Societal Security: Applying the Concept to the Process of Kurdish Identity Construction

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Abstract

With societal security, the Copenhagen school has provided a concept that illuminates much of the conflict between states and sub-state groups, though, as their critics have pointed out, the danger of reifying the identity of these groups is all too real. How can the concept be employed without succumbing to the weaknesses associated with the reification of societal identity. This paper examines the process of Kurdish identity formation to examine how multiple actors within Kurdish society identified threats in an effort to re-construct the identity of Kurdish society. Such an approach shows that societal security can be used in conjunction with a process-driven view of identity, which avoids the criticism of reifying societal identity, and that this gives us a greater handle on conflict between these societies and their host states, and within the societies themselves.

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succumbing to the weaknesses associated with the reification of societal identity? This paper examines the process of Kurdish identity formation to examine how multiple actors within Kurdish society identified threats in an effort to re-construct the identity of Kurdish society. Such an approach shows that societal security can be used in conjunction with a process-driven view of identity, which avoids the criticism of reifying societal identity, and that this gives us a greater handle on conflict between these societies and their host states, and within the societies themselves.

Does the concept of societal security enhance our understanding of the threats societies face from states? This paper argues that societal security overcomes many of the problems that traditional security studies has faced in attempting to address non-state security issues, and that it has provided a useful categorization of the developments and actors that may be constructed as threatening to societies. However, the concept still faces a number of critical flaws, which, if left un-addressed could serve to limit its usefulness and applicability. Examining the case of the Kurds, this paper points out that societal security, as formulated by Buzan and Waever, helps us identify actors and developments that have, and that in the future, may be constructed as threatening to the identity of these societies.

Conversely, this case also demonstrates that reifying societal identity limits its usefulness and could even contribute to misunderstanding the threats constructed by these societies. What is ultimately at stake in this debate is the proper identification of the source of violent conflict. Inadequately specified

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conceptualizations of security can lead to a misdiagnosis of the sources of conflict and misdirected policy prescriptions. At a time when the international community is faced with uncertain and highly problematic security situations in many parts of the world, it is essential to employ conceptualizations of security that call attention to competing claims within society and that are based on a long term historical understanding.

The importance of non-state actors to the study of security is a recent development in the field. The dramatic increase in the number of conflicts between states and some segment of their population following the end of the Cold War prompted scholars to give greater attention to the security threats facing societal or minority groups from the state in which they found themselves.[1] Even the relatively conflict-free states of Europe witnessed sub-state societal actors react against the state in an effort to define and provide for their own security. Far-right parties reacted against the immigration policies of the state while others resisted integration into the larger EU political unit.[2] Security scholars largely ignored these developments, and once they had turned their attention to these sub-state entities, they were theoretically ill equipped to deal with them.

The place of 'Society' or Sub-state entities

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[1] Buzan, Barry. 1991. *People, States and Fear*. Hemel Hempstead: Harvester Wheatsheaf, Gurr, Ted Robert. 2000. "Ethnic Conflict on the Wane." *Foreign Affairs* 79:52-64, Gurr, Ted Robert and Monty Marshall. 2003. *Peace and Conflict 2003: A Global Survey of Armed Conflicts, Self-Determination Movements and Democracy*, Edited by C. f. I. D. a. C. Management. College Park: University of Maryland.

[2] Bigo, Didier. 2001. "Migration and Security." in *Controlling a New Migration World*, edited by V. a. J. Guiradon, C. London: Routledge, Waever, O.; Buzan, B; Kelstrup, M and Lemaitre, P. 1993. "Identity, Migration and the New Security Agenda in Europe." Copenhagen: Center for Peace and Conflict Research.

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It is a commonly held view that the failure to address sub-state security issues stemmed from the predominance of realism in the study of security. While there is little doubt that this played some role, it should be noted that realist scholars were among the first to attempt to understand the causes of ethnic conflict and the phenomenon of weak states.[3] Unfortunately, there was little systematic attention given to how sub-state societal groups may feel threatened within the traditional security studies literature. A few scholars applied the traditional security concepts such as anarchy and the security dilemma to help explain instances of 'ethnic conflict' following the breakup of empires and multi-ethnic states.[4]

Of course, by the time International Relations scholars had begun to examine intrastate conflicts, there already existed a relatively well-established literature devoted to nationalism, ethnicity and conflicts within states. Nationalism and area studies scholars had been working on potential solutions to these ethnic conflicts for some time.[5] In most cases, these scholars examined how institutional arrangements within a democratic framework could end and/or prevent further conflict between the state and its ethnic minority groups. These scholars held that ethnic minority groups operated in a similar manner as states, in that they had a fixed identity, with leadership capable of articulating their

[3] Buzan, Barry. 1991. *People, States and Fear*. Hemel Hempstead: Harvester Wheatsheaf, Moynihan, Daniel. 1993. *Ethnicity in International Politics*. New York: Oxford University Press, Posen, Barry. 1993. "The Security Dilemma and Ethnic Conflict." *Survival* 35:28.

[4] Kaufman, Stuart. 1996. "International Theory of Inter-Ethnic War." *Review of International Studies* 22:151, Posen, Barry. 1993. "The Security Dilemma and Ethnic Conflict." *Survival* 35:28.

[5] Lijphart, Arend. 1969. "Consociational Democracy." *World Politics* 21:207-225, —. 1977. *Democracy in Plural Societies: A Comparative Exploration*. New Haven: Yale University Press, Lustick, Ian. 1979. "Stability in Deeply Divided Societies: Consociationalism versus Control." *World Politics* 31:325-344, Nordlinger, Eric. 1977. *Conflict Regulation in Divided Societies*. New Haven: Yale University Press.

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interests. Thus, proper institutional arrangements could provide the necessary incentives to alleviate the fixed security concerns of sub-state societal groups. So while early IR forays into intrastate conflict encountered an existing body of literature largely devoid of explicit theorizing, this literature was essentially realist. As a result, it inherited many of the same problems that liberal and constructivist scholars had leveled at realism, one of which was an inability to explain variation in participation in conflict; in other words why some groups resort to violent conflict, while others in similar structural conditions, do not.

