of Saddam Hussein, leading to the return of some well-educated Kurdish activists and politicians with extensive transnational human, social, cultural, and financial resources. These include individuals such as Hoshiyar Zebari, the Kurdistan Democratic Party representative overseas in the 1980s and 1990s who later became foreign minister, deputy prime minister, and finance minister of Iraq after the collapse of the Saddam regime. Similarly, Bahram Salih, who was in charge of the Patriotic Union of Kurdistan's foreign relations in the United Kingdom and the United States, returned to Kurdistan and became deputy prime minister in the Interim Iraqi Government in 2004 and the KRG's prime minister in 2009⁴³ and is current president of Iraq.

With the creation of the de facto Kurdish state in Kurdistan-Iraq, followed by the constitutional recognition of the autonomous Kurdistan Region in 2005, a significant return mobility started among the first and second generations from western countries. This includes individuals such as Qubad Talabani who was born in Syria, grew up in the United Kingdom, served as the KRG representative in the United States and currently is the deputy prime Minister of the KRG.⁴⁴ The number of highly skilled British Kurdish young people migrating to Kurdistan-Iraq started to increase in 2010. This return mobility has taken place against the backdrop of serious problems in the region, such as the ongoing war with ISIS and disputes with the Iraqi Central Government, the influx of 1,500,000 internally displaced people (IDPs) and refugees from Syria and the poorly functioning economy and political instability in the autonomous Kurdistan Region of Iraq. Indeed, the number of 1.5- and second-generation return migrants has become so significant as to warrant this study. A key informant of the KRG in Hawler estimates the number of migrants from Europe to Kurdistan (including first generation) at 30,000.

DIASPORAS AND RETURN MOBILITIES: THE KURDISH CONTEXT

While the abovementioned readings offer concepts for understanding return mobilities of children of labor migrants, and there is some overlap with the experiences of refugee-diasporas, this needs to be qualified to understand the motivations of children from refugee-diasporas in more detail. Many young people I interviewed either spent their childhood in Iraqi-Kurdistan during the war (1.5 generation) or had no childhood holidays in Kurdistan because

of war and conflict. So their return mobilities to the “root” are not based on attachment to the locality and positive memories of homeland. This is one important way in which return mobilities of children of conflict-generated refugee-diasporas such as the Kurds differ from other migrants’ motivations. Many respondents state that they developed their sense of ethnic belonging and attachment to their parent’s homeland through their families’ and communities’ narratives about the homeland, diasporic Kurdish networks, associations and political events in the United Kingdom. In this context, I argue that the studies focusing on return mobilities have paid less attention to the motives and roots of the return mobilities of geographically displaced people and their ethno-national aims to return to their post-conflict homeland and participate in the “reconstruction” process. The return mobilities of geographically displaced diasporas without a home nation-state may differ from the diasporas with a home nation-state.

In this section, I develop central arguments to redress the economic focus on “return” migration and conceptualize the motivation driving the return of 1.5-generation and second-generation geographically displaced diasporas to a conflicted or post-conflict region. Geographically displaced people have historically developed mystical and emotional attachments and strong political ties with their imagined and/or real homeland. As a result, they have established diaspora space⁴⁵ in the host countries where they reproduce their diasporic ethnic identity and consciousness and are involved in ethnic political movements and mobilizations. In this regard, the stateless diasporas differ from other migrants and mobilize their resources for homeland politics.⁴⁶ They live “here” but are “remembering/desiring another place”⁴⁷ and retain strong political and cultural bonds. They engage transnationally with the place of roots from which they have forcibly been displaced. Therefore, key characteristics of diasporas without a home state are their strong politicization and mobilization for their homeland and strong desire to return. Five interlocked factors play a crucial role in mobilization, politicization, and motivation of geographically displaced people to return to their homeland.