The place of identity in security studies

That some groups identified the 'other' as threatening, as in the case of the former Yugoslavia, stood in stark contrast to situations where groups did not identify the 'other' as threatening, such as Czechoslovakia or much of the former Soviet Union. The introduction of identity into the field of security studies helped explain some of this variation, unfortunately it has introduced a whole new set of problems; problems with which security scholars have not fully engaged. When security studies was dominated by realism, identity was not problematic for two reasons: states were the only referent object and states were understood as like units, in that they had similar identities and interests; and facing certain developments were expected to respond in a similar manner.[6] However, the emergence of the democratic peace school illustrated that states do not always respond in similar manners, and that in fact state identity can play a significant

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[6] Bull, Hedley. 1977. *The Anarchical Society: A Study of Order in World Politics.* New York: Columbia University Pres.

role in international security.[7] Constructivists picked up on the theme of identity, and used it to explain a number of important issues in international security; including the relations between states in the international system, the non-use of certain weapons or the adoption and implementation of certain international norms.[8] However, this utilization of the concept of identity was still tied to the state in that it was the identity of the state and the 'other' state(s) that impacted the nature of their relations.

Unfortunately few had theorized how the construction and re-construction of state identity may be perceived as threatening to societies or minorities contained within that state. That the state may indeed be conceived as a threat to minority populations, or vice versa, focused attention on the process of how state and sub-state communities' identity is constructed. Benedict Anderson's landmark book *Imagined Communities* ushered in a new wave of scholarship focusing on how national and ethnic identity was socially constructed, rather than a primordial given that had influenced ethnicity and nationalism scholarship up to that point.[9] Important work was done on how the construction of group identity necessitates a distinction with the 'other' and how this process of identity construction may lead to conflict with 'others' outside the group, or to the

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[7] Doyle, Michael. 2001. "Kant, Liberal Legacies and Foreign Affairs." in *Debating the Democratic Peace*, edited by M. Brown, S. Lynn-Jones, and S. Miller. Cambridge: MIT Press, Owen, John. 2001. "How Liberalism Produces Democratic Peace." in *Debating the Democratic Peace*, edited by M. Brown, S. Lynn-Jones, and S. Miller. Cambridge: MIT Press.

[8] Finnemore, Martha and Kathryn Sikkink. 1998. "International Norm Dynamics and Political Change." *International Organization* 52:887-917, Jepperson, Ronald; Wendt, Alexander and Katzenstein, Peter. 1996. "Norms, Identity and Culture in National Security." in *Culture of National Security: Norms and Identity in World Politics*, edited by P. Katzenstein. New York: Columbia University Press, Price, Richard M. 1997. *The Chemical Weapons Taboo*. Ithaca: Cornell University Press, Wendt, Alexander. 2000. *Social Theory of International Relations*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

[9] Anderson, Benedict. 1991. *Imagined Communities*. New York: Verso, Hobsbawn, Eric and T. Ranger. 1983. *The Invention of Tradition*. New York: Cambridge University Press.

manipulation of symbols and myths associated with the construction of group identity by elites.[10] One limitation of these works was lack of a generalizing theory to apply their findings to identity groups besides ethno-nationalists groups employing violence against the state.

This is where Buzan and Waever's conception of societal security is set up to make its most important contribution. They argue that 'societies', which include ethno-nationalists groups, religions and potentially other communities based on gender, sexuality or class, may construct threats from a variety of sources, including from other identity claims or from the state. Thus for the Copenhagen school, as McSweeney has dubbed Buzan and Waever and their collaborators, societies potentially face four distinct types of threat: migration, horizontal competition, vertical competition and depopulation.

Horizontal competition entails a transformation in the identity of a society due to the overriding cultural and linguistic influence from a neighbouring culture.[11] For instance, actors within the Quebecois and native Canadian populations have, at various times throughout their histories, constructed the larger English Canadian society as a threat. From this perspective, these two cultures fear the erosion of the linguistic and religious aspects of their culture as segments of their population adopt the culture of the larger Canadian culture in an effort to succeed economically or academically. In an effort to protect an

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[10] Kaufman, Stuart. 2001. *Modern Hatreds: the Symbolic Politics of Ethnic War*, Edited by R. Art, R. Jervis, and S. Walt. Ithaca: Cornell University Press, Rudolph, Susan and L. Rudolph. 1993. "Modern Hate." *The New Republic*.
[11] Buzan, B, O Waever, and J de Wilde. 1998. "Security: A New Framework for Analysis." Boulder: Lynne Reinner.

identity they perceived as threatened, Quebec has responded by instituting language protection laws.

Vertical competition occurs from integration into a wider cultural definition, or disintegration into smaller cultural units.[12] This process can be seen at play in the current expansion of the European Union with a number of societies expressing fear of integration into a larger European identity. Some of these societies have responded by rejecting the adoption of the European currency and of ceding power to European political institutions. The source of societal insecurity that has received the greatest attention has been migration. Migration threatens the identity of a society by causing a shift in the composition of society.[13] The large-scale inflow of migrants of different societal backgrounds may ultimately lead to that culture becoming dominant. For instance, the large numbers of Hispanic migrants into the southern states of the U.S. has been portrayed by some as leading to an erosion of American culture and political values.[14] Lastly, Buzan notes that depopulation may be another source of insecurity for societies, either from conflict or ethnic cleansing, disease or to a decline in natural population growth.

Unpacking Societal Security

As noted earlier, the developments that occurred following the end of the Cold War prompted a re-evaluation of the study of security, and a debate

[12] Ibid, Waever, O.; Buzan, B; Kelstrup, M and Lemaitre, P. 1993. "Identity, Migration and the New Security Agenda in Europe." Copenhagen: Center for Peace and Conflict Research.
[13] Buzan, B, O Waever, and J de Wilde. 1998. "Security: A New Framework for Analysis." Boulder: Lynne Reinner, Herd, Graeme and Joan Lofgren. 2001. "Societal Security, the Baltic States and EU Integration." *Cooperation and Conflict* 36:273-296.
[14] Huntington, Samuel. 1997. *The Clash of Civilizations and the Remaking of World Order.* New York: Touchstone.

regarding the broadening and deepening of the concept.[15] The Copenhagen Peace Research Institute, associated primarily with Barry Buzan and Ole Waever, observed that 'nation' and 'state' are not synonymous in most countries around the world, and that the traditional concept of national security studies was increasingly irrelevant to study post-Cold War developments.[16] In the cases where state and nation do not coincide, the security of a nation will often increase the insecurity of the state.[17] In such instances, the activities of states often represent the primary threat to societies, such as the breakup of Yugoslavia and resistance to EU expansion.[18]

Waever argues that scholars can best understand societal security by examining the processes whereby a group comes to perceive its identity as threatened and when it starts to act in a security mode; a process he refers to as securitisation.[19] The securitisation approach to security claims that societal communities argue within themselves as to what constitutes a threat to their community.[20] Unlike states however, societies lack a final arbiter of security decisions. Elites within the society act as securitising actors, by naming threats to the group and attempting to persuade or coerce the society of the validity of their

[15] Booth, Ken. 1991. "Security and Emancipation." *Review of International Studies* 17:313-326, Matthews, Jessica Tuchman. 1989. "Redefining Security." *Foreign Affairs* 68:171-177, Walt, Stephen. 1991. "The Renaissance of Security Studies." *International Studies Quarterly* 35:211-239.

[16] Bilgin, Pinar. 2003. "Individual and Societal Dimensions of Security." *International Studies Review* 5:203-222, Buzan, B, O Waever, and J de Wilde. 1998. "Security: A New Framework for Analysis." Boulder: Lynne Reinner.

[17] Waever, Ole. 1998. "Societal Security: The Concept." in *Security: A New Framework for Analysis*, edited by B. Buzan, O. Waever, and J. de Wilde. Boulder: Lynn Reinner.

[18] Bilgin, Pinar. 2003. "Individual and Societal Dimensions of Security." *International Studies Review* 5:203-222.

[19] Waever, Ole. 1995. "Securitization and Desecuritization." in *On Security*, edited by R. Lipschutz. New York: Columbia University Press.

[20] Buzan, B. 1998. "Societal Security, State Security and Internationalisation." in *Security: A New Framework for Analysis*, edited by B. Buzan, O. Waever, and J. de Wilde. Boulder: Lynn Reinner.

claim. Once the claim is accepted by society, it enacts extraordinary means to alleviate the threat. The process by which actors in a society or state argue and decide what constitutes a threat depends on the established rules of that society. Ultimately, Buzan concludes that perceptions of threat cannot only be imposed, societies must be convinced or persuaded that certain other groups or actions constitute a threat.[21]

In an effort to have society stand on its own as a referent object of security that is distinct from the state, Waever offers a view of society that differentiates it from the traditional conception of society as 'civil' society or as the source of the state's legitimacy. To make this distinction, he provides a definition of society that separates society from any link to the state but in doing so, makes the units of analysis far less obvious. Furthermore, Waever argues that we cannot view societal security as the aggregate sum of smaller groups within society. Waever concludes that societal security can only be understood by examining large-scale, we-identities or collective units that constitute themselves as social and political realities by interacting in an international system.[22]

This means that the concept of security is tied to very specific forms of political community, such as nations, ethnic groups or religious communities.[23] While the Copenhagen school concedes that all societies contain a number of groups carrying their own identities, they conclude that ethno-national groups and religions have become the primary units of analysis for societal security. To

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[21] Buzan, B, O Waever, and J de Wilde. 1998. "Security: A New Framework for Analysis." Boulder: Lynne Reinner.
[22] Waever, Ole. 1998. "Societal Security: The Concept." in *Security: A New Framework for Analysis*, edited by B. Buzan, O. Waever, and J. de Wilde. Boulder: Lynn Reinner.
[23] Ibid.

further limit the definition of society, Waever concludes that in security analysis, 'society' is mostly understood as meaning nations or other ethno-political communities modeled on the nation idea.[24] Thus Waever claims that societal security is about the sustainability, within acceptable conditions for evolution, of traditional patterns of language, culture, association, custom and religious and national identity.[25]

Critique of the Societal Security

Critical security theorists have launched a number of insightful criticisms of societal security, some of which proponents of the concept have yet to address. The most common, and arguably the most damaging, critique is that societal security tends to reify the identity of society.[26] Because of their equation of societal identity with national identity, this approach has been accused of reifying society and identity in ways that are untenable and potentially dangerous.[27] McSweeney contends that societal security defines society as a having a single identity, and that this risks supporting the rise of intolerant identities that make

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[24] Ibid.

[25] Ibid.

[26] Bilgin, Pinar. 2003. "Individual and Societal Dimensions of Security." *International Studies Review* 5:203-222.
McSweeney, Bill. 1996. "Identity and Security: Buzan and the Copenhagen School." *Review of International Studies* 22:81-93.
Theiler, Tobias. 2003. "Societal Security and Social Psychology." *Review of International Studies* 29:249-268.

[27] Bilgin, Pinar. 2003. "Individual and Societal Dimensions of Security." *International Studies Review* 5:203-222.
McSweeney, Bill. 1996. "Identity and Security: Buzan and the Copenhagen School." *Review of International Studies* 22:81-93.
Lapid, Yosef and Friedrich Kratochwil. 1996. "Revisiting the National: Toward an Identity Agenda in NeoRealism?" in *The Return of Culture and Identity in IR Theory*, edited by Y. Lapid and F. Kratochwil. Boulder: Lynn Reinner.

conflicts more likely.[28] Williams, in defense of societal security, argues that this criticism misses the primary contribution of societal security: it is precisely under the conditions of securitisation that a reified monolithic form of identity is declared.[29] The Copenhagen school admits that all societies have multiple identities but that a situation in which identity is being securitised is one in which this reality is being denied and seeking to be transformed.[30] This may well be the case, but it is not clear as to why the secular nationalist identity is the one that is assumed to trump other identities.