First, the collective trauma and shared memories that they experienced as an ethnic group in their homeland include feelings of displacement, and forcible expulsion.⁴⁸ This “horrendous event” leaves indelible marks on their group consciousness, marking their memories forever and changing their future identity in fundamental and irrevocable ways.⁴⁹ Shared trauma, history, experience, and ethnicity are transmitted to future generations through retold narrative, silence, community involvement in homeland politics, connecting generations over time and space and building a strong empathy, community and solidarity across generations and borders.⁵⁰ Clifford describes this situation as a new form of diasporic consciousness outside the homeland.⁵¹ This new consciousness facilitates ways of action, attachment to and engagement

with the place of “roots” because “even children who never return to their parents’ ancestral homes are brought up in households where people, values, goods and claims from somewhere else are present on a daily basis.”⁵² The interviews with young people for this research show clearly that the collective trauma has connected them to the first generation and to their parental homeland, and leads to a situation in which the second generation believes their homeland needs their assistance and support. Therefore, the interviewed young people for this study strongly believe in being part of the post-conflict construction of their homeland through their human and cultural capital. Aras, who came to the United Kingdom with his family as an eleven year old, states:

I was always very active in the Kurdish society in the UK when I was living there [UK]. I was involved in organising the Kurdish film festival, and other academic, political and cultural activities including campaigning to urge the British Government to recognise the Halabja massacre as genocide. [He refers to the use of chemical gas by Saddam Hussein’s regime against the Kurds in Halabja in 1988. Aras’s family escaped to Iran when the Iraqi forces attacked the Kurds in the Halabja region]. I have always been so close to the Kurdish society in the UK. However, I really wanted to come back here to contribute to Kurdistan and to teach at a Kurdish university. That plan did not work, but nevertheless, I did manage to come back here. . . . and to assist our authorities in the oil industry. (Aras, male, thirty, scientist, works for a foreign oil company, Kurdistan)

Second, diasporas have a strong feeling of guilt, obligations, and responsibility toward those living in the homeland⁵³ through having themselves left family, friends, political parties, and their homeland in a conflict situation.⁵⁴ I argue that diasporic groups with a strong sense of moral obligation have developed a strong bonding and bridging social capital (strong and weak ties), reciprocity as well as obligations, and expectation among themselves across the generations. These factors create the basis for intra-communal solidarity, politicized-altruistic behaviors, and diasporic philanthropy⁵⁵ and influence the decision to return to participate in the “reconstruction” of their homeland. Lara, a returnee and a lecturer at a Kurdish university, conducting research on the returnees, agrees that many returnees come back with a deep-seated compassion, patriotic spirit, and altruistic desire.

Third, many studies have highlighted that the majority of displaced diasporas live with the “myth of return,” but will not return to their real or imagined homeland.⁵⁶ Therefore, the homeland will remain a “mythic place of desire in the diasporic imagination.”⁵⁷ But displaced diasporas continue to sustain a strong sense of attachment to a territorial homeland, displaying a political and nationalistic narration, aspiration and hope of return at some point.⁵⁸ As a result, they are involved in lobbying their host country governments,

demonstrations against human rights abuse in the homeland, and providing financial resources to the political parties and organizations based in the homeland where the collective trauma happened. Therefore, the political and economic development in the country of “root” plays a central role in “both the construction and maintenance of diasporic national identity.”⁵⁹ These quotations from a British-born Kurdish student and a business owner in Kurdistan give some idea of the strong sense of emotional and political attachment to their parents’ homeland:

You don’t choose your homeland. Although our brain and thinking are always here, our hearts are always in Kurdistan. There is not one Kurd who did not feel passionate or angered by ISIS when they attacked Sinjar [*Ezide town*] or when they attacked Kurdistan as a whole. (Siran, twenty-three, male, student at University of Cambridge)

I always consider Kurdistan as my home, and I always wanted to come back to my home where my parents grew up and were forced out from their home. I grew up with their painful longing for Kurdistan. . . . Yes, of course, their painful longing has shaped our identity and our path to Kurdistan. (Sara, twenty-eight, female, business owner, Kurdistan-Iraq)

Fourth, diaspora organizations have strong ties with political parties and networks in the homeland and some of these political parties are also organized and operating among the diaspora population, mobilizing first and second generations for homeland politics.⁶⁰ Their ethno-national discourse serves as a political and cultural bonding mechanism, of solidarity and the politics of belonging to a particularity among certain diasporas and contributes to sustain their political, cultural, and economic ties with their homeland.

Fifth, the rapid flows of capital, ideas, knowledge, goods and services, including transnational satellite TV, the internet, and more specifically social media, play a key part in enabling a reconnection of diasporic populations with the homeland.⁶¹ For forcibly displaced people such as the Kurds, the homeland is an important reference point with regard to individual and collective identity as well as future plans. As Zana, a research participant, states, the rapid growth in the use of communications, such as social media and transport technologies to enable visits to their homeland, has increased their sense of belonging and strengthened social ties to create a “transnational social field” contributing to the growth of social networks, social capital, and political participation across nation-state borders.