McSweeney asserts that the move to societal security has merely inserted societies into the study of security in place of the state, which reifies the identity of a society the same way that traditional security studies have reified the state. Critics of the concept argue that treating society as unproblematic ignores the processes that create and re-create societies' identity.[31] McSweeney argues that identity can be approached either from a deconstructionist angle that focuses on processes, or from an objectivist standpoint where identity is taken as unproblematic.[32] The objectivist standpoint, which he accuses Buzan and Waever of taking, treats identity as a thing to be studied rather than as an act or a structure.[33] Buzan and Waever respond that both enterprises have academic

[28] McSweeny, Bill. 1996. "Identity and Security: Buzan and the Copenhagen School." *Review of International Studies* 22:81-93.
[29] Williams, Michael. 2003. "Words, Images, Enemies: Securitisation and International Politics." *International Studies Quarterly* 47:511-531.
[30] Ibid.
[31] Bilgin, Pinar. 2003. "Individual and Societal Dimensions of Security." *International Studies Review* 5:203-222.
[32] McSweeney, Bill. 1996. "Identity and Security: Buzan and the Copenhagen School." *Review of International Studies* 22:81-93.
[33] McSweeney, Bill. 1998. "Durkheim and the Copenhagen School: A Response to Buzan and Waever." *Review of International Studies* 24:137-140.

merit, that we need to understand the processes that construct identity; but we can also study identities as objective 'things' because they become socially sedimented, thus instilling it with 'social power that makes it efficient to evoke that identity and gives it a form that provides a clear image of what survival and non-survival of that identity group would mean'.[34]

So while McSweeney argues that the study of processes is the only valuable manner in which to engage identity, Buzan and Waever essentially favor a division of labor between those studying process, and those examining the consequences of adopting a singular identity. While I agree with Buzan and Waever that both enterprises have academic merit, their response is ultimately unsatisfying because they essentially disregard a significant element of the securitising discourse: that directed against 'insiders'. Buzan and Waever argue that societal identity becomes sedimented when society is threatened by 'outsiders'. This conceptualization enables them to examine how Kurds might come to view Turks or Arabs as a threat; without engaging how the community of Kurds has been constructed throughout the process of identifying 'external' threats. The process of securitisation involves the identification of external threats with a correspondent identification of internal threats; as the case of the Kurds will show, the two go hand in hand. Consequently, the accusation of reification remains valid. But what makes Buzan and Waever's response particularly unsatisfying is because societal security need not reify societal identity to be able to 'predict some consequences of one or the other self-

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[34] Buzan, Barry and Ole Waever. 1997. "Slippery? Contradictory? Sociologically Untenable? the Copenhagen School Replies." Ibid.23:241-250.

definitions'[35]; which stands as the most clear enunciation of why the Copenhagen school would rather engage in this exercise than the deconstruction of identity claims. Limiting our analysis of security discourse to that enunciated against an 'outside' group misses the most important element of securitisation, the identification of 'outside threats' and the concomitant restriction or expansion of the boundaries of the community itself. To examine only the security enunciations of secular nationalists, is to justify the discourse attempting to re-construct the element of society opposed to their vision of society outside the community; leading to the labeling and exclusion of all others as spoilers, terrorists, or religious fundamentalists.

Furthermore, the Copenhagen school has employed societal security to explain the reaction of European 'societies' against the migration policies of the state and against the widening and deepening of EU integration. The problem is that in such cases, 'societies' closely mirror the state in which they are found, thus obfuscating the distinction between societal actors and state actors. Applying the concept to non-state 'societies' will not only test the usefulness of the concept, it should also help elucidate the process by which 'societies' act, which remains unclear due to the fact that 'societies' unlike states, lack a clear definable securitising actor.

Applying Societal Security to a Sub-State People

So how might this concept be used to explain conflict between societies? One fine attempt to employ societal security to non-state societies is Paul Roe's application of the concept to ethnic violence in Transylvania. Roe employs

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[35] Ibid.

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societal security and combines it with the security dilemma to explain violence between Hungarians and Romanians in Transylvania.[36] Rather than arms acquisitions fuelling a security dilemma between the two groups, Roe claims that it was fear over language education and potential secession that fuelled the dilemma. Roe's conclusions are insightful and interesting and demonstrate the value of the societal security concept; however his analysis is not above the critique of reification. For Roe, Romanian 'society' misperceived the intentions of Hungarian 'society', who only wanted language-education to protect their existence as a distinct society from the Romanians. The Romanian 'society' misperceived that this demand was as a first step toward the secession of Transylvania, which in turn prompted fears of becoming part of a Hungarian dominated entity. These fears produced a security dilemma that ultimately spiraled into violent confrontation.

Roe is forced to introduce 'misperception' as the core element of his analysis, because he reifies societal identity. According to Roe, Hungarian society did not want to secede, but wanted only to protect their language. Roe can only make this claim if he asserts that Hungarian 'society' was unified and had a single leadership capable of enunciating their interests. Roe's solution was to have Hungarian 'society' enunciate its intentions more clearly so as not to alarm Romanian 'society'. One can only accept this conclusion if we accept that there were no elements within the Hungarian population advocating secession. As we shall see from the Kurdish case examined in the next section, societies

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[36] Roe, Paul. 2002. "Misperception & Ethnic Conflict: Transylvania's Societal Security Dilemma." Ibid.28:57-74.

are not unified - even strong ethno-nationalist ones. Societies have competing identity claims, competing goals and interests which result in differing security perceptions.

I argue that the identity of a society does not exist prior to the identification of threats, rather the identification of threats acts as a constitutive element of societal identity. Assuming an established identity misses this crucial aspect of the construction of security threats. Building on the critical security literature, this paper contends that the manner in which the concept of societal security has been employed has tended to reify a secular nationalist identity of society to the exclusion of all other forms. I argue that when employing the concept of societal security it is essential to do so without reifying one particular version of societal identity. In the Kurdish case, secular nationalism is but one of a number of competing identity claims. Focusing only on the threats articulated from a secular nationalist perspective ignores the threats enunciated by significant portions of Kurdish society. It is important to view enunciations of threats not as defending a given identity, but part of an ongoing debate over the identity of that society.

Historically, ethno-nationalist societal identity has been only one of a number of competing identity claims. This is true today in many parts of the world, where the 'European' concept of ethno-nationalism has been forced to compete with supra-national identity claims such as pan-religious identity or more narrow identities, based more on local or parochial interests. Because of this, we see expressions of threat to society that do not necessarily conform to our expectations, even those based on a more nuanced understanding of security,

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such as societal security. This is because the concept of societal security, as formulated by Waever and Buzan et al. is based on an ethno-nationalist conception of societal identity. This has essentially become an unnecessary sticking point in their theory. The concept, as formulated, provides a strong analytical tool for examining developments that are likely to be constructed as threatening to societies, but restricting the definition of society to include only ethno-nationalist groups, and potentially religion, unduly restricts the applicability of this theory.

To illustrate these points, I have chosen to examine the formation and development of Kurdish societal identity(s). In this case, Buzan and Waever's four types of threats to societal security are clearly enunciated and supported in the security discourse of each of the actors within these societies. However, unlike Buzan and Waever's formulation, these security threats were not enunciated to protect a given societal identity, but rather they were enunciated as an attempt to define the society's identity. Thus, developments that one actor within a society interprets as threatening, are often portrayed by others as essential for the security of the society.

I plan to use the concept of societal security to illustrate its usefulness in identifying the various threats that are constructed within and between societies. I also hope to show that one need not reify societal identity to successfully employ this concept to explore potential consequences of one or another self-definitions.

The Kurds of Turkey:

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Buzan and Waever explicitly identify the Kurds as a 'society' that is threatened by the activities of a state, they cite the Turkish state,[37] but they could also plausibly have identified Iraq, Iran and Syria as well. In many respects the Turkish Kurds are a prime example of their theory in practice. The Turkish state has sought to integrate them into a larger Turkish identity (horizontal competition), has forced Kurds to migrate out of their territorial homeland (migration), encouraged Turkish migration into the Kurdish areas (migration), has forbidden the use of the Kurdish language(s) (horizontal competition), changed place names (horizontal competition) and participated in large-scale violence against the Kurdish population bordering on ethnic cleansing (depopulation).[38] Thus it would seem that the Kurds represent a clear case of how the actions of the state, represent a threat to the ability of a society to live as itself. An examination of the Kurdish nationalist movement shows that these policies have been enunciated as threatening to Kurdish society, but Kurdish nationalist have not been the only actors attempting to identify security threats and re-construct the identity of Kurdish society.

The term 'Kurds' as an identifier of a distinct people was in use as early as 1150 A.D., although it did not necessarily imply a national identity. The term 'Kurd' was often applied to nomadic peoples or to a particular linguistic group; though in recent times the term has come to include an ethnic or national

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[37] Buzan, Barry and Ole Waever. 1997. "Slippery? Contradictory? Sociologically Untenable? the Copenhagen School Replies." Ibid.23:241-250.

[38] for a history of these transgressions, see McDowell, David. 1996. *A Modern History of the Kurds*. London: I.B. Tauris.

identity.[39] Most historians agree that it was not until the early years of the twentieth century that this group of tribes and people acquired any sense of community as a nation of Kurds.[40] Additionally, it is generally agreed that Kurdish nationalism has not been a constant of Kurdish identity, but rather has flourished in two waves, the period around the fall of the Ottoman Empire after World War One and after 1960. As we will see, Kurdish nationalism faced serious competition from other identity claims.

After the fall of the Ottoman Empire, Kurdish nationalist aspirations were fuelled by the Treaty of Sevres; negotiated between Great Britain, France and the Ottoman Empire; promising the Kurdish tribes an independent state. The Kurdish nationalist movement was the primary advocate of an independent Kurdish state and was led by westernized, educated urban intelligentsia. This group set up Kurdish literary clubs and educational societies and published magazines and journals espousing independence based on a nationalist identity of the Kurds. The urban intelligentsia operated in the major Middle Eastern urban areas such as Istanbul, Diyarbakir, Mosul and Baghdad, where they sought to convince the Great Powers rather than domestic actors or Kurdish society, that the Kurds constituted a distinct nation and ought to have an independent state of their own.

As with all identity claims, those supporting a nationalist view of Kurdish identity based their claim on the identification of threats to the emergent Kurdish nation. The nationalists identified the Turks as the dominant threat to the Kurds.

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[39] van Bruinessen, Martin. 1992. *Agha, Shaikh and State.* London: Zed Books Ltd.
[40] McDowell, David. 1996. *A Modern History of the Kurds.* London: I.B. Tauris.

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The Kurdistan Ta'ali Jamiyati (Society for the Rise of Kurdistan), one of the most prominent nationalist organizations run by the urban intelligentsia, proclaimed that the Kurds have 'no common cause with the Anatolian movement....the Kurds have resolved to have no other protector than England'.[41] Similarly, the Azadi (Independence) movement, which arose between 1909 and 1924, stated as its goal: to deliver the Kurds from Turkish oppression, to give Kurds freedom and opportunity to develop their country, and to obtain British assistance, realizing Kurdistan could not stand alone.[42] The Kurdish nationalists feared that the Kurds would form a minority in the newly created states that Britain and France would carve out of the former Ottoman Empire. Thus fear of domination by a larger ethno-nationalist group fuelled the push for the development of Kurdish national identity, and its logical outcome, an independent state.

These actors advocating a nationalist identity for the Kurds argued that the Turks and the Anatolian movement under Mustafa Kemal Attaturk, were the most significant threat to Kurdish identity and that the United Kingdom, and eventually an independent Kurdistan, was the best means of providing security for the fledgling and extremely divided Kurdish nation. From the nationalist perspective, Buzan and Waever's typology of threats to societal security seems applicable. Nationalist Kurds clearly feared horizontal competition from the larger, more developed Turkish cultural identity. Though most Kurdish people had lived peacefully beside the Turks and the Arabs under the Ottoman Empire, they now identified these groups as a threat.

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[41] Ibid.
[42] Entessar, Nader. 1992. *Kurdish Ethno-Nationalism*. Boulder: Lynn Reinner.

The Kurdish nationalists also feared vertical integration from a pan-Islamic identity that sought to subsume nationalism under religious identity. The Kurdish nationalists described those advocating the religious identity of the Kurds as 'religious fanatics…motivated by the fear of national consciousness which would awaken the people and leave them without so much as a single slave, and that their wealth, earned without effort, will be gone with the wind'.[43]

For the British, it was clear at this time that Kurdish nationalism was in its infancy as Kurdish society remained severely divided along tribal lines, that also involved linguistic and religious divisions.[44] So while the British entertained a number of influential urban intelligentsia claiming to speak for a united Kurdish nation they ultimately concluded that these actors lacked support of the population and the rural leaders to effectively press their claims for an independent Kurdistan based on a national identity.[45] The weakness of the urban intelligentsia was exacerbated by the importance of territorial claims within the nationalist identity construct. This served to enhance the power of the traditional leadership as they controlled the territory the nationalists claimed as the Kurdish homeland.[46]

At this time, Kurdish society was based on a feudal economic system with local tribal chiefs (aghas) controlling the territory and allegiance of the population on their land. There were also powerful religious authorities (shaykhs) that held

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[43] Bozarslan, Hamit. 2003. "Some Remarks on Kurdish Historiographical Discourse in Turkey (1919-1980)." in *Essays on the Origin of Kurdish Nationalism*, edited by A. Vali. Costa Meza: Mazda Publishers.