I am constantly either on the phone to various sources or if I am at home, I listen to the Kurdish satellite TVs. The internet helps many young people to build connections with employers and Kurdish authorities. If it wasn’t for the internet and

the media outlets I would have never booked a ticket to go back to Kurdistan.
(Zana, twenty-nine, works for a UK credit card company)

Today, the mobilized Kurdish diaspora exhibits cross-border and multiple offline and online connections with family, friends, ethnic political and cultural organizations, and non-ethnic networks, where they exchange information, support and solidarity, monetary remittances, and social capital. The testimonies of highly skilled Kurds in the United Kingdom show a strong desire to return to their homeland. The myth of returning “home” is still alive among this group due to their political attachment, marked sense of individual and collective Kurdish identity, behavior, and social norms. The narrative constructed around the “myth of return” bears a close relationship to the notion of an idealized home: idealized imagery of the past, memory of collective loss and attachment to the place keep the myth of return alive, particularly among the 1.5 generation who have a strong territorial identity and attachment because of spending part of their childhood/youth in Kurdistan. Zetter states that the notion of returning home has been “a dominant theme” for many diasporic communities for whom “return remains a profound conviction.”⁶² The “myth of return” is constructed because protracted exiles are living in a condition where they feel that “their exile is temporary and that they will eventually return home.”⁶³ They live in a situation where interaction between myth and reality becomes part of everyday life. The “myth of return” can also contribute to the establishment of transnational networks which provide potential resources (e.g., access to jobs, political participation, and the maintenance of cultural and linguistic elements of ethnic identity) for socially bound groups.⁶⁴

MOTIVATIONS AND A TYPOLOGY OF RETURN MOBILITIES

The removal of Iraqi military from Kurdistan and the ability of Kurds to control their own fate in the Kurdish-populated region of Iraq since 1991, despite the poor economic and political stability, attracted Euro Kurds of diverse age, gender, political affiliation, occupation, education, socioeconomic background and length of migration back from western countries, including the United Kingdom, to Kurdistan. The relative political stability from 2003 to 2014 has created hope among the Kurdish diaspora who want to contribute to the imagined Kurdish political project and play a crucial role in post-conflict reconstruction, and consolidate the process of nation-building, democratization, “gender equality,” and economic growth. As a result of these political aspirations and economic opportunities, as Amedy, a research participant in

Erbil states, many skilled, deskilled, and unskilled European citizens with a Kurdish background have moved to Kurdistan-Iraq.

Some people come here simply because they are tired of Europe. They *don't want to live abroad anymore*. However, there are also people who are very academic, writers, teachers and engineers. . . . They are also back here. And of course, young people who were born or are educated in Europe, they have joined the chain to come to Kurdistan in recent years. (Amedy, male, thirty-one, works for a bank in Kurdistan)

The majority of young people interviewed repeatedly used a discourse of moving to Kurdistan to participate in the “reconstruction of the de facto Kurdish state” in northern Iraq through their human and cultural capital. The “hope for an independent Kurdistan is so high” that they intend to be part of this “historical development” and contribute to the livelihood of “the people living in Kurdistan.” A deep-seated feeling of patriotism flows from the statements below from the highly skilled young people.

Various people have different motivations. In my case, I have a strong feeling of patriotism to Kurdistan. I felt that was my opportunity to return to Kurdistan to help my country. (Dara, male, thirty-three, Lecturer at a British University)

I think, at least if I speak for myself, I've been interested in the development there and the events taking place. . . . What we are all trying to strive for, which is an independent democratic Kurdistan free from oppression. (Lorin, female, 29, worked for a media company in Kurdistan)

I returned because I thought my skills will be useful for my country and people. (Baran, male, twenty-seven, works for an oil company)

While Portes points out that “immigrant transnationalism is not driven by ideological reasons but by the very logic of global capitalism,”⁶⁵ my research shows that transnational mobility of some individuals within certain diasporas may also be driven by diasporic consciousness, political projects, and job opportunities. While many countries have established specific ministries or departments and developed different nationalistic and cultural programs to communicate with and attract their diasporas, particularly highly skilled and educated emigrants, to contribute to the “national economy,”⁶⁶ the KRG has neither inaugurated a Ministry of Diaspora Affairs nor developed a relevant state-sponsored repatriation program. Despite this, highly skilled young people returned to Kurdistan motivated by diasporic consciousness and political aspirations.