[44] McDowell, David. 1996. *A Modern History of the Kurds.* London: I.B. Tauris.

[45] Ibid.

[46] Vali, Abbas. 2003. "Genealogies of the Kurds: Constructions of Nation and National Identity in Kurdish Historical Writing." in *Essays on the Origins of Kurdish Nationalism*, edited by A. Vali. Costa Mesa: Mazda Publishing.

considerable influence over the local population and the tribal leaders. Thus the religious and tribal leaders, who were the primary landholders, served as the most prominent societal actors capable of enunciating Kurdish identity and security, and enforcing such a view on the general Kurdish population. While there were a few traditional tribal leaders and landholders that favored an independent Kurdistan, many saw the evolution of a nationalist view of Kurdish identity as threatening to the personal economic and social advantages they enjoyed due to the feudal arrangement of their society that was encouraged and supported by the Ottoman Empire, and later by Turkish authorities. The religious leaders also attempted to thwart a Kurdish nationalist identity from emerging in an effort to maintain a Kurdish identity based on the Sufi sect of Sunni Islam and its association with the Caliphate and a larger pan-Islamic identity.

Because of these socio-economic and religious interests, the traditional leadership distrusted the urban Kurdish nationalists. They were described as 'carriers of ungodly and revolutionary ideas'.[47] Thus the nationalists were presented as threatening to the religious identity of the Kurds and their established socio-economic order. The nationalists advocated sweeping social and economic changes that would do away with the feudal economic system and the personal power of the traditional leadership. Thus the educated intelligentsia, and the nationalist identity they advocated, represented a threat to the religious leaders and the large landholders.

Though Kurdish nationalists sought to do away with the power of the landholders and religious leaders, secular nationalism was not the primary threat

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[47] Entessar, Nader. 1992. *Kurdish Ethno-Nationalism*. Boulder: Lynn Reinner.

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that these traditional leaders identified in their efforts to maintain their view of Kurdish identity. The traditional Kurdish leadership responded to the security threat posed by the possibility of the creation of an Armenian/Christian state in the region. British Admiral Calthorpe noted this in a report to his superiors in the Foreign Office that 'the most important factor in this situation is fear that the eastern section of Turkey will be placed under Armenian rule. There is otherwise a strong tendency for Kurds and Turks to drift apart but this fear drives them into union'.[48] This fear was motivated partly due to feared retribution over the role of the Kurdish tribes in the Armenian genocide of 1915, but also due to a general fear of Christian rule. Significant elements of Kurdish society sought to maintain a union with the Turks in order to limit the power of the Armenian Christians in the area. Newspaper articles at the time claimed that support for Kurdish independence was tantamount to assisting Armenian nationalism.[49] In response, several Kurdish nationalists were captured and killed.

By identifying Christian Armenia as the primary threat in the region, Turkish leader Mustafa Kemal Attaturk successfully co-opted the traditional Kurdish notables in support of his state building project. To do this, he appealed to the religious element that the Turks and Kurds shared. In 1919, Kemal proclaimed that 'Turks and Kurds will continue to live as brothers around the institution of the khalifa'.[50] In making this statement, Kemal assured the traditional Kurdish leaders that union with Turkey would not threaten Kurdish identity. The one common element of Turkish and Kurdish identity was their

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[48] McDowell, David. 1996. *A Modern History of the Kurds*. London: I.B. Tauris.
[49] Ibid.
[50] Ibid.

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Sunni Muslim identity that tied them to the institution of the Caliphate. The religious element was particularly important in opposing the Christian Armenian threat and in the initial union of Turks and Kurds in the Turkish state.

From this perspective, Buzan and Waever's societal security threats are less applicable. The traditional Kurdish leadership advocated union with the more powerful Turks to ward off the Christian threat. Thus integration into a Turkish state was not a perceived as a threat to Kurdish identity, but rather was seen as instrumental in protecting Kurdish society from being overwhelmed by Christian Armenians. Horizontal competition from Turkish identity was largely ignored, while vertical integration within a larger pan-Islamic movement was not only not a threat to Kurdish identity, it was an essential element of Kurdish identity.

Kemal's appeal to Kurdish religious identity proved successful during the difficult years of the early formation of Turkey, as many Kurdish tribal leaders assisted the Turkish army in putting down revolts by Kurdish nationalist groups. However, by 1923, it was clear that Mustafa Kemal had altered his strategy toward the Kurds in the eastern regions of Turkey as he sought to create a new, secular Turkish national identity. At this time, Kemal abolished the Caliphate and on the same day, closed all Kurdish schools, associations and publications.[51] Kemal had clearly revealed his plan for an ethnically Turkish nation that rejected Islam as a primary aspect of Turkish nationalist identity. As a result, the ranks of those calling for Kurdish independence, which had previously consisted of the

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[51] Houston, Christopher. 2001. *Islam, Kurds, and the Turkish Nation State.* Oxford: Berg.

nationalist educated intelligentsia in the western urban centers, swelled to include the religious leaders and religiously minded landholders in Kurdistan.[52]

As a result of this move, the Kurds who had advocated union with Turkey to alleviate the Christian/Armenian threat now portrayed Turkey as a threat. The threat however was not primarily seen as threatening to Kurdish national identity, but to the religious aspect of Kurdish identity. The first major uprising of the Kurds in response to Kemal's change of strategy was the Shaydh Said Revolt of 1925. Invoked by modern day Kurdish nationalists as part of their mythic past, the Said Revolt appealed much more to the religious identity of the Kurds than it did their nationalist aspirations.[53] So while the call was for an independent Kurdistan, it was hoped that this new entity would be subject to the institution of the Caliphate. As noted earlier, re-instituting the Caliphate appealed to the Sufi sect of the Sunni branch of Islam, which the majority of Kurdish society identified with. In seeking to restore the Caliphate, Shaykh Said lost the support of the Alevi Kurds whose non-Sunni identity was threatened by the possibility of Islamic rule. The religious, rather than nationalist, nature of the revolt is also apparent in Shaykh Said's choice of king for an independent Kurdistan; he chose a non-Kurdish caliphal representative, indicating his concept of Kurdish identity was based less on ethno-national identity than on Kurdish religious particularism.[54] Ultimately the revolt failed and led to severe reprisals against the Kurds by the Turkish state.

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[52] McDowell, David. 1996. *A Modern History of the Kurds*. London: I.B. Tauris.
[53] Ibid.
[54] Ibid.

From this point, Kurdish nationalism remained largely inactive until the mid-1960's. In the meantime, various elements within Kurdish society continued to fight against Turkish aggression in Kurdistan, but most leaders and fighters were motivated by religious reasons to restore the Caliphate rather than a nationalist agenda.[55] In their own effort at creating a modern secular nation-state, the Turkish authorities instituted a number of policies aimed at redefining Kurdish identity. Turkish governments refused to even acknowledge the existence of Kurds as a minority population in Turkey, referring to them as Mountain Turks. The Turkish state tried to assimilate the Kurds by banning all things Kurdish, including publication of books and music; changing the names of towns, villages and areas from Kurdish names to Turkish ones, and even forbidding parents from giving their children Kurdish names. Education in Kurdish was forbidden, thus leading to generations of uneducated Kurds combined with a Turkish-speaking educated Kurdish elite. The Turkish state also forcibly deported Kurds to Western Turkey, forced Turkish migration into Kurdish areas, murdered and assassinated Kurdish leaders and intentionally ignored Kurdish areas in their efforts at modernization and economic development.[56]

The publication ban meant that the Kurds lacked a common, published Kurdish literature and media – an important element in the creation and re-creation of identity and instrumental in enunciating security threats. In addition to impeding development of a common Kurdish national identity, it also helped traditional notables maintain their position of power over the population, as the

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[55] Ibid.
[56] Ibid.

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primary actors capable of enunciating and defending Kurdish identity and security. The dominant position of the traditional leaders was also enhanced by the lack of development and resistance to land reform in the east of Turkey.

However, one effect of Turkey's policies in Kurdistan forced many Kurds to migrate to Europe or to the urban centers of western Turkey, either through forced deportation, as migrant workers or as migrants seeking higher levels of education. These demographic changes served to erode the influence of the traditional notables in favor of the left wing urban leaders.[57] Rather than assimilating, the growing 'left wing' urban population continued their fight to define Kurdish identity. It was from within this group that a new Kurdish nationalistic identity developed. This version of Kurdish nationalist identity was infused with an awareness of class struggle, underdevelopment, exploitation and imperialism.[58] Thus, in addition to Turkish oppression, they had identified underdevelopment and poverty as major security threats to Kurdish identity. These Kurdish migrants in the west began to join left-wing political parties that claimed to speak for Kurdish society and called for increased development of Turkish Kurdistan. These groups also spawned a renewal of Kurdish literature by publishing a number of journals and books. The effects of this was felt less in the eastern Kurdish regions due to linguistic differences and vast illiteracy, but it had a large effect on the growing urban Kurdish population.

Those Kurds still in the underdeveloped eastern regions were still bound by the traditional Kurdish leadership and thus maintained a religious view of

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[57] Hyman, Anthony. 1988. "Elusive Kurdistan." *Conflict Studies* 214.
[58] Entessar, Nader. 1992. *Kurdish Ethno-Nationalism*. Boulder: Lynn Reinner.

Kurdish identity. In 1969, sociologist Nur Yalman observed, "religious affiliation remains more important than linguistic affiliations. If religious affiliations were weakened…Turkish-Kurdish opposition would be more divisive".[59] The traditional Kurdish leaders favored involvement with the democratic institutions of Turkey, and generally supported political parties devoted to the revival of Islam in Turkish politics, such as the Justice Party or the National Salvation Party. Thus democracy in Turkey sustained feudal ties and the power of traditional leaders in Kurdistan who could effectively persuade their constituencies that support for these parties was in the interest of Kurdish society. The Turkish political parties pandered to the economic interests of traditional Kurdish leaders who were able to deliver a significant numbers of votes.[60]

By the 1960's, the quest to define Kurdish nationalist identity had fully embraced a class dimension as well. The rise in number of both educated Kurds and underemployed young Kurdish men swelled the ranks of the leftist parties and organizations. These parties advocated the abolition of feudal remnants and land reform, in addition to defining Kurdish national identity. This clearly put them at odds with the traditional notables whose sole claim to authority rested on their landholdings. Thus the struggle over Kurdish identity involved much more than defining Kurds against the Turkish aggressor. It involved elements of class, economics, religion, and nationalism.

The combination of these forces can be seen during the rise of the Kurdistan Workers Party (PKK) in the late 1970's. A relatively unknown party, the

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[59] McDowell, David. 1996. *A Modern History of the Kurds*. London: I.B. Tauris.
[60] Entessar, Nader. 1992. *Kurdish Ethno-Nationalism*. Boulder: Lynn Reinner.

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PKK sought to become the sole actor capable of defining Kurdish identity and identifying threats to it. Abdullah Ocalan, the founder and former leader of the Kurdistan Workers Party (PKK) rose from the left wing urban elites who had migrated to the west and advocated a secular nationalist view of Kurdish identity. Typical of the new urban elite, Ocalan was highly educated, he was a law graduate of Ankara University, and speaks Turkish, not Kurdish.[61]

As an extremist organization advocating socio-economic reform and independence, the PKK has clearly enunciated security threats to their view of secular nationalist Kurdish identity. The list included agents of the Turkish state and those that supported them, the Turkish left that subordinated the Kurdish question to the leftist revolution and the exploitative Kurdish landlord class.[62] For the PKK, Kurds as well as Turks are identified as a threat to Kurdish identity. In naming Kurds that support the Turkish state the PKK explicitly targeted the village guards, who were Kurds paid by the Turkish state to police Kurdish areas. The early operations of the PKK were devoted to eliminating as many of the village guards as they could.

The PKK, having clearly identified those that represent a threat to their vision of Kurdish secular nationalist identity, went about attempting to eliminate these threats. Through widespread violence, assassinations and open military conflict the PKK attempted to impose its view of Kurdish identity onto the Kurds and the Turkish state. This resulted in the death of many Kurds and Turks and brought renewed oppression from the Turkish state. For some, this was a clear

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[61] Hyman, Anthony. 1988. "Elusive Kurdistan." *Conflict Studies* 214, McDowell, David. 1996. *A Modern History of the Kurds*. London: I.B. Tauris.
[62] McDowell, David. 1996. *A Modern History of the Kurds*. London: I.B. Tauris.