Personal stories gather people around them, connecting people and promoting empathy among generations and across different locations. Many

Kurdish young people are heavily influenced by the retold, reconstructed, and renegotiated narratives of their exiled families and communities. As Lorin points out, the narratives she heard from her family shaped her decision to move to Kurdistan after her studies to “participate in political development,” to which she and her family have contributed from abroad.

I come from a background where my father has been very engaged in the political movement and the liberation movement in Kurdistan. He has been a Peshmerga [Kurdish fighter]. He has been one of the key figures in establishing a political party there. He has been writing history and political things about the situation there. When I grew up we had those stories in the home here. So for me, it’s very important to be part of that. I have been engaged both in Europe where I have been based but I decided to go back to Kurdistan. (Lorin, female, twenty-nine, worked for a media company in Kurdistan, interviewed in London)

Moreover, as explained above, diasporas such as the Kurds have a strong feeling of guilt, responsibility and obligation to those living in the homeland; they feel that they have left people alone under oppressive policies of the respective countries in Kurdistan. This leads to political mobilization for homeland politics in the diaspora. As Karwan’s statement shows, this feeling also leads to some returning to the homeland to participate in the political and social process.

Our fathers as Peshmerga gave everything for Kurdistan. I study at the University of Cambridge for a reason. My view is it’s a shame for me not to go out to Kurdistan and serve in a particular role. (Karwan, twenty-two, studying IR)

Having said this, it is important to emphasize that the European Kurdish young people are not homogenous in terms of sense of belonging, occupation, education, socioeconomic background, political affiliation, and length of time spent in settlement countries. Provided below is a typology of the highly skilled young people who return to Kurdistan.

Children of Former Guerrillas and Political Establishment

Those with historical family involvement or affiliation with political parties or politicians usually return hoping to work for the KRG or in the public sector, including universities, schools, and foreign relations. The political activities of their parents and the retold narrative of Kurdistan have a huge impact on their choice of study, occupation, and networks. As a key informant in Erbil states:

They have good connections with the political parties . . . they have a good chance to get a job in Kurdistan. (Hemresh, male, works for the KRG, Erbil)

These are privileged, career-oriented young people who can use the struggle of their parents in the 1980s and 1990s to build a future for themselves in Kurdistan. They develop new career directions in Kurdistan which they may not get the opportunity to develop elsewhere.

Professionals in Areas of Labor Market Demand

The second group mostly comprises engineers working for foreign oil and gas, communications and construction industries. There are also a significant number of medical doctors and teachers who moved to Kurdistan to work for hospitals and schools. Other university-educated returnees work in finance companies, human resources, and for NGOs.

Young Entrepreneurs and Knowledge Transferrers

The third group is mostly young people with entrepreneurial spirit motivated to “transport knowledge and technology” with “new business ideas” to contribute to the “diversification of the Kurdish economy.” They are highly skilled entrepreneurs, operating in IT, (digital) media, film production, publication, broadcasting, property development, and “green tourism.” Some of them point out that “relying on oil and gas will cause an economic crisis in Kurdistan,” causing them to focus on other economic sectors.

Idealists Contributing to Reconstructing the Homeland

Fourthly, there are idealists who are involved in or have grown up with the narrative of imagined Kurdistan and campaigned for “a democratic and an independent Kurdistan.” They fervently believe in contributing to social and political structural change in Kurdistan. As political actors, they have political and intellectual principles which differ from other returnees. This group is critical of the political parties and existing, mostly corrupted structures; they are frustrated about the “mismanagement of the Kurdish institutions,” “corruption,” “bribery,” “nepotism,” and “lack of transparency” as well as “lack of accountability” in Kurdistan. I see this group as excluded new elites, whose critical voices are nevertheless present in the public domain via the Kurdish media, participating in knowledge production as social scientists, journalists, and publishers. They attempt to push the KRG for more transparency and accountability, and if they work for the Kurdish universities, they attempt to transfer their knowledge and expertise via their institutions (e.g., establishing gender studies in Kurdish universities). However, they are under-resourced and have not achieved significant change to date. Some have already left for Europe.

Dreamers who Seek a Familiar Home

This group consists of those looking for a familiar home in which to educate their children in their tradition, culture and norms; those seeking a future in an idealized fictitious past to be “happy far away from capitalist system and relationships”; cultural importers, hoping to provide “high quality culture” and entertainment for “our people.”