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indicator that the Turkish state represented the greatest threat to the Kurds, for others it indicated that the PKK was the primary threat facing the Kurds. While it is difficult to tell whether the majority of Kurds support the PKK or not, it is clear that secular nationalism under the PKK has made a much stronger breakthrough in the rural eastern parts of Kurdistan than previous Kurdish nationalist movements have succeeded in doing.

The growth and mass success of the secular nationalist view of Kurdish identity does not signify the emergence of a singular vision of Kurdish identity. Among secular nationalists, there is a division between moderates and extremists. The PKK is the primary extremist organization, but there have been a number of successful political parties representing a more moderate Kurdish cause. During the 1960's and 1970's, the HEP fought for Kurdish autonomy within the political institutions of Turkey. The party was banned by the Turkish state, but was reformed as the Democratic Labour Party (DEP) and later as the People's Democratic Party (HADEP). These parties have consistently garnered large shares of the Kurdish vote, illustrating the widespread support for a moderate solution within the political institutions and sovereignty of Turkey. While both groups view Kurdish identity as secular and nationalistic, they disagree on the level of threat that Turkey poses. Those advocating independence claim that Kurdish security can only be provided by an independent state, while those that favor autonomy or increased minority rights contend that a new relationship within the Turkish state is sufficient to provide security for Kurdish identity.

The secular nationalist view of Kurdish identity also continues to face challenges from those advocating a pan-Islamic Kurdish identity. The Islamist movement has long regarded secular nationalism as the primary threat. Early on, the western, secular aspect of Kemal's nation building project was identified as the threatening all Muslims in Turkey, and it largely ignored the fact that Kemal's project favored one national identity, the Turks, over another, the Kurds.[63] Thus, the political parties that were devoted to revitalizing the place of Islam in Turkish politics were silent over the treatment of the Kurds. For this reason, the PKK identified them as one of the three groups that represented a threat to Kurdish identity. Worse yet, several militant Islamic organizations sprung up that targeted the Kurdish secular nationalist movement and the PKK. By the end of 1993 over 500 Kurdish activists and PKK supporters had been assassinated by these groups who still sought to subordinate Kurdish nationalism to a pan-Islamic view of Turkish politics and Kurdish identity.

By the early 1990's it appeared that Ocalan and the PKK had modified their list of potential threats to Kurdish nationalist identity. In 1991 Ocalan proclaimed that there was no question of separating Kurdistan from Turkey, 'my people need Turkey. We cannot separate for at least 40 years'.[64] From this statement, Ocalan acknowledged that Turkey need not be constructed as a threat to the Kurds, but rather has an essential role to play in the survival and development of the Kurdish nation. Ocalan also fostered associations with religious leaders to show that a secular nationalist view of Kurdish identity need

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[63] Houston, Christopher. 2001. *Islam, Kurds, and the Turkish Nation State.* Oxford: Berg.
[64] McDowell, David. 1996. *A Modern History of the Kurds.* London: I.B. Tauris.

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not pose a threat to those whose aim was to re-establish role for Islam in Turkish politics.

While nationalists and pan-Islamic forces continue to battle over Kurdish identity, it is important to recognize that they have not been the only ones making a claim on Kurdish identity. The Turkish state has actively sought to redefine Kurdish identity within the Turkish identity. In creating a new Turkish identity, Kemal Attaturk sought to eliminate the institutions that carry on a societies identity. His ban on Kurdish schools and publications stood until the mid-1990's when it was partially rescinded. Since the founding of the Turkish state, there has existed a longstanding prohibition against even uttering the word "Kurds" in Turkish politics, Kurds were to be referred to as 'Mountain Turks'. The Turkish state even revived scientific theories claiming that Kurds were of Turkish origin.[65] The Turkish state claimed the Kurdish language(s) were derivative of Turkish, though there existed a well-founded scholarship authenticating its Indo-European roots. For others, Kurds were those who had lost their Turkish identity due to the poor socio-economic position in the less advanced eastern regions of the Turkish state.[66]

Kurdish identity, like all societal identities, is being constructed and re-constructed. The decline in the power of the traditional notables has clearly enhanced the power of those actors advocating a secular Kurdish nationalist identity.[67] However, religion continues to play an important role in the ongoing debate over both Turkish and Kurdish identity. There are significant economic

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[65] Entessar, Nader. 1992. *Kurdish Ethno-Nationalism*. Boulder: Lynn Reinner.
[66] Houston, Christopher. 2001. *Islam, Kurds, and the Turkish Nation State*. Oxford: Berg.
[67] Hyman, Anthony. 1988. "Elusive Kurdistan." *Conflict Studies* 214.

factors that continue to influence the identity of and the security threats to the Kurds. As Ocalan has now acknowledged, economic impoverishment makes union with Turkey essential for the future survival of the Kurds in Turkey. Potential involvement in the European Union has also impacted the potential societal threats that the Kurds face. As Houston notes 'contemporary Kurdish identity is hardly unified but subject to competing claims over its constitution'.[68] These competing claims over Kurdish identity are made evident by the security threats that their advocates identify.

Conclusions

The Kurdish and Palestinian cases show that developments that are portrayed as threatening to the 'society' ultimately serve to construct and re-construct the identity of the society. Securtising actors do not identify objective security threats to a socially sedimented societal identity as Buzan and Waever claim, rather they identify security threats that bolster their identity claims. Thus secular nationalists in both cases identify competing nationalist claims, either Turkish or Arab, as threatening to the society's identity. Furthermore, the religious nationalists in both societies identify secular nationalists as threatening to their society.

Clearly to reify the identity of the Kurdish and Palestinian society as secular nationalist would gloss over important internal debates over the nature of these societies' identity. It would also leave unexplained a primary source of violent conflict within these societies: PKK violence against the Turkish Kurdish

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[68] Houston, Christopher. 2001. *Islam, Kurds, and the Turkish Nation State*. Oxford: Berg.

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population and the Iraqi Kurds as well as the ongoing battles between Fatah and Hamas.

This does not mean we need to throw the baby out with the bath water; applying societal security does provide analytical leverage when assessing what developments may be constructed as threatening and potentially cause violent conflict. Using societal security makes it possible to explain how migration, television and radio broadcasts, election outcomes, and language education could contribute to violent conflict between societies, or between the state and a society.

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