ACCESS TO THE LABOR MARKET IN THE CONFLICTED REGION

The skilled return migrants are considered agents of economic transformation in their home countries, cross-border intermediaries whose ties to foreign resources and familiarity with their homeland institutions enable them to bring innovative practices to organizations in their countries of origin.⁶⁷ Since 2005, the returning highly skilled Euro Kurds have greatly contributed to knowledge production and critical thinking, and influencing social, political, cultural and economic policies in Kurdistan. A key KRG informant points out that Kurdistan-Iraq has widely benefited from their cultural, social, and human capital at local and international levels. They have brought pluralism and diversity of opinion on issues of democratization, urban life, gender equality, secular lifestyle, the education and health sectors, and acceptance and respect for minorities in Kurdistan. They play a crucial role in improving service culture, transferring technological development, and know-how to Kurdistan. They contribute to the multiculturalism of Kurdistan and create new translocal spaces where people with different cultures, languages, and norms meet and reshape ideas, institutions and urban lifestyle in Kurdistan-Iraq. Significantly, considerable numbers of returnees work for the KRG. After the collapse of the Saddam regime in 2003, Kurdistan-Iraq started to recover from the conflict. The KRG began investing in the public sector, building new universities, schools, hospitals, and other public services. A significant number of international oil and gas, pharmaceutical, and communications companies have also started operating in Kurdistan. In addition, construction has increased in both private and public sectors. The interviewees state that, before moving to Kurdistan, they had been in touch with various Kurdish political parties and agencies in search of KRG public sector employment. Others have moved to the region to have face-to-face contact with political parties, for job opportunities in the health and education sector, to bring entrepreneurial ideas, and also to contribute to the democratic process and knowledge production. Most Kurdish young people have become a bridge between these companies and the local authorities and people, working in logistics, or working in oil production

(drilling, production, sales, and marketing). It was easier to work for a foreign company while being able to easily interact with the local people, the returnees having a command of both languages.

However, the nepotism and the lack of transparency in the job market for the public sector causes huge frustration among some returnees who lack access to the labor market. Moreover, class, gender, political position, and tribal belonging are also very important social aspects in getting access to the labor market. For example, Alan, who works for an international bank in the United Kingdom as a senior business adviser states that he returned to Kurdistan to “link Kurdistan with international credit institutions” but later came back to the United Kingdom because:

Employment is based on merit in the world. Merit is made up of skills, your knowledge, qualification etc. But there, it's the polar opposite. It's who you know rather than what you know. That's not to say the UK does not have nepotism but it is much more skewed to a meritocratic system. (Alan, male, twenty-seven, works for an international bank)

It is relevant to mention here that the local realities and structures have a huge influence over the reintegration in the labor market and society. Those young people who are loyal to the Kurdish political parties find people to help them get a position within structured and controlled organizations. However, some cases show that they are unlikely to be productive and contribute to economic and political developments in their new home because they have limited options in participating in existing, corrupted structures, which then lead to disappointment and re-immigration. In this context, return mobilities of the British-Kurdish young people are not a one-way movement but rather the to-and-fro of transnationalism.

The internet and its applications, such as digital social networks, provide a substantial chance for British-Kurdish young people to get in touch with the private sector, including local and foreign companies, operating in Kurdistan. These companies prefer highly skilled “Euro Kurds” because the returnees have knowledge of Kurdistan but also speak English and have British or other EU citizenship, which makes it possible for them to travel and attend company meetings in Europe and elsewhere. In addition, the European Kurds from different countries have commonalities, for example, lifestyle and their own politicized virtual networks for sharing information, experience and job opportunities, including people like Rojda, who experienced these new virtual networks where there is a sense of “us” from European Kurds living in Kurdistan:

I received job offers from those who were Kurds from Europe. They work both in the public sector and for the government. I would see of course local Kurds

online maybe on different social media channels, Twitter or Facebook. Well, mostly Twitter. Facebook is a bit more limited. It's only your friends there if you wish. But I am mainly in contact with European Kurds living in Kurdistan. (Rojda, twenty-seven, female, works in the education sector in Kurdistan)

Political, social, and cultural ties and network relationships play a central role in the motivation and decision to return to the homeland.⁶⁸ The premigration networks, the relationship with political parties, family ties, the influence of culture, language and contact with the private sector all shape the process of return among Kurdish young people. However, as mentioned above, membership of the network where resources are embedded is not easy. Belonging to a co-ethnic group does not necessarily mean access to the available resources. The strong ties in the structures of relations between actors and among actors from the diaspora and in the homeland determine access to resources. If the returnees go with their ideas, visions and projects, they will try to realize these through their existing networks but if the political and social structures create obstacles, then they will either attempt to establish their own critical networks or return to the United Kingdom.

CHALLENGES TO RETURNEES

Research has found that political instability, violence, and conflicts hamper economic growth and cause an uncertain economic environment that leads to reduced employment opportunities and increased likelihood of employment in the informal sector.⁶⁹ In June 2014, ISIS seized Mosul, Iraq's third largest city. The fighting against ISIS and the influx of refugees into Kurdistan-Iraq worsened the existing budget crisis, and made it even more urgent for the KRG to secure reliable routes for oil exports and payments. Oil companies withdrew most expatriate staff. Kurdistan-Iraq experienced a severe economic crisis and public sector workers were paid only partial salaries. However, these unfavorable economic and political conditions have not caused a massive remigration of returnees. The international companies have left the region but the highly skilled young people have remained in Kurdistan-Iraq; they consider Kurdistan-Iraq as their country which needs their "help and expertise during the difficult time."⁷⁰ Similarly, Bahram, a thirty-four-year-old British-educated medical doctor in Sulemyania, Kurdistan states: "Where should we go? This is our country and we grew up with the idea to return to Kurdistan one day. We are now here and it is our national responsibility and duty to stay here. The conflict will come to an end soon and we should continue with our work." Economic-based explanation of "return" migration

is not applicable to this situation as the British-Kurdish young people's diasporic consciousness (political and emotional attachment to the homeland) is more relevant. However, the homeland is not always the place of memory, and returnees' process of integration and repatriation is not straightforward. Returnees may experience a shock as a result of different cultural and social codes and local realities which contradict the diasporic imagination of homeland.⁷¹ The second generation experienced the shock more than the 1.5 generation in terms of building social ties and friendships, and adapting to their new environment.⁷²

Moreover, beyond the security concerns, constant electricity cuts, an inefficient and costly banking system, lack of entertainment for western-born young people and religious conservatism, some interviewees stated that they face multiple difficulties in their "new" home, in particular those who were not born in Kurdistan. The competition for available jobs between the local people creates a feeling that European Kurds are not welcome. Many local workers feel "frightened to lose their jobs" to those educated in Europe, who may be more knowledgeable than the local workers. The returnees understand the concerns of locally educated people, but they also feel they should not be "discriminated" against in the job market in Kurdistan, and that jobs should be given to those who have the ability, knowledge, and required skills. Furthermore, the political establishment may not welcome the diasporas,⁷³ since the returnees may be perceived as a personal threat to local actors in terms of political interests and status. In such cases, the returnees are seen as outsiders.⁷⁴ Some of the Kurdish returnees stated that they felt that they are considered by local people as "Europi" (Europeans) or "Xarici" (outsiders) and are not accepted as "native" or "pure" Kurds but considered "impure" Kurds. For example, a female returnee, interviewed in Erbil, posted the following statement on Facebook:

In England, I was constantly asked: "Where are you from? No, but, where are you really from?" I'd then always say I'm from Kurdistan even though that didn't mean much to many of those asking and I'd have to explain where Kurdistan is.

And here I am, finally in Kurdistan. The land I used to call my home and where now they constantly say: "You're not from here, are you?!" (Roza, female, twenty-four, works in the education sector in Kurdistan)

This notion of (un)belonging and disillusionment, despite identifying with and investing in a new place, lead to a double diasporic identification, that the United Kingdom is another homeland to which a significant number of British Kurdish young people re-returned and others may also re-return in the future. In this context, scholars in the field of transnationalism point out that

the return mobilities are not a one-way movement but rather the to-and-fro of transnationalism. Therefore, studies indicate that return mobilities are a constant movement between the countries of routes and roots, and an integral part of transnational human mobility.⁷⁵ Kurdish returnees also sustain their transnational networks and connections with UK-based friends and colleagues. In this sense, return mobilities to Kurdistan are not the end of the migration process but a transnational and circular process based on transnational practices (marriage, education, regular visits, purchase of property, and issues related to citizenship, for example, British passport for their children and partners and business) between Kurdistan, United Kingdom, and elsewhere. However, what is also clear is that a significant number of returnees have now decided to stay in Kurdistan to wait and see what will happen post-ISIS and even post-Kurdish referendum on independence. In this process the development of integration and inclusion policies can play a crucial role in their determination to stay in the region.

A number of studies have highlighted that men consider returning more than women,⁷⁶ and my research mirrors this, showing that young males believe they will build their careers and form a family there. In contrast, the young females have some reservations in returning to Kurdistan or staying there, for numerous reasons including difficulties finding a job and socio-cultural structures that restrict women's cultural, social, financial, and gendered freedoms.⁷⁷ In addition, sexual harassment and sexist remarks in the workplace make it very difficult for young female returnees to stay in Kurdistan. During my visit to Kurdistan-Iraq, I met many returnees struggling for gender equality and demanding that the KRG develop effective policies to tackle this. Having said this, some of the highly skilled females who were interviewed have worked successfully as English teachers, lecturers, doctors or humanitarian aid workers or left their position in the public sector to start businesses in Kurdistan.

CONCLUSION

Drawing on research on the transnational mobility of thirty-two highly skilled British Kurdish 1.5-generation and second-generation males and females (18–35 years old) from the United Kingdom to Kurdistan-Iraq, this chapter extends the scope of existing theoretical understandings of return mobilities and identifies the motivations of highly skilled/educated young people with a diasporic background to relocate to their parental homeland, despite its turbulent political situation arising from ongoing conflict in the Middle East.

This adds a key political and nationalist dimension, in the case of geographically displaced diasporas such as the Kurds, of aspiration, politics of

identity, ethnic belongingness, and territorial attachment to existing political-economic readings of return migration. Theoretical approaches such as the NELM, structuralist, and network approaches have primarily considered return migration as the result of migrants' economic failure or success. The identity and emotional attachment to the country of root-based sociological and anthropological approaches of transnational migration have challenged the political-economic reading of return migration; here, too, however, the additional dimensions of diasporic return mobilities have received little attention.

Some studies on return mobilities of the second-generation state that they migrate for economic/career reasons.⁷⁸ This may be true for some recent return mobilities, but in my case studies, while they too want to develop their career and improve their economic situation through their human and cultural capital, they also want to contribute to Kurdistan. In this sense economic and cultural motivations are not independent from each other but closely intertwined. Thus, "returnees" view the fact that they are gaining qualifications not just in terms of individual economic or status opportunities, but as an opportunity to contribute to the reconstruction of their conflict-ridden homeland and therefore compensate for their parental generation's trauma, as well as the associated feelings of guilt and responsibility. In this sense, this chapter has shown that the motivation of geographically displaced diasporas may be different from economically motivated return mobilities, arguing that it is less likely to be driven by economic and financial behavior than by a strong ethnic group consciousness based on shared memories of trauma and loss and on shared political and nationalistic aspirations for a homeland.

The collective trauma of displacement and strong sense of ethnic belonging are fundamental for identity and transnational action. It leads to the politicization of the diasporas and contributes to politics of identity, the strong sense of responsibility, and/or obligation to those living in the homeland as well as to the desire to return once the conflict has ended in the homeland. The transnationalized ethno-national movements and the rapid flows of capital, ideas, knowledge, goods and services, including transnational satellite TV, the internet and more specifically social media, play a key part in reconnecting diasporic populations with the homeland and creating the desire to return "home."

With the collapse of the Saddam regime in 2003 a significant return migration began among first and second Kurdish generations from western countries, including the United Kingdom, to Kurdistan-Iraq where the Kurds have established a de facto Kurdish state. However, the KRG has neither inaugurated a Ministry of Diaspora Affairs nor developed a state-sponsored return and repatriation program. Despite this and the ongoing economic and security crisis in the region, highly skilled young people have returned to Kurdistan

and the interviews, conducted in the United Kingdom and Kurdistan, make clear that the strong diasporic consciousness, politics of belonging, ethno-nationalism and political and emotional attachment to the homeland motivate return migration but also shape these highly skilled young people's career paths, as well as social and geographical transnational mobility. The returnees play a crucial role in the post-conflict reconstruction of Kurdistan-Iraq, transferring technological innovation, knowledge, and innovative practices. Analyzing the interviews, it is clear that they intend to be agents of change in a post-conflict context and contribute to the economic development of their post-conflict homeland. However, they also face numerous cultural and economic challenges in the region. As a result of these challenges, a significant number of young people have re-returned to the United Kingdom. This process shows that return migration is not a one-way movement, but the to-and-fro of transnationalism.

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